Chapter Fifty-One: The Choir Invisible

Harry heard the screaming in his dreams.

He opened his eyes slowly at first, certain he would find himself in another vision of Voldemort torturing someone. He wondered grimly how bad the vision must have been to have broken through his Occlumency barrier—or if Voldemort had managed to find some way through the grass that sealed off their link, just to show him these special visions of pain.

But, to his surprise, though he found himself standing in a dark, misty environment he knew must be a dream, he didn’t see Voldemort anywhere. He felt slick grass beneath his feet, and, a moment later, noticed the thick lash of rain that must have been falling all the time. He tilted his head up, blinking, and brushed his fringe back from his face when it tried to cling.

He made out a huge shape arcing overhead, but it refused to resolve into anything he knew—a dragon, for example, or a hippogriff. It turned in circles, maddeningly elusive, and screamed, and screamed, and screamed.

The screaming began to prick up and down Harry’s spine. He could feel his magic responding to it, which was not something he would have expected. He swallowed and crossed his arms over his stomach defensively, readying a shield in case the creature should swoop down and try to rend him open. He had no idea why he was viewing this scene as yet, and no idea what shields he might be able to conjure—or what damage he might be able to take—in this dream state.

The screaming grew louder and louder, and abruptly died away, like a crack of thunder that had reached the limit of its roll. Harry squinted determinedly upward, wondering if he could see the creature now.

He made out what he thought was a spiked tail, swaying lazily above a taloned paw. Then the paw came down in his direction, powered by a leg like a crushing pillar.

Harry dropped to the ground and rolled out of the way; there was no point in trying to keep his feet on unknown terrain, made worse to balance on by the rainwater. The leg made the ground shake hard enough as it came down to throw him a few feet in the air. Harry tucked his arms around his head as he landed, and probably saved his glasses from being broken.

He scrambled into a kneel, and stared at the thing as it turned its head towards him. It was still unformed, or seemed so, in the rushing rain, but he thought he could make out glinting eyes and teeth.

There was a familiarity about the creature, but the only thing Harry could really compare it to was a dragon, and he knew of no dragons who sounded like they were screaming. Dragons sang, in Acies’s terms, and roared, in everyone else’s. And he really should have recognized a dragon’s shape, after such close acquaintance with them during the Triwizard Tournament.

He tried to calm down, and to make his voice calm when he spoke. “What is your name? What is your kindred? Do you need help? I am vates, and I think that I might be able to—"

The creature screamed at him, its breath deep and rotten with various horrid smells. Harry choked, and went with the blast of sound that bore him further into the dark place, wherever they were—it felt flat and grassy, at least. He wouldn’t question the dragon, the thing, if it didn’t want to be questioned.

He hit something, probably a boulder, and this time came up with a shield sparking around him. The creature snaked a long neck towards him, bending at odd angles. It paused when it saw the shield, and Harry saw something in the hovering golden eyes—he still couldn’t see the face that supposedly encased them—which might have been doubt.

Harry switched to Parseltongue, concentrating on the snakelike curves of the neck. If it was a serpent of some kind, then of course it wouldn’t have understood English and his offer to be vates to it. “Are you hurt? Do you need help? What are you? Why have you brought me here?”

The creature held absolutely still. Harry waited, holding his breath until he couldn’t do it any longer and let it out with a whoosh.

As if that were the signal it’d been waiting for, the creature lashed out, smashing him in the side with its heavily muscled neck. Harry felt himself fly over the obstruction at his back and land in another grassy path. He gasped in pain, and then again when his hand flew out to catch him too late and he hit his face in the mud.
He sat up, swiping at his mud-covered glasses, until he realized it was useless and he had to pull them off. The creature was right in front of him when he could see again, its mouth open to reveal teeth longer than his arms.

Harry concentrated desperately on trying to wake up.

The creature drew in its breath and screamed, even as the dream shattered.

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The scream pursued Harry into waking light, provided by Fawkes, who sat near his head on the pillow and chirped in concern. It took Harry a long moment to realize that, rather than the creature screaming into his ear, he was hearing thunder. He shuddered and turned to face the phoenix, stroking his feathers and breathing harshly.

Wait.

He felt pain when he inhaled and exhaled, not just the terror of the dream. Harry pulled up his pyjama shirt and moved to the side, so that he could see his own ribs in Fawkes’s light. He grimaced when he saw bruises, already turning purple and green like night-blooming flowers.

He listened critically to his own breath and felt his own pain, then shook his head. No, he was fairly sure that he didn’t have any broken ribs. He’d felt that when Quirrell cursed him with *Crucio* in his and Connor’s first year, and this pain wasn’t as sharp.

“What the *fuck,*” he murmured, for lack of anything better to say.

He sat where he was for a time, rubbing Fawkes’s head absentmindedly, shifting so that his movements wouldn’t disturb Argutus, who lay curled up beside him with his head on his tail. He searched his mind for references to a creature who could do this, and came up with nothing. There were, Merlin knew, dangerous and wonderful fantastic beasts in the world, especially ones that Harry didn’t know much about, but he had not heard even a rumor of one like this.

And it had seemed to have a personal enmity against him, as though he had done something that hurt it. That screaming—

He was still hearing the screaming. Or something like it.

Harry closed his eyes, concentrating. The screaming faded as he listened, though, faded into the thunder that shook the castle.

*The thunder.*

Harry felt his eyes flare open. The creature was connected to the storms. It had to be. It had been raining in the dream, hadn’t it? And the screaming had faded into the thunder when he woke. Perhaps this was Voldemort’s plan, to conjure a beast to hunt him in his dreams. It seemed indirect and wasteful, but then, Voldemort had never made *sensible* plans.

There was only one way Harry really knew of to get answers. He would have to go outside, which he hadn’t been since the storms started, and try to sense what magic might be stalking him.

He slid across the bed, wincing as twinges from his ribs announced themselves, and made it to his curtains without trouble. When he opened them, though, he jumped. Draco stood there, his eyebrows raised.

“And you were going where?” he asked.

“Just outside,” Harry said, flushing and not understanding why. It wasn’t like he had been doing anything *dangerous,* after all. The beast that had come stalking him in his dreams wasn’t his fault. “I think I might have a clue to the magic powering the storms, whatever Voldemort is going to do on Midwinter that’s stirring the weather up so much. But I haven’t been close enough to the rain and the lightning to see if there really is magic behind it. I should recognize his magic, if it’s there.” *And that would explain why my magic in the dream responded, too. I am his magical heir, and it might have sensed the familiarity of his power.* “So I’m going outside to see what I can feel.”

“Alone?”
Harry gave him an annoyed glance. “Well, yes. It’s just a walk on the grounds, Draco, and I thought you were asleep.”

“You woke me up with your little groans and complaints,” said Draco. Harry was glad that he’d dropped his pyjama top in time to hide the bruises. “And there’s no such thing as a little walk on the grounds with you, Harry. You’ll find a mad murderer lurking with a knife under the Whomping Willow, or one of Hagrid’s pets escaped and trying to find a way to get into the castle. I’m coming with you.” He turned to fetch one of his cloaks, presumably, from his trunk.

“Draco,” Harry whined, and knew he was whining. But it was bad enough that his own sleep was disturbed and he had suspicions of Voldemort’s magic riding the storms. He didn’t want Draco exposed to either annoyance or danger.

Draco looked at him over his shoulder. “You could always do the sensible thing and stay inside, Harry.”

“I should know tonight,” said Harry, and decided that he would have to tell Draco the truth to get past the skeptical expression on his face. “I had a dream or a vision, one of the two. Not about Voldemort,” he added hastily, when Draco’s face tightened. “But a creature hunted me, one I’ve never seen before. Its cry faded into the thunder when I woke. I thought I should at least investigate the connection between it and the storms.”

“Did it hurt you?”

Harry kept his face blank with an effort. “Just a bit.”

Draco hissed at him under his breath. “We’re going to Madam Pomfrey when we’re done here,” he said, and flung his cloak over his head. Harry knew it had enchantments to make it impervious to rain and snow, and took some comfort in the fact that at least Draco wouldn’t get wet.

“I don’t need to go to Madam Pomfrey,” he said, and knew that he was whining again. Somehow his simple little adventure had turned into this. Harry didn’t know why this always happened to him. In first year, he had slipped out after Quirrell into the Forbidden Forest and seen him kill a unicorn and drink its blood, and no one had objected to that.

“Unless you can manage to heal yourself, yes, you do,” said Draco, and held out the edge of his cloak. “Come on, beneath here. I know that the magic on yours isn’t as good.”

Harry scowled at him as he tied a pair of robes on over his pyjamas and trudged over to him. “And, of course, the fact that it’ll give you a chance to hold me doesn’t factor at all into your plans,” he muttered.

Draco grinned at him and slipped an arm around his waist as Harry stepped under the cloak. Luckily, the arm gripped him beneath the ring of bruises that went around his ribs, and so Harry didn’t need to wince and pull away. “I wouldn’t be Slytherin if I admitted to something like that, Harry,” he said innocently.

Harry chose to cast a Disillusionment Charm over them instead of replying. Snape often patrolled the dungeons at night, and though it was probably too late for the prefects to be out, there was always the chance of running into someone else, too.

Draco’s hold never varied as they crept up the dungeon corridors and towards the front doors, even when they were on the stairs and it was awkward to maneuver with Draco’s arm around his waist. Harry tried a few pointed glances and half-tugs away to no avail. Besides, he soon had enough to do, keeping his breath from rasping through his lungs in pain. He had to get outside and see what was happening with the storms, and if Draco saw how badly he’d been bruised, there was the chance that he wouldn’t let that happen.

They reached the entrance hall. Harry could hear the storm much better now. The thunder sounded like someone being tortured, so loud that he wondered how anyone in Gryffindor Tower or Ravenclaw Tower got any sleep. He would have noticed dark circles beneath Connor’s eyes, though, so he suspected that McGonagall and Flitwick had cast charms on the outer walls to damp the sound.

“This way,” Draco murmured, and propelled Harry across the entrance hall towards the doors.

“I know it’s that way,” said Harry, but didn’t try to walk the distance on his own. It wouldn’t work, and would just prove embarrassing, so he might as well go along with what Draco wanted to do.

Halfway to the doors, they met a reflected shimmer of movement that indicated someone else was using a Disillusionment Charm.
Harry raised his eyebrows, and then decided he had to at least know who it was. *Finite Incantatem*, he thought, concentrating on the shimmer.

The spell broke and revealed Hermione creeping intently towards the staircase, her face set. Draco drew breath for an exclamation, but Harry clamped an arm around his waist in return and squeezed, making him do nothing more than huff. Hermione stopped and looked around in suspicion, but obviously didn’t see them. A moment later, she noticed she was visible, squeaked, and recast the Charm on herself.

Draco waited until they heard the faint sound of her footsteps on the staircase, and then whispered, “Why did you stop me from saying anything, Harry? That’s prime taunting material, right there! You know she’s on her way back from the Hufflepuff common room—”

“And that’s why you’re not to tease her,” Harry whispered furiously. “How would you like it if we were in different Houses and someone caught you on the way back to the dungeons?”

Draco shook his head. “Wouldn’t have happened. We were both always going to be Slytherins.”

Harry gave up. Sometimes, Draco was impossible. “This way,” he said instead, and this time, he was the one to lead the way to the doors.

They crept out through them, and into the heart of the storm.

Harry felt the magic at once, curling like a snake on the back of the thunder, clenching its talons around the lightning, split and scattered and sparkling in every drop of rain that fell to earth. The wards woven into Hogwarts’s stones had kept him from feeling it before; that was the only explanation for the intense difference between inside and outside. Harry put out a shaky hand, gripping at nothing, only to feel Draco take it and hold it.

The wind picked up, and Harry realized he had been at least partially wrong. The beast’s cry wasn’t just thunder. It was the swift flow of the air, building to gale force, a more varied sound than screaming, but still incredibly loud. He shuddered. There was a mind behind that wind and that thunder, and the mind did not care about hurting others. It would not stalk them out of some sadistic need to torture, but it would sweep them out of the way without even noticing them, as casually as a wizard might step on an ant.

“Harry?” Draco’s voice sounded far away, and not only because the storm was roaring like a wild thing.

Harry edged a few steps further away from the entrance, letting the doors of Hogwarts drop shut behind him. He had to get closer to the storm, had to find the answer to this nagging sense of familiarity. There was—there was something more than sentience here, something more than magic. He’d felt it before, he knew what it was, but he couldn’t identify it now. Why not?

“Harry!”

Harry felt rain shove his fringe away from his face like harsh fingers, and realized he’d stepped out from under the cloak. He didn’t think he could care. There was a pulling force here that he’d only felt once before: with the singing, many-legged creature imprisoned in Grimmauld Place. This wasn’t the same song, exactly—that one was far more musical, without the rough edges of wind and thunder—but this was a song. If he could hear the words, if he could make out the notes, then he would know who was singing, and he thought that was important.

He reached out slowly towards the magic, his own power writhing around his body in inchoate streams of light.

Then the storm noticed him.

Harry felt the focus of the great mind sharpen and point at him, like an arrowhead. Still, he couldn’t find it in himself to feel frightened. He was only vaguely aware of Draco hammering on the light behind him; his magic had tightened, forming a barrier between them.

Harry looked up.

The lightning came down.
He felt it hit him like a bite, like a clamping of jaws around his waist. He snapped sideways, once, and every muscle in his body rang. The song he heard changed to a deepening croon, and then the magic draped over him, a mingling of the electric shock he would have expected to feel and hundreds of small, pinching, champing mouths. They were trying to drain his magic, and Harry, stumbling, dazed, was almost of a mind to let them.

Then he heard a hiss close to his ankles, and dazzling light flared above him, to the accompaniment of Fawkes’s indignant voice.

The song turned into a hiss, considerably less pleasant to listen to than what Harry recognized as Argutus’s insults in Parseltongue. The magic drew back from Harry and lurched up, coiling like a cobra, looking from Argutus to Fawkes as if wondering who it should hit first.

Fawkes dived at it, his talons widespread, his song fearless. The magic turned, its decision obviously made.

Harry woke.

He flung out his hand, and the light that had been keeping Draco away from him turned into a blade that carved the darkness facing him. The darkness writhed and screamed, more in annoyance and anger than pain, Harry thought, and jumped away from him. Now it had almost the form of the beast in his dream, though considerably smaller, bending its neck back towards him, the golden eyes and the long, sharp teeth gleaming in the midst of a body he couldn’t see very well.

“Go away,” Harry said, and heard Fawkes strengthen his words with a warble. Fire streamed from the phoenix, turning the raindrops to steam before they landed. Argutus was coiled around his ankle, still hissing in agitation, and the darkness watched all of them with wild, contemptuous eyes. “I will not allow you to harm them, whatever you might do to me.”

The creature continued watching him for a moment. Then it laughed, a rolling, deep belly laugh that said it could wait for a time when Harry wouldn’t escape it, and turned and sprang for the clouds. Wings like wet patches on stone opened around it, and beat once, and then it was gone, dissipated into the roaring, stalking force of a power that, Harry realized, he had felt before.

It wasn’t any plan of Voldemort’s stirring up the storms, after all. This was the wild Dark, the same force that walked the night skies on Walpurgis Night.

And Midwinter was coming up—longest night of the year, a night without a moon.

Harry felt his mouth tighten. This was worse news than Voldemort, by far.

He shook his head and stooped down so that Argutus could crawl up his left arm. Fawkes landed on his shoulder, both balance and voice unsteady for a moment. His head ducked to brush against Harry’s cheek, and Harry winced. The feathers would leave a faint burn. Fawkes had been worried.

Someone else had been, too, and Draco pulled Harry firmly against him, murmuring, “I don’t know whether I should kiss you or punch you, to tell you the truth. Or take you to Madam Pomfrey and make sure that she feeds you enough Dreamless Sleep to last you for the next three days.”

Harry winced and tugged himself backward as Draco’s arms came in contact with the bruises. He ignored Draco’s hurt expression for a moment to feel at the edges of his magic. At last, he nodded, satisfied. If the wild Dark had permanently swallowed any of his power, he really couldn’t tell. He felt fine.

Well, except for the bruises, and the fact that he’d put his life in danger again without meaning to, and the wild worry in Argutus’s voice as he loosed a stream of admonitions, and Draco’s silence that throbbed like a toothache.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said quietly, turning to him. “But that was the creature from the dream I had before we came out here. It hit me along the ribs with its neck, and when I woke, I found that I carried the bruises.”

Draco’s expression changed, but to one not that much better. “And when were you planning to tell me about this?”

“Um. After I found out about the storms?”

Draco closed his eyes and shook his head. “I hope it was worth it, Harry, because you frightened me to death.” He kept his head turned away, and Harry suspected he knew why when his voice was choked up a moment later. “I thought you were going to die,
Harry thought of saying that Draco should be used to that by now, but kept the words behind his teeth. Now wasn’t a time for jokes. “I know,” he said quietly. “I’m sorry.”

“I’ll get it through your head someday that your life is worth more than the knowledge you get by risking it,” Draco breathed. Harry wasn’t sure if it was a promise or a prayer. “Someday.”

“I hope so,” Harry said. It wasn’t that he liked worrying people, he thought, as he told Draco where to put his arm so that he could support Harry into the school but not press on any of the bruises. He didn’t even particularly enjoy risking his life, unless he was doing it in a plan he was fairly sure would work out and could anticipate and exult in the adrenaline rush.

But—well, sometimes risking his life was the only way to learn anything. And what he had learned tonight had been worth the risk.

Of course, he still didn’t necessarily know what it meant, what had stirred the wild Dark up so, and why it had chosen this Midwinter to strike when it normally only grew this active around Walpurgis. He knew someone who would know, though.

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“You’re staying here for the night, Mr. Pot—Harry.” Madam Pomfrey, her hair half-wild from sleep, had woken up when Draco insistently called for her, but she wasn’t very happy about it. She’d run her wand over his ribs, and then looked even less happy. “You have a few internal injuries, easily cured with potions, and rest.” She jabbed her wand at him as if she would cast a sleep spell right there. “And your ribs are fractured, though not broken. You’re going to sleep, and then you’ll stay in bed until at least noon tomorrow.”

“But it was sleep that caused me to get the injuries in the first place,” Harry protested, ignoring Draco’s little satisfied noise. “How can you be sure that I won’t have another dream like that?”

Madam Pomfrey gave a sharp little sigh, a white triangle of skin appearing around her nostrils. “I am sure of nothing where you are concerned, Harry,” she muttered. “But Dreamless Sleep at least seems like a reasonable precaution, and I will set a spell to warn me if you manifest any unexpected wounds.”

Harry squirmed. This was exactly what he’d hoped to avoid. “Can I wait half an hour to take the Potion, Madam Pomfrey?” he asked, and smiled dazzlingly at her. “I have to talk to someone first.”

“You are not firecalling anyone at this time of night,” the matron began.

“It’s not a firecall,” said Harry. “Just a spell that I can use which contacts them right away. I promise, I won’t take more than half an hour.” Unless she changes her mind at the end of the half hour, he thought hopefully. He hated Dreamless Sleep. It always made him slower to react in the morning, and in the middle of a War, a split second’s reaction time could make the difference between life and death.

Madam Pomfrey stared harder at him. “You’re not going to take the Potion unless I agree to this, are you?” she asked.

Harry painted a contrite expression across his face. “No. Sorry.”

The matron shook her head heavily and went to fetch the vial of dark potion from a cabinet on the far wall. “Half an hour, Harry,” she said, as she set it down on the table beside the bed as heavily as a troll had ever dropped a club. “And you’ll take these potions now.” She held out what Harry recognized as healing potions for internal injuries and fractured bones. He nodded and drank them, wishing absently that whoever had invented these had looked into making them taste sweeter.

“I should go back to sleep,” said Madam Pomfrey, and looked fiercely at Draco. Harry expected her to send him back to the Slytherin common room, but she said only, “You’ll make sure that he takes the Dreamless Sleep, Mr. Malfoy? And then stay here, in a separate bed?”

Draco flushed, but nodded. “You can count on me, Madam,” he said.

“Good,” said Madam Pomfrey, and glared one final time at Harry, as if she could make him safer by looking. Then she went back
to her private room in the back of the hospital wing.

Harry sighed as he saw the look on Draco’s face. He was no doubt taking the Dreamless Sleep now. But Draco appeared content to wait for at least the same period of time that the matron had said he could have, so Harry touched his left wrist and whispered the communication spell.

A moment later, Henrietta Bulstrode, sounding very awake for this time of night, said, “Yes, vates? What can I do for you?”

Harry shrugged his discomfort off—just because vates sounded like a title when she said it didn’t mean she meant it that way—and pressed forward in his task. “I need to know what you know about the wild Dark,” he said. “Other than Thomas Rhangnara, I think you have the largest library, and he’s busy researching ways to break past Ariadne’s Web right now.”

“Of course,” said Henrietta, not even asking why he needed it. “I know a good deal about it without even looking in a book, vates; some of my ancestors once tried to harness the magic at Walpurgis, before they gave it up as a bad idea. What have you learned about it?”

“It’s in motion now,” said Harry. “These storms that are plaguing the British Isles come from it. It confronted me in my dreams tonight, and then when I stepped out into the storm. I think it plans to strike at Midwinter, when the moon will be dark.”

There was a long moment of stillness. Then Henrietta said softly, “Someone has roused the Dark, then. I think it must be the Dark Lord, and not you. Powerful wizards draw its attention, but you haven’t done anything to actively irritate it, have you?”

“No,” said Harry, ignoring the way Fawkes chirped on his shoulder. The phoenix had a different opinion, but Harry didn’t have to let that influence his response to Henrietta. “But I was under the impression that it could strike back any time it wanted, and it would, too, whether or not someone had actively irritated it.”

“No,” said Henrietta. “It is above us. Most of the time, it plays in the spaces between the stars and ignores us. Walpurgis draws its attention, and so does the proclamation of a new Dark Lord, but very little else. However, I believe that Voldemort tried to capture it this past Walpurgis, did he not?”

Harry swore beneath his breath. “He did,” he said, ignoring Draco’s raised eyebrow. “I suppose I thought it would take its vengeance before now.”

“No,” said Henrietta calmly. “It will wait for Midwinter, the time when the world is furthest from light—and the blackening of the moon will add to its power. It means to play, I think, or it would not have come hunting you. My family has a story of an ancestor facing it one Midwinter in the form of a mighty storm. That storm might have destroyed Britain, but the Dark lost interest and wandered away. This time, I do not think we can count on that.”

“Definitely not.” Harry shuddered at the memory of the wild Dark’s golden eyes, very interested in him. It had obviously tried to take his magic just because it could. It might want to punish Voldemort, but from what Henrietta was saying, it wouldn’t at all object to killing whatever was in its path. “Is there any way to tell where the brunt of the storm will fall? Or is it just wherever Voldemort is going to be that night?”

“No,” said Henrietta. “The Dark has a sense of ceremony when it comes hunting like this—as you’ve surmised for yourself, or it would have taken its vengeance already, without the buildup to Midwinter. It intends for this to be more than a simple vengeance-taking. It wants attention, rather like a spoiled child. That is the reason it has reached out to you, vates, beyond your magic, I think. In my ancestor’s story, it chose Stonehenge, both because that was the place he’d tried to capture it and because the most powerful wizard in those days was a druid who loved the stones. It will almost certainly find it amusing to choose a place that connects you and Voldemort, a place where something powerful and Dark happened.”

Harry felt himself freeze, and Draco shift beside him. He forced the words past his tight throat. “Where something powerful and Dark happened? Or where something almost happened?”

Henrietta’s voice turned uncertain for the first time. “That, I will have to look up. It’s been a long time since I studied the books on the character and temper of the wild Dark. My family’s stories always served me well for most of my needs. But I think it will choose the Darkest occurrence it can, and that means a successful ritual, say, would please it better than one that failed to happen.”

*That eliminates the Chamber of Secrets and the Shrieking Shack, then.*
“Vates?” Henrietta’s voice was concerned. “Do you think you know where the storm will come down?”

Harry coughed, and managed to speak again. “I do,” he said. “There are really only two places it could. The house in Godric’s Hollow where Voldemort gave me my curse scar, or—” He made himself say it. “The graveyard where I lost my hand.”

Draco leaned against him. Fawkes crooned. Argutus lifted his head. “I think I know how to control my visions now,” he said. “That’s why I spent the time away from you that I did, working on them. I can show you, if I can just concentrate.”

“I am sorry, vates,” Henrietta’s voice murmured. “It will almost certainly be the graveyard. The giving of the curse scar involved Dark magic, yes, but that was longer ago. And would I be right in saying that you do not personally remember it?”

“Right,” Harry whispered.

“Again, I will have to look up confirmation, but from what I know of the wild Dark, if it’s decided to make you a piece in its game, it will want to hurt you as much as possible. And the graveyard holds more and worse memories for you. Yes, it will be there.”

“All right,” Harry breathed. He managed to kick his brain past the memories it wanted to show him. “Then I’ll find out where Tom Riddle was buried. He used his father’s bone in the ritual to revive himself, along with my blood. Whatever graveyard it is, we’ll find it, and we’ll know where to go and block the storm.”

“I would say that you cannot block the storm, but I know that you must try,” said Henrietta. “I will go to my library and see if I can learn anything about the wild Dark that might help, or might contradict what we know now. Farewell, vates. Try to rest.”

“Farewell,” Harry echoed blankly, and then he felt the spell ease and vanish.

He closed his eyes and counted to ten, in Mermish, in his head. The memories, which had gripped him like the jaws of the lightning around his waist, slowly eased the same way the spell had. Then he could let himself feel Fawkes on his shoulder again, and Argutus coiled tightly around his left wrist, and—

And Draco holding the vial of Dreamless Sleep Potion to his lips.

“Draco!” he tried to say, but choked. He ended up swallowing most of the potion, resigned to it. He didn’t think it had been quite half an hour, but he was in no position to object. Draco eased him back so that he could lie on the pillows.

“Sorry,” he whispered into Harry’s ear. “But you’ve just had a pretty hard shock. You deserve a while to rest after this, I think.”

Harry closed his eyes. He had a few moments before the potion, swirling in the center of his mind like a maelstrom, covered the whole thing. He murmured sleepily and shifted position.

“Harry?” Draco sounded as if he were on the other side of an ocean. “Can you block the storm at all, do you think? I thought no mortal wizard could stop the wild Dark.”

“I don’t know,” Harry murmured. “But just because it’s impossible doesn’t mean I can get out of trying.”

Draco was silent then. Harry felt his hand for just a moment more before the potion carried him away. The last thought he remembered was absurd gratitude to the wild Dark. This was a problem so overwhelming that he couldn’t feel bad about devoting all his efforts towards solving it, at least until Midwinter arrived.

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Draco knew Harry had fallen asleep almost instantly—Dreamless Sleep always affected him that way after the initial pause—but he stayed there, staring down into his face, fighting the temptation to curl up in the same bed as Harry after all. Only the remembrance of Harry’s injuries, including the bruises flaring along his ribs like the marks of clutching fingers, kept him from doing it. He might jostle Harry in his sleep and hurt him further.

Merlin, Harry. He closed his eyes, but then the vision of Harry caught and tossed by the lightning was there. The lightning had grown around him, wild and weird and disgusting like nothing Draco had seen before, sucking as if it would pull Harry’s skin off
his bones. The fear had struck Draco like a blade, the idea that he might lose Harry never so present as it had been in that moment.

Now, worse than the fear was the despair. *No matter what I can do, I can never keep him safe.*

Draco took a deep breath and sat back in his chair, and made himself face the thought. It was one of the things Vera had spoken to him about, and her gentle words rushed past his ears like the sigh of a breeze.

“You love your Harry fiercely enough to go through any storms beside him, I can see that. What you must know now is that the storms are unlikely to end. You dream of a haven where you can live with him and be untroubled, but that will not happen. Your Harry will forever cast himself into danger’s path. He does not know the meaning of relaxation, he is only slowly learning the meaning of pleasure, and he will never learn to look aside from the suffering of others. You must decide if you can bear that, and the wounds it will put on your heart.”

Draco shut his eyes. He had scoffed a bit at Vera’s pronouncement, because while he knew she could see souls, she couldn’t predict the future. She couldn’t know that Harry would never consent to say he had done enough and retreat from the world.

Now, Draco had to admit that knowledge of the basis of someone’s character could be a kind of prediction, if you knew them well enough. And Vera knew them both well enough.

Could he bear this?

The answer was there, though, before he asked the question. *Yes.* He was too deeply tangled up in Harry to pull back now, without ripping apart half of what he was. Oh, he could heal from those wounds—Vera would probably say that; his father, who did not believe in needing people, would certainly say that—but he didn’t want to. So, yes, he could bear this, because he must.

So he had to decide how he was going to bear it.

Draco narrowed his eyes and pushed his hair back from his forehead. Madam Pomfrey had cast warming and drying charms on them, but Draco still thought he could feel the pressure of the rain, and the wind, and the eyes of the lightning-creature that had hurt Harry. The pressure didn’t make him weary, or frustrated with Harry, or even very frightened. It just pissed him off.

*I am going to bear this, but not like a little suffering wife, or a best friend dragged along against his will. I am going to bear this the way I want to bear it. Harry knows what I want. I won’t settle for less, because I shouldn’t have to. I deserve what I want from him. And I’m going to make a place for myself in the midst of all the storms and dragons and oceans and Dark Lords he has to face.*

*I was here first. They can sod off. I can bear this because I know I’m the most important person in the world to him. If I’m not, then I’ll get upset, but not before. Harry might help other people, but he’s going to share his life with me. And I’m going to be beside him, not behind him.*

As spiky and snarly as he felt, Draco wasn’t sure he’d be able to sleep, but, surprisingly, slumber descended the moment he curled up in the hospital bed across from Harry’s, despite the memory of the storm and the soft light shining from Fawkes. He supposed, as the ground slid out from under him and tipped him down into the abyss, that this was what the sleep of the just felt like.

Surely no one in the world can be as right as I am at this moment.

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**Chapter Fifty-Two: Harry Plays the “Boy-Who-Lived”**

“You cannot mean to do this.” Snape seemed to be under the impression that if he said that often enough, then Harry would wake up from the spell Snape seemed to be convinced he was under, and decide not to do this.

“But I do.” Harry looked aside from the conjured mirror and studied his guardian over his shoulder. “I admit, stepping into the storm is a risk, but it has to be in public, or I can’t trust that the warning will get to everyone in time.”

“And you think they will listen to you.” That was flat.

“I do,” Harry repeated. He looked again in the mirror, then gave a shrug, irritated at himself. He’d wanted to look appropriately
warrior-like, so that those who listened to his press conference would take his warning seriously, but other than the grim expression on his face—that was no problem—he had to admit he didn’t know what would make him look that way. He would be speaking to a mixed audience of Light and Dark wizards, too, which further complicated the problem. In the end, he’d gone for ordinary dark robes, though he’d left the Slytherin tie off, so that he wouldn’t look like a schoolboy. He’d also bared his left arm, both because he liked the symbolic gesture of revealing he didn’t have the Dark Mark and to emphasize his missing hand. If he could remind his audience that he’d lost some of himself to this war, they would be more likely to listen.

“I wish you did not have to do this,” Snape muttered behind him. “Not only the storms might kill you. An Order of the Phoenix member with a knife—” Harry hoped he hadn’t jumped at that, since Snape still didn’t know about Digle—“a Death Eater with the Killing Curse on her lips, or someone determined to avenge Dumbledore’s imprisonment would do just as well.”

“I know,” said Harry. “But I’ve explained the reasons why.” He had, multiple times, including the reasons that Scrimgeour had added to his list when he first contacted the Minister and asked if he thought the press conference was a good idea. Snape was stubborn, but he was also, in this case, helpless to stop the conference from going ahead.

“You have. And I will be at your shoulder.” That alone seemed to give Snape any confidence.

Harry just nodded and got ready to leave Snape’s private rooms for the entrance hall. He’d tried to get Snape to stay here, since there really were Death Eaters hunting him, but Snape had just looked at him, and that was that.

They met Draco outside the door; he’d fussed himself into readiness in their bedroom. Harry almost envied him his deep green robes with the Malfoy crest, for all that they looked uncomfortable. They proclaimed Draco’s status and allegiances clearly and undeniably. Lacking a last name and a Declaration for either Dark or Light, Harry’s options were limited.

Of course, sending a mixed message is the only truthful thing I can do. I just hope that it doesn’t dilute the impact of that message.

“Ready?” Draco looked at Harry’s bared left arm, started to frown for a moment, then seemed to catch on to the gesture and nodded. Then he frowned anyway. “Do you think I should show my left arm as well?”

“It’d be a shame to ruin the robes,” said Harry, less because he thought that was true than because he wanted no more fussing. It was already two-o’clock, and the press conference was at three. They had to get off Hogwarts grounds and then Apparate to the vicinity of the Ministry. Then, no doubt, the press of people would hold them up before they could get to the stage where the Minister had arranged for them to have the conference. “Let’s leave.”

Draco exchanged a look with Snape that Harry didn’t bother to translate, since he knew it would be uncomplimentary to him. He led the way out of the dungeons, only to pause when he saw his brother waiting near the front doors, tugging at the collar of his own formal robes as if they constricted his breathing.

“Connor?” Harry could not imagine why Connor wanted to come. He’d offered his brother the opportunity to attend the press conference with him already, and Connor had quietly refused, saying that he thought people would get confused if the former Boy-Who-Lived appeared with the current one. “Have you changed your mind?”

“Not exactly,” said Connor. “But I just thought of something I should do, and this is the best chance to do it. I want as many people to know as possible.” His face was pale, but determined.

Draco made a little growling noise. Harry knew what he was thinking. Your brother shouldn’t take over the spotlight. Of course he would be trying to do that. Just like a Gryffindor.

Harry spoke quickly, to cut the impending tantrum off. “You’re welcome, of course, Connor.” He glanced at Snape. “You can Side-Along Apparate Draco, and I’ll Apparate my brother?”

Snape said nothing for long moments, and Harry wondered if he would send Connor back to Gryffindor Tower after all. The two of them were getting along a bit better in their practice dueling sessions, but it was still nothing to brag about.

“That would be acceptable,” said Snape at last, and Harry relaxed. He would have to seriously reconsider having another of these conferences in the future. The sheer amount of fuss involved in them was making him allergic to them, and he hadn’t even had one yet, properly.
They stepped out into the rain, and Harry tensed. It had been a week since the storm’s attack. That didn’t seem to make any
difference to his jumpiness, though, especially now that he could hear the song and feel the magic behind the rain and thunder.
His brain kept reminding him that they were now only ten days from Midwinter, and that all their preparations to counter the wild
Dark’s stroke might not be enough.

But nothing hit them. Snape cast Impervious Charms on their cloaks to keep the rain from soaking them through, and shields
above their heads to keep them from being pelted. Harry nodded; he should have thought of that himself. He was going to arrive
in public with his hair wild as it was, thanks to its refusal to obey a comb. He would at least like to avoid having it soaked and
windblown.

“This way.”

Snape led them towards the road to Hogsmeade. Harry found himself walking between Draco and his brother. Draco maintained a
silence no doubt born of a superiority complex. Harry knew for a fact that he hadn’t been in a public situation like this very often,
either, but he acted as if he had, and that could make all the difference. Pureblood rituals were good at training a wizard or witch
to maintain an uncaring attitude.

Connor, of course, chewed on his lip and did such a good job of messing his own hair up that the wind didn’t need to help. Harry
opened his mouth to say something, then shut it again and shook his head. Connor was nervous enough about—whatever this was.
He assumed his brother didn’t want him to know what it was, or he would have said something already. Scolding him would only
raise his nerves.

Draco, of course, didn’t know how to leave well enough alone. “Quit burrowing, Potter,” he said, in a distant, lofty tone that
almost perfectly imitated Lucius’s. “If your thoughts aren’t already in your head, pawing at your hair won’t help you find them.”

Connor, just about to run his fingers through his hair again, flushed and dropped his hand to his side. “You don’t know anything
about what I’m doing, Malfoy,” he snapped.

“No, I don’t.” Draco was now wearing the politely neutral expression that Harry suspected both the elder Malfoys favored for
boring dinner parties. “Why don’t you tell me, and then I’ll have some idea?”

“I would, if I thought that you could keep—“

“Enough.”

Snape’s pointedly single word put an end to the conversation, and after that they walked in silence. Harry had thought he’d be
grateful for it, but he found the silence sharpening the thoughts in his head, sending them tumbling into one another, revolving in
odd patterns. He wondered, as he had since he’d sent the letters to Skeeter and Scrimgeour asking about this, if it were really the
right thing to do. The Ministry, after all, could have announced the facts about the wild Dark and told people to stay inside on
Midwinter night as easily as Harry.

But people were used to ignoring the Ministry, treating their announcements as a bit of a joke; almost a year of Scrimgeour in
office hadn’t yet changed that. And a secondhand report that Harry planned to fight the storms wouldn’t command as much
credibility as a proclamation from Harry himself. He badly wanted to give what reassurance he could. By now, most of wizarding
Britain would know these weren’t natural storms—if only because it was the eleventh of December and no snow had fallen yet,
only this constant, steady rain—and Harry would rather they realize the true cause than panic.

And know someone is doing something about it. There’s that, too.

Harry shifted restlessly, which jostled Argutus, who was curled around his left arm and under his robe, the only concession he’d
made to the chill of the air and the rain. He slid his head out the slit in the sleeve, and flicked his tongue at Harry. “Everything
will be all right,” he said. “I showed you in the vision.”

Harry managed a tense smile. It was true that Argutus had managed to conjure a vision of what looked like Britain, and maybe
even part of Europe, with a tracery of light across it, surrounded by intense darkness. Harry had given the description to his allies,
in the hopes that someone might know something about it. Augustus Starrise had answered at once, saying excitedly that it
resembled some cooperative rituals he knew of. Now he was organizing the Light wizards who were either allied to Harry or
owed his Light allies favors. He was confident they would help Harry to resist the storm when it came.
Harry wasn’t as confident. Argutus’s scales showed what might happen, like a prophecy, rather than what would happen, with the sharpness and clarity of a necromancer’s vision. He hoped they were doing the right thing, but he couldn’t be sure. And none of his allies had felt the sheer screaming power of the wild Dark as he had. It had carried him like a child when they struck back against Voldemort at Walpurgis. It could do the same thing now, especially when it was angry and wanted to—play with Harry.

Henrietta had contacted him several times over the course of the last week, but had been unable to add anything to her original guess about why the Dark was after Harry. It wanted his attention, and it wanted to eat his magic if it could—Harry had seen that much in the lightning attack—and it could be miffed for its own reasons. Henrietta had argued that its motive mattered less than the fact that it was apparently drawing Harry into the dance it was doing with Voldemort, the same way that the other Dark storm had drawn both her ancestor and a powerful druid into a dance. Harry had reluctantly agreed.

Even if it wasn’t pulling at me, I would still have to face it. I’m the only one who might possibly harness enough power to stop it.

He shivered. Snape gave him a sharp glance. “Do you need me to renew the charms on your cloak, Harry?” he asked.

Harry shook his head. “I’m fine,” he whispered. He did feel a faint chill from the rain, in fact, but only now that Snape had called his attention to it. He felt a far greater chill from the fact that he would be going up against one of the mightiest forces of magic in the world, and that he was powerful, and backed by allies, but without the sheer strength the Dark had casually displayed to him.

And it would be stronger than ever come Midwinter, with the moon, which somewhat lessened its influence now, gone.

Harry shook his head and lengthened his stride. He had to stop worrying about what might happen. There was only what he could plan until he actually entered the battle, and then what would happen. He would control as much of that as he could, but he remembered Lily telling him that battle plans only lasted until the battle began. Then they shattered, always.

I’ll do what I can. And right now, that’s warn the wizarding public about what’s coming.

Above him, the thunder screamed. It sounded smug.

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“Welcome, Harry.” Scrimgeour was rising to his feet, his face grave and his yellow eyes more intent than Harry had ever seen them. This was the Minister’s public face, he thought, the one he would don in times of war and natural disaster. “Thank you for coming. I think this is the best solution.”

Harry nodded. He was somewhat astonished the Minister had seen him in the midst of the dozen Aurors who’d met them at the Apparition point and escorted them to the platform. Perhaps Scrimgeour just knew he had to be in there somewhere.

He climbed the steps of the platform, feeling Impervious Charms and wards part for him and then slam back together again. He wondered, half-humorously, if there was one to prevent rotten vegetables or saliva from hitting him. The wizarding public in older times had sometimes been demonstrative.

He scanned the faces of the wizards already waiting and watching. The reporters were closest to the stage, of course; there was the flash of Skeeter’s glasses, and several bursting lights registered the presence of photographers. Next to Skeeter was a woman with severely pulled-back hair and a practiced sneer, who seemed to spend most of her time sneering at Skeeter. Harry suspected she was Melinda Honeywhistle, Skeeter’s most frequent rival for the front page of the Prophet. Next to her stood a somber man, and next to him a wizard in the tattiest robes Harry had ever seen, and then more men and women, professional or unprofessional as their papers, or perhaps their reputations, dictated. Harry didn’t know any others by sight.

He knew the wizards and witches gathered beyond the reporters, though, or at least he knew of them. These would be the same kind of people who had come to witness his parents’ trial—hungry for a hint of explanation, rejoicing in whatever came their way. They looked less eager now than they had then, more worried, but they still stared at him with open curiosity. Harry nodded. It would be the spectators who came to the press conference; more ordinary citizens would be content to read what he said in the newspapers.

Aurors moved through the crowd, registering wands and glaring at anyone who got too rowdy. It took Harry a moment to realize they weren’t the only Ministry officials there. Wizards in nondescript dark robes slithered through the spectators more gracefully than the Aurors, and sometimes paused as if they were only ordinary people idly jostling for a better spot.
Harry raised his eyebrows. *Unspeakables. Scrimgeour is taking my security seriously, it seems.*

Well, it was in public, and the last time Scrimgeour had seen him, Digle had tried to kill him. Harry supposed he’d won the right to feel a little paranoid.

He glanced over his shoulder, to see how the others were settling. Draco had taken one of the chairs near the back of the stage and adopted a perfect pose and perfect bored face. Snape was sitting beside him, scowling as if he hated every foot separating Harry and him. Connor was talking earnestly to Scrimgeour. Harry cocked his head, then remembered Connor saying last summer that he’d written Scrimgeour several times about the trial and struck up a relationship with him. Harry supposed he was seeing the results of those letters now.

“Mr. Potter,” said an unfamiliar voice.

Harry kept his head turned, as though he had no idea who that surname belonged to. A moment later, Skeeter’s tone, honed to precise nastiness, said, “Really, Melinda, you might try reading the *Prophet* once in a while. It would enlarge your grammatical skills as well as your knowledge of current events. Harry renounced his parents’ name at his parents’ trial. Do try to keep up.”

Melinda Honeywhistle growled under her breath and said, “Harry,” in a tone that implied she hated it. She would be someone used to making formalities into a mockery, Harry thought distantly as he turned and faced her.

“Yes, ma’am?” he asked.

“Would you mind answering a few questions before the conference begins?” She beamed up at him—the expression was patently false; Skeeter was better at this, Harry thought—and tapped her quill against her notebook. “Strictly off the record, I promise.”

Harry gave her an empty, polite smile. “Sorry, ma’am, I can’t. I promised that I’d save all my announcements for the conference itself, and that doesn’t begin until the Minister says it will.” He turned back to the conversation between Scrimgeour and his brother. The Minister had bent down now, and was speaking in a low, rapid voice. Connor listened raptly, nodding now and then. Harry frowned.

“What in the world can he have planned?”

“Oh, come, Mr. Potter—”

“Melinda, really,” said Skeeter, her voice holding just the right amount of shock.

“Harry, I mean.” Honeywhistle said that as if it were a talisman against her forgetting his proper name again. “Surely it won’t hurt to answer just a few questions? Nothing about what brings you here today, I promise. I’m doing a human interest piece about victims of child abuse, and I’d just like to talk to both you and your brother quickly, not at all in-depth.”

Harry could see Snape rising to his feet. *Uh-oh.* Tempting as it was to let Snape deal with Honeywhistle, Harry didn’t want the press conference to start off with the kind of spell incident that would make headlines overshadowing his announcement. “I’m afraid that’s impossible, ma’am,” he said. “Here comes the Minister, anyway.”

That was true. Scrimgeour had spun away from Connor with a nod, and Connor took his seat, looking satisfied. Scrimgeour did pause halfway across the stage to give Snape a look. It was a very clear look. Snape sat back down.

“Back a few steps, ladies, if you please,” said Scrimgeour, his face tight and his eyes on fire. Harry wondered if he had a grudge against Honeywhistle in particular, or if he just hated people violating the proprieties at events like this. Both Honeywhistle and Skeeter stepped away from the stage, and Scrimgeour tapped his wand against his throat. “*Sonorus,*” he said, even as he glanced at Harry.

Harry nodded, just slightly.

Scrimgeour faced the chattering reporters and crowd and coughed. The sound echoed several times around the expanse of cobbledstones, warded with extensive charms to turn away Muggle notice and entrance, where the Ministry had chosen to build the platform. Most of the people who’d been talking jumped at once and turned their attention back to the Minister.

“Thank you for coming,” said Scrimgeour. Even with the charm amplifying his voice, it was just the right volume, Harry thought, grave and courteous without being overwhelming. He’d obviously learned public speaking along with every other Ministerial duty that mattered. He paused for a moment, as if measuring up the threats that the Aurors and Unspeakables might have missed,
and then continued. “This is a press conference arranged through the Ministry, though with the cooperation of Harry, who until recently was Harry Potter. He has an announcement that concerns the safety of the whole of wizarding Britain. With that in mind, here he is, to make his announcement. Questions will only be permitted after he has finished speaking.” He said the last with a significant glance at Melinda Honeywhistle, and then tapped his throat to silence his own voice, nodding at Harry.

Harry was not going to trust to *Sonorus*; he didn’t have the Minister’s experience with it. He used a charm he’d found during his research on Ariadne’s Web, instead, when he’d had the idea, born from a half-crazed lack of sleep, that he might be able to send a wind through the lightning ward around Durmstrang.

“*Insusurro*,” he murmured, and the air near everyone’s ears altered, vibrating in tune with his voice, carrying it to them as if he were standing next to them and speaking at normal volume. More than one person jumped when he began giving his prepared speech, but at least they wouldn’t miss anything important.

“My name is Harry, as you know,” he said, turning his head from side to side, meeting as many of their eyes as he could. His heart had begun to pound a few minutes ago, but now it retreated into a hard, steady beat. This really wasn’t much different than addressing his allies, especially since he didn’t need to raise his voice to insure he was heard. “Until recently, as the Minister says, I was Harry Potter. But one thing about me has not changed, and that is the extent of my magic and my commitment to using it to guarantee freedom for as many wizards and magical creatures as I can.”

He let a few of the restraints on his magic slip. Harry heard people gasp as they felt his power for the first time. He let it flurry above their heads, an invisible presence for the most part—unless someone else saw it visually, he supposed—but transforming the rain into soft flakes of snow.

The thunder screamed at him, the Dark magic feeling and responding to his strength. Harry let a grim smile pull at his lips as he brought down the barriers on himself again, and it promptly began raining harder than ever. He couldn’t have proved his point better if he tried.

“The wild Dark has been provoked,” he said. “This is the magic that opposes the Light, that runs in the dark spaces between the stars, that dances on Walpurgis Night.” The majority of the people in the crowd looked frightened, and Harry didn’t blame them. They were Light wizards. The wild Dark was the stuff of nightmares to them, or stories their parents had used to frighten them. “It intends to come sweeping in on Midwinter night, the solstice, when the moon will be dark. That is a time of power for it. As a prelude to that, it has hatched these storms, but all of these storms are nothing next to what it intends to bring down on Midwinter.”

He heard murmurs of rising panic, and knew he didn’t dare let them advance too far. He held up his left arm, and saw multiple eyes fix on it, noting the missing sleeve and the missing hand. Argutus was, thankfully, keeping out of sight.

“I intend to fight it,” he said quietly. “If it were only hunting Voldemort, I would not condemn it, but it will destroy anything in its path. And I challenge power that does that.” He turned his arm over. “No matter what it costs me. No matter what kind of power it is, Dark or Light. I will protect you as best as I can. I must ask that you take precautions that night. Do not travel if at all possible on the twenty-first of December, and set up your strongest wards. Beware of Dark magical creatures; they may become bolder as the wild Dark nears. Do not go outside.”

They stared at him, their mouths slightly parted. That had happened to even Skeeter and Honeywhistle, Harry saw with a gush of amusement.

He turned and looked upwards. As they’d planned before he left Hogwarts, Fawkes chose that moment to appear, flaring into being above the platform with a ringing cry that challenged the Dark and negated it. The rain around him turned into a corona of steam as he coasted down and landed on Harry’s right arm, upraised to receive him. The phoenix tossed his head back and loosed a deep, thrilling song. Harry could see it strengthening and comforting the people who watched the platform, much as it had done for him in the Chamber of Secrets.

Fascinated, awed looks had already appeared on their faces, even before Fawkes began to sing. Harry suspected few of them would ever have been so close to a phoenix before, and they would be remembering that Fawkes was a creature of ultimate Light.

“I am going to fight this,” said Harry. “I promise you. I am not a Declared Lord, but I have the power of one. That power is now turned to protecting you, defending you, serving you—healing you if necessary when the storm has passed.” He tilted his head, aware of a quiet strength rising in him. He wasn’t sure if it’d come because he called it, or if it came from the trust growing in their faces, or if he was starting to believe his own carefully orchestrated show. “I will defeat it, with the help of the Light.”
Fawkes spread his wings and sang again. His feathers were not quite burning, but shifting from color to color, red on gold on blue. Harry had to tear his eyes away before he was mesmerized along with all the other spectators. Fawkes seemed to be taking the approach of the wild Dark quite as seriously as he was. The phoenix had grown brighter and brighter in the past few days, and he sang more often.

“I am doing this because I am *vates*,” Harry added. He suspected that at least a few questions would concern what he had to gain from this, when he was neither a Light Lord nor a Dark one. “I still support the rights of magical creatures, and would like to see all of them free. I still support the repeal of the anti-werewolf laws, among others.” He felt Scrimgeour’s quick, stabbing glance, but didn’t look aside from the crowd to meet it. It was remarkable, really, how he felt right now. These were *his* people—his to serve and defend and protect, since they couldn’t do it themselves. A sweet shiver ran down his spine. If he fought the wild Dark, he would only be doing what he was supposed to be doing, what he had wanted to do ever since Narcissa had written to him in the persona of Starborn and suggested that a powerful wizard need not become a Lord. “But I count wizards and witches as among those I protect. And the wild Dark is no one’s friend now that it has started hunting. I will oppose it.”

He waited a moment longer, his arm uplifted beneath Fawkes’s body, the rain around them hissing away before it managed to touch them.

Then he dropped his arm, and Fawkes rose above his head, hovering with wings spread like an eagle’s, singing with all his might. A burst of radiance traveled from him over the heads of the crowd, and then he settled on Harry’s shoulder, head bowed so that his plumes brushed Harry’s neck. Harry raised his hand and scratched gently at the downy breast feathers.

“I will take questions now,” he said quietly.

Skeeter tried, she really did, but Melinda Honeywhistle still managed to ask the first one. “Does this mean that you’re Declaring for Light, *vates*?” she asked, apparently deciding that she preferred that to his first name.

Harry laughed. “Did I say I was?”

“You have a phoenix on your shoulder,” said Honeywhistle, even as her Quick-Quotes Quill stabbed and rustled over the paper. “You said that you were going to use Light magic to fight the Dark. I think it’s a reasonable assumption.”

“Reasonable assumptions are often wrong, ma’am.” Harry found that he was enjoying himself. He’d told the truth, and what dramatic elements he’d used were really part of him—*no borrowed phoenixes here*.” “In this case, Fawkes has been bonded to me since this spring, and that was his choice. He used to belong to Albus Dumbledore, but abandoned him when he started disapproving of Dumbledore’s choices.” Mouths opened at that, and quills rustled faster. Fawkes crooned to confirm it. “And I said I would be using Light magic because one uses Light magic to fight the wild Dark. It would simply absorb and consume Dark Arts. That does not mean I am loyal to Light to the exclusion of all else, as a Declaration would imply.”

Honeywhistle tried to ask something else, but this time, Skeeter managed to get in. “Do you intend to stand poised between Dark and Light the rest of your life, Harry?” she asked. Her eyes gleamed with interest. Harry was sure that she was dreaming of the front page of the *Prophet* again, though what headline she’d use, he didn’t know.

“As long as I live, yes,” said Harry. “A *vates* must, and I’ll only Declare for Dark or Light if I fail as *vates*. I don’t intend to fail.”

“What advantages would you say that using both Dark and Light magic offers?” Skeeter asked.

Harry cocked his head. He could give a light, easy answer about his range of magic being greater, of course, but that wasn’t what he wanted to do. He wanted to say something that would make people understand how he truly felt, and not just the practical advantages of it. Then, they might see their way clearer to following his ideals, and not just following *him*.

“It lets me be without fear,” he said, knowing she would hear him thanks to the charm guiding the words to her ear. “Not that I’m never scared, of course, but it means that I don’t have to fear Dark or Light because I don’t understand them, the way that can happen when a Declared wizard becomes too invested in his own allegiance. In some ways, it’s not much different from being undeclared altogether, but I understand that most undeclared wizards still don’t use Dark Arts.”

“Are you saying you do?” That was the wizard in the tatty robes, leaning forward intently.

Harry lifted his eyebrows. “I have, yes.”
“Can you give some examples of places and times where you think Dark Arts are permissible?” That was a witch standing behind Honeywhistle, bouncing up and down on her toes to be noticed. “After all, the Ministry has banned them, and for good reasons in most cases.”

“In most cases,” Harry agreed. “But I have used what is classified as Dark magic to cut some of the webs on magical creatures, and in battle against Voldemort.” It was rather funny to see the witch stop bouncing and shiver, as though Voldemort would appear and hex her for listening to his name. “I’ve also been the victim of curses like that. It helps to know what your enemy’s going to use against you.”

“Would you advocate the Ministry lifting the bans on Dark Arts?” the witch pressed, apparently over her fear of the Dark Lord.

“I would not advocate the Ministry doing anything in particular about them,” Harry murmured, aware that Scrimgeour was watching him. “Taken together, they’re too broad a category to simply ban or lift the ban on. There are some individual spells I might lobby for, yes. Certainly not the Unforgivable Curses, and not most of the spells Voldemort’s Death Eaters use.”

The witch tried to ask another question, but a wizard using *Sonorus* bested her. “Harry!” he boomed. “Is it true that you consider the rights of centaurs and werewolves more important than the rights of wizards and witches?”

Harry bowed his head. “Thank you for letting me know of a deficiency in my spell, sir. I shall correct it right away.”

“What?” The booming voice was baffled now.

Harry looked up and smiled sweetly in his direction. “I cast a charm that would enable everyone to hear me during my speech,” he said. “But it must have a weakness in it, because you didn’t hear me say that I count wizards and witches among those I protect. I’ll look into that before I cast the spell again.”

Snickers interrupted the wizard’s attempt to bluster through that, and someone else called out, “Do you see yourself bound to oppose Voldemort because you’re the Boy-Who-Lived?”

Harry snorted. “I’m bound to oppose him because I have the power to do so, and I see that there’s a problem. The person who sees the problem and can correct it has the responsibility to do so, in my view.”

“But what about the prophecy that says you’re supposed to defeat him?” the same reporter, probably—she was far enough back that Harry couldn’t see her in the general press—persisted. “The one you spoke about in your parents’ trial?”

Harry cocked his head. “That is perhaps a reason, but only a secondary one. My parents counted on that to save them and excuse their actions. I plan never to do so.”

There were a few more questions, but most of them were repetitions of what had gone before, or far enough away from the topic at hand that Harry turned them aside with a light jest and refused to answer. At last, the reporters looked at each other and apparently had no more to say. Harry smiled. That was one of the advantages of being as straightforward and speaking as much truth as possible. It left few holds for anyone to grab his words and try to spin them, though he was sure some of the stories they published about this would manage to do it.

“If that is all?” Scrimgeour, who’d cast *Sonorus* on himself again, asked, and was answered by nodding heads. “Then Mr. Connor Potter would like to make an announcement.”

Harry stepped aside, and watched curiously as his brother marched to the front of the stage. He was probably chewing his lip again, and his voice was a bit too loud when he spoke. But the content of his announcement would take attention away from the way he said it. It certainly snared Harry’s.

“I’m going to Declare for Light,” said Connor. “I just wanted everyone to know that. That doesn’t mean my brother is,” he added. Harry wondered, through his daze, if it was instinct that led him to think the reporters would try to link their announcements, or if he just wanted to make absolutely clear that his actions didn’t control Harry’s. “But I am.”

The reporters threw questions at him, of course. Connor rode most of them out admirably, though once or twice he stammered. Harry watched his back thoughtfully, but managed a smile when Connor turned to him.
Of course he has the right to make whatever Declaration he likes. And I can’t say it’s a surprise, really. Connor’s always been more Light-minded. If he’s spoken with Scrimgeour and Remus and others who are loyal to the Light over these past few months, it’s not surprising they’ve convinced him.

I just hope this doesn’t put a rift between us.

Connor finally stepped back from the edge of the platform with a defiant little toss of his head that Harry recognized; it meant that he was going to go ride his broom, and nothing Lily or James said would stop him. But that was all right. It was probably the attitude he would need to weather the storm his announcement would cause.

He caught Harry’s eye, and smiled uncertainly. “We’re all right?” he whispered, then winced as he realized he hadn’t taken Sonorus off. He quickly removed it.

Harry nodded to him. “Of course.”

Connor smiled in relief.

Harry glanced around one more time, but the crowd was already dispersing—the wizards and witches who had come in search of entertainment to look for something more entertaining, the reporters racing to write their stories first and launch them on the wizarding world. Harry relaxed and glanced up at Scrimgeour, who had come to a stop next to him, frowning.

“You meant what you said about Dark Arts and anti-werewolf laws, didn’t you.” Scrimgeour’s voice was more resigned than anything else.

Harry arched his eyebrows. “You know I did.”

Scrimgeour nodded. “I have a few pieces of information for you,” he said. “The first is that one of our Muggleborn Aurors located the place you were looking for. The graveyard where Tom Riddle is buried is in a town called Little Hangleton.” He handed Harry a sheaf of parchment. “Here’s the map and the information on how to get there. It turns out there are Apparition points not too far from it. The Ministry actually handled a murder case there about fifty years ago. Strange case,” he added, with a shake of his head. “A wizard named Morfin Gaunt confessed to the murder of the Riddles.”

Harry swallowed, his hand closing convulsively on the parchment. “I don’t think it was him.”

“Probably not,” said Scrimgeour dryly. “The second piece of information is that I questioned Digle, and he confessed to letting a woman named Hestia Jones in to see Dumbledore.”

“He did?” Harry blinked. From what he had seen of Digle, he hadn’t thought a wild elephant could drag a confession out of the man.

“Yes. Strangest thing, really. He was willing to talk after he had a bit of pumpkin juice with breakfast.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. Scrimgeour looked a bit too innocent. Before he could say anything, though, the Minister went on. “We’ve confirmed that Hestia Jones has connections with Order of the Phoenix members. We’ll be bringing her in for questioning today.” He looked straight at Harry. “She was the only one who helped Dumbledore cast the compulsion spell, from what Digle said, but she can lead us to others. We’ll have the rest of them yet.”

Harry nodded slowly. “Thank you.”

“Digle shouldn’t have done what he did,” said Scrimgeour, narrowing his eyes in turn. “I dislike attempted murder, Harry, and just because it’s attempted murder on you doesn’t make it any less serious. Rather the opposite, in fact.”

“What.”

It wasn’t a question. Harry froze, then turned his head slowly, inch by inch, to meet Snape’s eyes. He hadn’t heard his guardian come up behind him.

“I had heard nothing of this,” Snape said. Draco stood next to him, looking equally furious.
Harry looked around for help, but Scrimgeour had discreetly stepped away, and Connor just happened to be facing the other direction. Fawkes cocked his head and crooned as if to say that Harry really should have known better, then took off in a flap of wings. Argutus was silent.

“You will be explaining on the way back to Hogwarts why you failed to inform us of this,” said Snape, even as their escort of Aurors came forward again.

Woefully, Harry bowed his head and followed.

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**Intermission: That Which Burns Shall Rise Again**

There were Aurors at her door.

Hestia Jones knew that, but it didn’t stop her from penning the last line in the letter she was sending, the code that would tell the Order of the Phoenix member that she could be trusted, and that this was a true message that had the approval of Dumbledore, not a prank or a matter of minor importance. She tied the letter to the leg of the waiting owl, a small one which would attract barely any attention, especially now that dusk was falling and non-magical owls as well as magical ones were in motion.

“Go, now,” she whispered to the owl, pausing to scratch its head. “You know who you have to find.”

The owl hooted enthusiastically and took wing through the back window of her flat, the only one that was open. Hestia smiled. That window looked out over an alley of wizarding London, one too small for a human to get through on foot. No one would be watching there.

So. It was done, now. Her last message was gone, and she had done her part to make sure that the influence of the Light would not die, even though they had caught Kingsley Shacklebolt and Homer Digle.

“Hestia Jones!” The Auror at the door was using an impressive-sounding growl, as though he imagined that would make her surrender faster. “Undo your locking charms and surrender your wand.”

Hestia, whose wand was on a table across the room, sniffed, but made no attempt to move. Her eyes were on the vanishing owl. They remained that way even when the Aurors at last blasted aside her door and stamped into the room, pulling her arms roughly behind her back as they arrested her.

None of them understood. She had known that, of course, but she confirmed their lack of comprehension when she looked into their eyes. Hestia glanced down at the floor to hide her smile.

The Order of the Phoenix was not some spreading vine they could cut down and stamp on and burn and be done with. It was a group of people with the same beliefs, people whose minds were touched with Light, who knew that no matter the unfortunate pressure of some accusations and some Dark wizards who pretended to be Light in power, the group’s mission—fighting against Dark Lords—must continue. They would be the ones who weren’t fooled, the ones who saw with the clear eyes of their namesake. When Harry Potter revealed himself to be the Dark Lord that Hestia knew he was, they would be ready, even if some of their members were in prison.

And she knew there was another person, his existence hinted at in whispers, who could make use of them, even if Lord Dumbledore was tried and condemned and stripped of his magic. He could have been a Light Lord, but he had preferred to let his protégé, Albus, claim the title. Now that he knew he was needed, he would come out of seclusion, and he would find the Order of the Phoenix ready and waiting to assist him.

*After all,* Hestia thought, as the Aurors searched her for knives or magical artifacts or extra wands, *when a phoenix burns, it rises again. They really ought to have known that about us.*

The serene smile remained on her face even as the Aurors shoved her out the door and Apparated with her to Tullianum.

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Snape sat on one side of his private rooms and stared at Harry. The boy stared back, arms crossed over his chest as if he were...
cold. Draco stood beside him, his hand twitching as if he wanted to clutch Harry’s shoulder in reassurance. He always drew his hand back, though, when he met Snape’s eyes. Both of them knew how serious this was.

Harry had nearly died, again, the day he went to the Ministry to speak with Scrimgeour about Shacklebolt, Mallory, and Digle. And he had not told them.

Snape would have tried yelling, but he didn’t think any of them could bear it. Besides, it hadn’t made an impact on Harry before. Nor had scolding, or the urgent pleas to tell them when his life was in danger. Snape wasn’t even entirely sure what had prompted Harry to keep silent this time. It was not as though he would want to protect Digle, since the Ministry was charging him with attempted murder anyway. That much he had confirmed before he shut down and stared at Snape and Draco both with blank green eyes.

So Snape decided to speak of the emotion that most drove him at the moment, and, judging from the expression on Draco’s face when he thought no one was looking, drove him, too.

“I am sorry that you do not trust us yet, Harry,” he said quietly.

Harry blinked and jerked his head up. “What are you talking about?” he asked. “I trust you. Of course I trust you.” He glanced up at Draco and tried to smile. The smile withered when Draco just stared back at him.

“Then why keep silent?” Snape asked.

Harry shook his head. “I don’t know if I can explain it,” he said. “But—well, the Aurors were most concerned about the fact that Digle had a knife at all, not about his almost killing me. It was a pathetic attempt. I took care of it as soon as it happened. Scrimgeour is worried, of course, but he worries all the time anyway.” He tried another smile, this time with slightly more success. “Why should I worry you with telling you about it?”

Snape sighed. Even to his ears, it had a weary sound. “Because I want to know, Harry,” he said. “And when you do not tell me of these attempts, something so vital and important as your nearly dying, it does make me feel as though you don’t trust me.”

“Me, too,” said Draco, crouching down beside Harry’s seat so that Harry couldn’t help but see him. “I’m not sure whether I think that you don’t trust us not to get angry at you or don’t trust us not to rush out and eviscerate the bastard responsible, but either way, I’d rather that you told us.”

Harry shrank into a corner of the couch. “But I nearly die all the time,” he said. “You’ve even seen most of those happen. Why should one more time matter?”

Draco glanced back at Snape. Snape drew in a deep breath and controlled his immediate response. That Harry could even ask such a question showed how differently he thought about this kind of thing from most people. Snape couldn’t snap out that Harry’s life was of course important, because he wouldn’t understand.

“But I know that,” said Harry. “That’s the reason I don’t tell you about all of the murder attempts. I don’t want you to spend your lives in a constant state of fear.”

“I would rather do that than have a false happiness,” said Snape, arriving at the crux of the matter at last. “I would rather know that you are in danger and be ready to protect you than fondly imagine nothing is wrong and have an unexpected threat come at you from behind.”

“You could also, you know, always hold back from going into danger,” said Draco, with the Malfoy trick of putting the force of a yell into a whisper, which Snape had heard only Lucius master before.

Harry sighed. “That’s not going to happen, Draco, not with as many times as I don’t even realize that my life might hang in the balance, or with as many times as I need to experience danger to make a new ally trust me.”

“You still let people have too much of you,” said Draco, resting his hand on Harry’s shoulder as though he thought that would make him more likely to listen. “You don’t need to experience danger to make them trust you. It’s just the most expedient way for
that other person. But not for us, Harry. We would rather that you stayed safe.”

Harry looked away, biting at his lip. Snape nodded slowly. Draco had hit on the one argument that might actually convince Harry to think before he plunged into danger. It was not as good as making him value his own life for its own sake, but it was a start.

“And you would rather have the worry, too?” Harry whispered. “I don’t need to protect you from knowing?”

“No,” said Snape forcefully, not intending to let this sign of sense get away. Harry’s eyes returned to his face. “At the moment, all you spare us from feeling is a few days of worry. We find out in the end, and feel the worry delayed, and anger, and the helplessness that I, at least, experience, when I know that your own distrust of me prevents me from helping you.”

“That’s not it at all!” Harry said, squirming upright on the couch. “I don’t distrust you. I just want to defend you from the helplessness you seem to experience at finding that I’ve nearly died again.”

“Truly?” Snape considered Harry’s fervent nod, and prevented himself from reacting to the statement that Harry trusted him with anything other than a sharply indrawn breath. “Well, it feels like the other.”

“With me, too,” said Draco, with perhaps a bit too much sadness in his voice, his eyes cast down on the floor. But if Harry thought the pouting was false, he obviously chose not to take it that way, reaching out and resting his hand and his wrist on Draco’s shoulders.

“I didn’t know,” Harry whispered. “I did think I was defending you from knowing. And the Ministry was handling Digle, and, well, it happened so suddenly, and I didn’t even get a scratch—“ He cut himself off abruptly. “But that doesn’t matter, I suppose,” he said. “You still want to know.”

“Yes, Harry,” said Snape.

Draco’s answer was wordless, an intense stare, but it still made Harry bow his head and nod.

The boys left for the Slytherin common room then, and left Snape to summon a house elf, request a glass of wine, and stare into the fire.

It is growing, that trust between us. Slowly, it’s coming back, like a phoenix burned in its own fire.

Snape had not permitted himself to react the way he most wanted to to Harry’s declaration just now, the way he had held himself back from doing anything last month when Harry spoke of admiring him. With some children, he knew, it would have been the right course, to show how much he valued those seemingly casual words, the evidence that their love for him was not totally destroyed.

But Harry had heard Snape say that it was love for him that had made Snape accuse his parents and Dumbledore. He knew how Snape felt. It was the consequences of his actions that he had become angry at and hated.

Snape would need to let Harry find his way back to him on his own, burn away his hatred like a coating of ash and burst into new flames, a rising of love and hope and trust that would renew their bond as no forced words—which Harry would probably think of as manipulation anyway—could.

That Harry had not been chased away utterly by Snape’s actions on his behalf, that he did not hate him forever, was good fortune such as he had not conceived of when he sent the owl to the Ministry bearing the Pensieve Potion and the written records of Dumbledore’s memories. He did have a future, a chance, with his ward. And he would not ruin it by moving too quickly.

That which burns shall rise again, he thought. It had been one of Albus’s favorite sayings, but it was older than he was, and therefore no one could prevent Snape from valuing it.

We shall rise again.

He shuddered then, and stood to do some experimental brewing. His own mind was taking a far too soppy turn for his taste.

_*_*_*_*_*_*
Dear Lord Voldemort:

I hope you will forgive the familiarity, but as my last letter to you began the same way, I thought I should stay consistent. I write now with confidence in your ability to decipher the charm I have used to disguise my handwriting, and your ability to understand what you will find when you do. No one has ever said that Lord Voldemort is an ignoramus.

I bring information that you may know already, along with the evidence of my own eyes. I was in the crowd at Harry Potter’s press conference yesterday, and he never noticed me. Of course, he has the habit of overlooking me. Even if he had noticed I was there, it is likely he would not have paid the slightest bit of attention.

Potter, as you may know, declared that he would be fighting the wild Dark and the storm it will bring down on Midwinter night. I am well-aware that Lord Voldemort, of course, will know the motives of the wild Dark magic and how best to harness that power. Potter, however, was supremely confident. The tone of his voice, the shine in his eyes, the movement of his arms, and the phoenix that landed on his shoulder, all proclaimed that he knew how to handle this. I suspect that part of this was showmanship for the crowd, but not all of it can have been; Potter is not that good a liar. Thus comes my warning. Potter has reason to be confident.

I have, unfortunately, not been able to learn the details of his plan. He has told his Dark allies that his Light ones are handling it. So he will use Light magic—but that covers large areas of spells. I am sorry not to be able to offer you more information.

One interesting tidbit that your own spies might or might not have seen: Scrimgeour spoke with Potter after the press conference was done, and gave him a large packet of papers. I was not very near the stage, but I know some spells that ride the wind and turn it inside out, and I did overhear the names “Little Hangleton,” “Tom Riddle,” and “Morfin Gaunt.” I hope that these will mean something to my Lord.

Please let me know, my lord, if I can be of more use to you, or if you have instructions for me. I understand I am not initiated, and that what you will find when the charm to disguise my handwriting dissipates may lessen your trust in me. But, I assure you, I am ready and willing to serve you. Potter will never give me what I want. You can, and if it suits your Lordship’s pleasure, you will.

I wish you luck on Midwinter night, my lord.

The Serpent.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Fifty-Three: Tonight There Shall Be No Moon

The night before Midwinter, Pansy climbed the North Tower to its highest point and stood there watching the storm.

It barely rained now. It had become a thing of fire and air, lighting and wind flickering and dancing as if in answer to a question the giants had asked. One flash spoke from a corner of the sky, and was answered by a gust that tore Pansy’s hood off and sent her hair streaming behind her. Then the wind coiled around her legs, with a howl like a burning cat, and the lighting answered, arcing from the north to the west.

Pansy wondered who else was watching the storm, if they saw the same things and what they thought if they did. She wondered how Muggles were explaining all this strange weather. Of course, even if one of them thought of the provoked Dark magic as an explanation, they wouldn’t be able to feel it.

Lightning and wind talked to each other for hours, until midnight came. Pansy then felt the deep silence of the dead all around her. She had already learned to read those silences, though as yet she heard their voices in little more than whispers. They were in dread of something.

Pansy lifted her head. She could see no light. The moon had gone, of course, and the clouds covered the stars.

From one horizon to the next, from life towards death, from darkness unto darkness, the voice of the thunder spoke, menacing and
all-encompassing. Pansy gripped the sides of the North Tower as it shook, the boom resounding in its bones. Somewhere to the
left of her, the wind seized a bit of stone from Hogwarts’s walls and sent it whirling furiously to the west. Pansy suspected it
would hit a wizard or witch in the head and cause him or her to die before the night was out.

In the wake of that thunder, the night went suddenly and ominously still. Pansy could hear the silence of the dead returning to the
cool, dry thing it usually was, the empty, expectant quietude of the grave. She looked up, and saw the clouds parting like water
troubled by the fall of a stone, slipping down the sides of the sky. The stars shone out overhead again. Pansy wished they hadn’t.
They were weak, pale things, making the darkness seem all the stronger and the smugger for it.

She closed her eyes, and leaned her head on her clasped hands. She knew the Dark hadn’t gone. It was withdrawing its strength,
melting to the south and the north, gathering and then whirling around above the sea. It would come back and strike at its chosen
location with all the more speed and power for not storming for a day. Pansy suspected it would arrive at midnight tomorrow, or
perhaps sunset, the moment when the light yielded the sky.

She shuddered. She was glad that she wasn’t going with Harry tomorrow to face the wrath of the wild Dark. She could not
imagine how he would counter it.

*No, you just have a full day of classes and trying to get used to seeing death, Pansy,* she thought, straightening and shaking her
hair back. *Time to go to bed.*

It should be safe to enter the common room now, she thought. The sight that had driven her forth from it, the death she could not
bear to see written on the air in letters of fire, should have faded. Its bearer would also have gone to bed.

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Harry had a hard time keeping himself from going mad in his classes that day.

He could feel the wild Dark now, waiting. It had been growing clearer and clearer with every day since the first attack by the
storm, and now that it was the twenty-first, the first day of winter, the day of longest darkness, he felt it everywhere. When he
turned his eyes on the walls of the Slytherin common room, he could see shadows whipping just out of sight, like the trailing edge
of a robe. When he briefly stepped outside to see if what the Gryffindor Quidditch team was saying was true and the storms had
stopped, he felt it smiling down at him from beyond the steel-clear sky. When he tried to pay attention in Defense Against the
Dark Arts, he felt it weighting Acies’s words, distorting them and twisting them out of true, every now and then showing him a
vision of a blackness as complete as a cave underground.

The wild Dark had come, and Harry did not know if he was ready.

Fawkes, who rode on his shoulder to every class that day, and regularly shifted between scarlet and gold and blue in his feathers,
crooned when he thought that. A clear vision formed in Harry’s mind, of the sun rising after a long night that no one thought
would ever end. Harry managed a smile as he stroked the phoenix’s neck.

He would have to be ready. He had made what preparations he could. He would be going to the graveyard when sunset came,
with Snape, Draco, and those of his allies who could not fight tonight but still wanted to protect him as advance guards. Augustus,
who was serving as focal point for the Light wizard ritual, would follow him in some time later, when preparations for the ritual
were complete.

Harry wanted to be there at sunset just in case the Dark chose the yielding of the light for its strike, but he didn’t think it would.
As the day wore on and the light declined, he sensed it retreating still. To get to Little Hangleton at sunset, it would have had to
gallop and tear cross-country, summoning its power from every corner of the sky, and Harry knew that wouldn’t happen. The
Dark would favor a slow, dramatic, majestic approach.

Still, it made the sky shake with the tread of its strength, and he knew the melodrama it favored wasn’t humorous, as it would
have been with an opponent of lesser power, as it was occasionally even with Voldemort. This was the Dark’s cruel way of
drawing out the anticipation, taunting him without words that he could not stop it, that no one could. A storm that could lay waste
to the British Isles was coming. What effort of a mortal wizard could stop that?

*The efforts of many mortal wizards,* Harry thought, as he stroked Fawkes’s feathers. *That’s the answer. It has to be.*

And perhaps more than just mortal wizards, given that Acies came to find him after lunch. “Harry,” she said, her head bowed so
that her hood shaded her eyes, her voice low. “I may be able to bring one of the Singers to your defense. I promise nothing, because they are free and it is not my place to constrain them into an answer. I dare not even persuade. I can only mention the idea, and hope that one of them approves.”

“A dragon might come to the graveyard?” Harry breathed.

“Perhaps,” Acies said, stressing the word. “And I do not know what kind of Singer it would be, and if she would even arrive in time. I mention the possibility only so that you will not be surprised if it does happen, rather than as something to depend on.” She bobbed her head and then stepped back; Harry could sense the curious gazes of those students who wanted to know what Professor Merryweather was talking so intensely to him about. “Tell your allies not to harm her if she does come.”

“I promise,” said Harry, feeling a bit breathless as Acies strode away. He wondered for a moment why she’d seemed so certain that it would be a female dragon who came, and then remembered that female dragons were usually larger, stronger, and fiercer than the males. She’d probably spread the idea before those Singers she thought would do the most good in battle.

*If even a dragon can help in the battle against the wild Dark.*

But, Harry could not deny, he felt a bit more cheerful after that.

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“Ready?”

Harry, his breath pluming before his face, nodded, and then cast a warming charm on himself. He, Snape, and Draco had waited on the Hogsmeade road for the Dark allies who could accompany them—which meant most of them save Charles and Thomas—to arrive. Now Belville, grumbling about the cold and the damage that warming charms did to his fine cloak, had finally joined them. It was Lucius who asked the question, his eyes slit and his face as proud and cruel as a hawk’s.

“I am,” Harry said, just to reassure those of his allies who hadn’t seen him nod, and then looked quickly around at them. “You all have a clear picture of the Apparition point in your heads?” He’d discussed it with them by the means of Charles’s communication spell, as well as owled them copies of the maps that Scrimgeour had procured for him, and Henrietta and Hawthorn, among others, had Apparated there already. But the last thing Harry wanted was any of them getting splinched, so he thought it best to ask.

Nods and murmurs answered. Honoria actually laughed at him. “Honestly, Harry, we know how much this matters,” she said, though she didn’t look as though she knew how much it mattered at all. Letters of red and gold marched on her cloak, flashing insults to the wild Dark back at the dying sun. “We deserve to die by now if we don’t.”

Harry ignored her as much as possible—he was still irritated that she hadn’t taken the payment of the life debt seriously—and then moved the extra step beyond Hogwarts’s wards. The picture of the Apparition point was clear in his mind. He could feel the reassuring presence of Regulus and Peter at his back, Snape and Draco at his sides. Fawkes crooned above his head, and then all of that vanished into the blackness of Apparition.

They reappeared on a hillside, the Apparition point concealed in a thick grove of trees that almost blazed to Harry’s sight with Muggle-repelling charms. He stepped hastily out of the way as the others Apparated in, and glanced around a few times.

The countryside seemed utterly unspectacular. Long shadows stretched from the grove across the steep ground, which canted more sharply below them than it did above. The grass here was matted and half-frozen with the frost they’d received this morning, the first proper one of the season, and too long to indicate that Muggles cared for it. Harry made out a path winding lazily past the grove. It didn’t look well-used, either, since spreading ground plants obscured half of it.

“How far is the graveyard from here?” Burke grumbled.

“Less than a quarter mile, according to the Ministry maps,” Harry said, and lifted his head to check the time. The sun was still safely above the horizon. “This way,” he added, and led them down the hill.

They walked in silence, for the most part, except for Honoria apparently attempting to tell a joke to a distinctly unamused Ignifer. Harry shaded his eyes as he stared ahead. The village of Little Hangleton started towards the bottom of the hill, Scrimgeour’s information said, though so far Harry didn’t see a sign of it. Well, it was supposed to be a small village, as Muggle places went.
He actually almost stumbled into the shack before he saw it. His hand touched the weathered boards, and he started back in surprise. Snape caught him, and murmured in his ear, “Harry, what is it?”

“That’s not a woodpile,” Harry breathed, staring at the tumble of wood he had assumed some Muggle must have cut and then dumped here carelessly.

Looking at it closely now, he could see that it was a house, if one stretched the definition of “house” until it snapped. The door had fallen off the hinges and listed badly to one side, propped up by a broken piece of wood extending from the shack’s right side. A tiny gap indicated the grave of a window. Harry could see raw-toothed holes in the shack’s roof, and twigs that were probably the remnants of a bird’s nest.

None of that would have attracted much of his attention, though, if not for the aura of powerful magic that stormed from the place. Harry could feel it like a spreading maelstrom under the much greater influence of the Dark storm. It eddied, a sullen black whirlpool. Harry imagined what might happen to a Muggle who tried to step into the old house, and shuddered.

“I feel it, too.” Snape’s voice was low and hard. “What is it?”

Harry took a deep breath, and then coughed. A stench that wasn’t physical choked him when he tried to inhale it. This wasn’t just Dark magic, he thought. He knew the feel of that, and it was very far from being the pure evil that Light wizards thought it was, even in its wild form. This was magic worked with deliberately malevolent intent, and he didn’t recognize it. He knew that he would be cursed if he tried to get into the shack, but not what form the curse would take.

“I don’t know,” Harry said.

Snape’s hand tightened, drawing him away from the pile of wood. “Then don’t fool around with it,” he ordered. “When and if we have time after our business is done at the graveyard, then we’ll come back.”

Harry wondered for a moment what kind of wizard would have left this here without any Muggle repelling charms around it, like an open pit trap, and then snorted. Tom Riddle, of course. Voldemort. The bastard.

“Can we get a move on?” Belville’s voice was arrogant, but that didn’t hide the rushing undercurrent of fear. “I thought we had to be at the graveyard at sunset, in case the storm struck there.”

Harry shook himself free of his fascination with the shack. Like Snape said, it was a minor mystery in the face of attack from the wild Dark, and they would investigate it only if and when they had time. Untying curses that Voldemort had set himself was no easy task, and perhaps there would turn out to be nothing worth the effort behind them. It didn’t look like the kind of place that Voldemort would hide anything valuable. “I don’t think it will fall there now,” he said absentely, and turned his face up to the winter sunlight. “It’s probably coming at midnight.”

Belville said something uncomplimentary to that, regarding the hurry they’d taken to get here, but Harry ignored it. He could see the houses of Little Hangleton once they got beyond the shack, as if it were the gateway to the village, and so he concentrated on casting charms that would cause any Muggles abroad to forget to see them. They saw no one as they worked their way north and west around the houses, though. Muggles couldn’t feel the wild Dark, Harry thought, but they could sense enough unnaturalness in the weather to be uneasy about it. They’d stay indoors.

At least, so Harry hoped. The storm would hit Little Hangleton first if he couldn’t stop it. He shuddered to think of how the wild Dark would play with helpless Muggles, unable even to comprehend the force that faced them, much less to withstand it.

*I’m doing this for them, too, then. I have to think of defending everyone, not just myself.*

The weight of extra lives steadied him, rather than crushing him. It had always been that way, for Harry. If the wild Dark had just wanted him and Voldemort, he would have fought with less strength than he would now that he knew it would kill anyone who got in its way.

*Kill, or torture, or play with...*

He saw the stone wall of the graveyard when they left the last house behind. It sat below a much larger building that Harry suspected, from the information Scrimgeour had passed to him, was the Riddle house. The Riddles, mother and father and son,
had been found dead there in the 1940’s, their bodies unmarked, looks of terror on their faces. They had obviously died from the Killing Curse, and Morfin Gaunt had confessed to the murders.

Harry shook his head. *I’d wager my right hand that it was Voldemort who killed them. Merlin knows how many victims have taken the blame for his crimes.*

The thought ran away from his head like water through a hole in the bottom of a basin, and Harry realized he was panting. Draco noticed. He paused, then slung an arm around Harry’s shoulders and squeezed firmly. They had to keep walking, or one of Harry’s other allies would notice his growing discomfort, and that could be disastrous. Harry had not forgotten that a traitor was somewhere among them.

Harry leaned towards Draco, and fought to still memories of the last time he had come to this graveyard at sunset, exactly six months ago now, on the first day of summer. His left hand throbbed. He shuddered as he reimagined bonds gripping his wrists and ankles, and a flare of pain from his chest reminded him of the bite Voldemort had taken out of him when he still looked like a deformed child.

“It will be all right,” Draco whispered in his ear. “Things will be different this time. You’ll see.”

Harry nodded into his shoulder, and kept walking. The stone wall around the graveyard drew nearer and nearer. Harry could see the headstones and angels he remembered looming above the half-tumbled rocks. He could see no sign of movement, though. He supposed that wasn’t unusual. It was Thursday, not Sunday, and unless there was a funeral in the graveyard, there might be one or two Muggles visiting, no more.

Closer and closer they came, and the graveyard lay there. Harry could glimpse the grass inside it now, smooth and flat. It looked well-cared for, he thought. It had probably been the same when he was there at midsummer, but then he’d been too—busy—to notice such things.

He paused when they neared the gates. For a long moment, he couldn’t force his legs to move. His heartbeat thundered in his ears, so loud that the murmurs of his allies faded behind it. He watched the sun linger in the western corner of the graveyard, and saw lights glimmering up from Little Hangleton below, and he shuddered.

“It’s all right, Harry,” Draco whispered. “It will be. I promise.” He squeezed Harry’s shoulder again. “But this time, you’ve got to lead.”

Harry gave him a smile he hoped didn’t look as pallid as it felt. Then he stepped forward and gently shifted the gates aside.

He stepped in, and then the world snapped.

Glamours fell like rags. Harry could feel the magic surrounding the graveyard now: thick charms to repel Muggles, wards to alert someone when a stranger entered, and curses running over the ground like a mat, all of it sheltering under a thick outer shell that had kept him from noticing any spells when he was outside the gates. He could see something dark writhing over the graves, and he spun back around, thinking Voldemort might have Apparated in behind him.

He hadn’t, but wards had sifted down behind Harry, piling up like snow. He could barely see Draco, Snape, and the rest of his allies through the thick white lines. They were casting spells at the barrier, their lips moving in incantations that he couldn’t hear. Harry swore, and swore again, and felt sweat build up beneath his cloak like a second skin.

“Potter.”

Harry turned sharply. The dark thing writhing over the graves had form and definition in his eyes now, the way it hadn’t when he’d been more concerned in identifying what kind of trap he’d sprung. But now…

Now…

His mind stuttered and stopped for a moment, then gagged.

The dark thing was a thicket of thorns, a mass of black branches, wide as pillars, all of them plunging into the center of the thicket, towards a root he couldn’t see. The thorns themselves wound around the graves, and projected into wicked-looking tips that Harry could swear were barbed.
Impaled on three of them was a figure Harry recognized as Evan Rosier. Vines wreathed his feet and crowned his head and hair and pinned his arms to the sides, outset. Harry could see thorns piercing the flesh of his limbs, stained red with the blood they drew. The thorns that corkscrewed into his back appeared to become one with his flesh, and Harry could see shadows running just under Rosier’s ribs that were probably their ends. Rosier was crucified there, alive, and his face was twisted with a pain so profound that Harry held his breath for a long moment.

When he started breathing again with a whoosh, Rosier smiled at him. It looked as if he could barely manage the expression; it pulled on the barbs buried along his hairline, the briars that halted an inch from his eyes.

“Do you…like them?” Rosier whispered, wheezing in between each few words. Harry wondered for a moment how he could hear them, then realized he’d drawn nearer, staring up in shock and horror and an odd, dream-like fascination. “They’re…eating me alive. Drawing the…flesh out of me…through my back. They’ll…liquefy my heart in the…end. So she…told me.”

“What?” Harry whispered. He could think of no other question, and certainly not an answer, in the face of such suffering.

Rosier blinked, and the edges embedded in his face bobbed near to him with the movement and kissed his eyelids. “The…Thorn Bitch, of course,” the Death Eater said. “Indigena…Yaxley. I thought you had…heard of her.”

“Have you?” said Harry, and licked his lips.

Think of the storm. Voldemort’s tricks and traps are nothing next to that. But he could not look away from Rosier, could not comprehend leaving even an enemy to hurt like this. “I didn’t know she could do things like this.”

“You are…about to learn, I think,” Rosier said.

Harry opened his mouth to ask what that meant, and the grass beneath his feet whipped into motion, twining up his legs. Before Harry could think to fight, it had locked his body into place, and grown into the pocket of his robes, where it found and made off with his wand. Harry snarled, and prepared to draw his wandless magic in and wither the grass. He had no compunctions about killing other living things when they were doing the bidding of someone who could enact that sort of punishment on Rosier.

Vines lifted from the grass with a hissing sound and lashed around his arms, drawing them wide.

And Harry’s wandless magic hit the barrier of them and fell back into his body, just as it had on midsummer when opposing the wall of Voldemort’s will.

Harry screamed. He could not help it. The memories had overtaken him too suddenly and too completely. He lay on that stone again, the one where he’d been tied and had to struggle helplessly while Cynthia Whitecheek and Fenrir Greyback killed a little boy in front of him, the one where he’d watched Voldemort come back to life, the one where Bellatrix had taken his hand.

He screamed again when he saw a figure walking towards him, obviously a witch, in the same long dark robes that Bellatrix had worn. But Rosier’s voice, shouting for him to stop screaming, and the sight of two arms, whole and undamaged, projecting from the witch’s robes, shoved him back into his right mind. Harry closed his eyes and took a deep breath, feeling it rasp through his lungs. His throat already hurt. His right hand danced on the end of his arm, as though it wanted to detach itself from his body rather than chance being cut off.

The witch halted beneath him and looked up. Only then did Harry realize that the grass and the vines had both risen on long runners, elevating him a good ten feet above the ground. He felt his feet swaying helplessly in midair, and his wrists began to ache.

The witch studied him. Harry stared back at her. He had no doubt that this was Indigena Yaxley.

She looked ordinary enough, really, her brown hair touched with blonde and her eyes dark. What made her unusual were the shadows beneath her skin, which came into clearer view as she rotated one hand and the vines circled, moving Harry into a different position over her head. He could see leaves under her cheeks, petals cradling her eyes, the edges of vines curling around her ears and then dropping towards the collar of her robes. Harry tried to imagine the magic, along with the genius at Herbology, that it would take to put plants in that position and survive. He could not.

“There, that’s better,” said the witch, in a clear, crisp voice. “I prefer my guests when they aren’t screaming. Dear Evan has obliged me in that, most of the time, although sometimes the pain grows too great even for him. And I haven’t hurt you very
much, Harry, really. Do you like them?” She nodded to the vines that gripped his arms. “My Lord has been having me experiment. These vines bind wandless magic as long as they are touching the victim’s body. I went to some trouble to breed them. They won’t hurt you, but they will hold you.”

Speechless with hatred, Harry could only stare back at her. He had thought for a moment that this woman must be as mad as Bellatrix or Rosier, with the way she was talking, but her eyes were clear, and her smile faded as she waited and he said nothing in praise of her vines.

“It would be hard for you to appreciate them when they’re making you prisoner, I suppose,” said the woman, regret in her voice. “Pity.” Abruptly, she turned towards the house above the graveyard, head cocked as if she’d heard a summons.

Voldemort Apparated in.

Harry felt his coming as a darkening of the faint sunlight that still remained. His magic roared around him, fully recovered—and augmented, it seemed, by whatever power he’d managed to drain in the months since Harry saw him last. He walked forward with a long, sinuous dark shape gliding at his side. A newly-bred basilisk, Harry saw, without plumes—a female.

Voldemort halted beneath the vines and looked up at him. Harry’s scar split his head open like the lightning had split the sky while the storms still raged. Through the haze of pain, he saw Voldemort’s lipless mouth part in a smile.

“Bring him down, Indigena,” the Dark Lord said, somewhere far away.

The vines retracted smoothly into the earth, bearing Harry closer and closer to his enemy. The agony increased as he neared, and by the time his back touched the grass—more smoothly than he would have thought possible for a Death Eater—he was writhing in agony, though he refused to scream as yet. Yes, screaming would relieve his feelings and perhaps keep him from going mad, but he refused to let Voldemort think he had won.

Voldemort leaned towards him. When his pale face was an inch above his, the pain turned Harry’s vision white.

He still didn’t think he’d screamed, but then Voldemort was drawing back and Harry heard his own breaths ripping through his nostrils and throat, hoarse, pleading sounds like the gasps of a wounded animal. “Your vines work wonderfully well, Indigena,” Voldemort was saying, with laughter in his voice. “Hold him still while I summon my own pet.”

“Yes, my lord,” said Indigena promptly. She sounded a bit resigned, as though this wasn’t her idea of fun, but Harry had no doubt she would obey. The vines holding his arms pressed a bit closer, as if to reassure him of that.

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“Yes, my lord,” said Indigena promptly. She sounded a bit resigned, as though this wasn’t her idea of fun, but Harry had no doubt she would obey. The vines holding his arms pressed a bit closer, as if to reassure him of that.

Voldemort turned away from Indigena, easing the pain in Harry’s head a bit more, and hissed. Harry forced himself to listen. Voldemort was speaking Parseltongue, there was no doubt of that, but it sounded like he was doing so through a mouth full of dirt. “Come, White One, Child of the Darkest Night, Digger of Tunnels, arise!”

The grass beneath Harry churned and mounded, bearing him briefly upwards. The vines didn’t loosen their hold, though, and he fell back into their cradle as the ripple of movement traveled under him and they curled around Voldemort. The Dark Lord didn’t seem concerned that he was within a rapidly rising circle of earth. He simply stretched his hands out and repeated his summons. Harry realized abruptly that he was surrounded by a pale green glow, like a sickly Lumos, that stood out starkly against the night. The sun had set.

The earth erupted. Harry saw a long white coil, as sickly a color as the light surrounding Voldemort in its own way. Voldemort shifted his position easily, and then he was standing on that coil, borne aloft on it, laughing and repeating the invocation one more time.

Other white coils shifted, long mounds of rubbery flesh stretching upwards towards the hidden stars, the rushing clouds. Harry shuddered in revulsion when one brushed past him, and he smelled the scent of decay, rotting flesh, a humid smell that he would never have associated with a snake.

The basilisk swayed and hissed, and Harry turned to see her confronting a blunt head risen out of the earth, opening a maw fringed with fangs like long strings of saliva. If the head had eyes, Harry couldn’t see it.

He understood the smell, then, and the odd Parseltongue Voldemort spoke. He had summoned not a snake, but an enormous worm.
The great creature carried on rising, bursting out of corner after corner of the graveyard, until the only earth untouched was that supporting Indigena, the thorn patch embracing Rosier, and the vines that held Harry up. The witch never moved, except when she craned her neck to check on the vines. Harry saw a tender smile cross her face when she did that, as if she admired children or favored pets.

Harry managed to painfully turn his head a time or two, and made out the thick white glow of the wards at the gates. None of his allies could get through them, he knew, or they would have been here already, fighting furiously to free him from the vines.

That meant he was on his own.

Think, he ordered himself, and closed his eyes.

Voldemort spoke before he could delve into thought, though, his voice soft and thick and mocking and eager. “Do you like my plan, Harry? When the wild Dark comes, I will lure it with the promise of a feast—you and Rosier, my faithless Rosier, both in exquisite pain and radiating Dark magic. Let it come close enough, however, and this child of the earth I have called will begin to swallow it. When it is engaged in fighting for its freedom, I will harness it as I should have been able to at Walpurgis. That you interrupted. This, you shall help me with.”

“You’re mad, Tom,” Harry said, opening his eyes. Voldemort stood a little higher than he did, outlined against the sky—darkness above him, diseased light around him, white flesh beneath his feet. Harry could feel his power, and, beyond him, the growing pressure of the wild Dark. It was gathering its might now, sweeping towards the graveyard. “You can’t hold the Dark. It will tear you apart. That’s what it’s come for, to punish you.”

Voldemort laughed, a sound that Harry thought he should not have heard across the distance that separated them, but heard nonetheless. He could see the crimson eyes fastened on him now, radiating a light of their own, one that made the shadows deeper. “Harry, Harry, Harry. You know nothing of the deep, old magic that I have studied, the years I spent in pursuit of the Arts before I returned to Britain and Declared myself the Dark Lord. There are natural oppositions, natural patterns, in magic, and in other countries, they have preserved the knowledge of them better than wizards have here, with their mouths dumbly open and their gazes fixed on the sky. The earth opposes the air, even as fire opposes water, and it may hold the greatest of winds. I will harness the Dark. I only need sacrifices to draw its attention, and those I have.”

Harry let out a huffing breath. He was not sure which he feared more: that Voldemort was fooling himself, and the wild Dark would break him and go on to wreak havoc and destruction across the British Isles and half Europe—or that Voldemort was telling the truth, and he might be able to tame the power of the wild Dark and use it.

Either way, it’s up to me to stop this, he thought, and felt a helpless rage rising in him. If Voldemort weren’t so mad, this would be a lot easier.

Thunder abruptly spoke from beyond the graveyard, and Voldemort laughed aloud and spread his arms. “The Dark is coming,” he cried, “and who in all Britain stands to stop me? No Dark Arts can penetrate the wards I have woven, the preparations I have made, the spells I have raised—”

“Not the Dark,” said a voice Harry knew, “but the Light. For even in the deepest Dark, the Light doth shine. Aurora ades dum!”

And it was as if dawn had come to the graveyard.

* * * * *

Chapter Fifty-Four: Even In The Deepest Dark, The Light Doth Shine

Harry swung his head so hard that he felt one of the vines actually tear in its grip on him. Indigena Yaxley shouted something. Voldemort erupted into a wordless snarl, and the basilisk, if not the worm, ripped into insults in Parseltongue. Rosier started laughing.

Harry could make no sound. His whole attention was imprisoned in the vision that had landed before him.

A mass of glaring white light filled the eastern end of the graveyard, spreading from the gates, and it dissipated Voldemort’s wards and Dark magic as Harry had never seen anything do—unless it was the sun rising and dissipating morning mists. The
darkness flowed back before it, and Harry thought he felt a twinge of discomfort from the wild Dark magic itself, though it grew confident again in the next moment. Sharp, piercing, stabbing like swords, the Light magic stalked a little further into the graveyard.

As Harry’s eyes grew used to it, he could make out its shape. It radiated as sunbeams from a central core, and the core was focused around Augustus and the white wood staff he held. It was his voice that had called out the spell, then, Harry thought. Hardly surprising, since Augustus had said he would be the focal point for the cooperative ritual between the Light wizards.

Harry just hadn’t expected them to get here this soon.

“Hello, Harry,” said Augustus. Harry took a moment to realize what was different about his voice. It lacked the sneering, condescending undertone it had contained every other time Harry saw him. He now sounded purely happy. “I assume that you’re in a spot of trouble and could use our help?” He raised his head and studied Harry, as if the presence of the vines and the worm hadn’t already told him that.

Harry just nodded wordlessly, and then Voldemort broke the silence that had fallen between them. It was in that dirt-filled Parseltongue, and he commanded the worm to attack, kill, eat.

The white coils began shifting forward, turning towards the mass of churned earth and grass in front of the gates. Harry saw the rubbery flesh writhing, and cried out a warning in the moment before Yaxley’s leaves wrapped around his mouth and made speech impossible.

Augustus laughed and called out a spell in a voice so high and ringing that Harry couldn’t make out the invocation. The bands of gold on his staff shone as he turned it in the direction of the worm, and the white light focused and beamed sharply down.

The white flesh began to smoke where the light touched it, like a mass of ants with the sun focused on them through a glass. Harry heard a thin voice screaming, high enough to make blood run from his ears, and the creature shifted back from Augustus and the wizards that Harry could make out standing behind him, dim dark shapes in the fierce glow.

“No!” screamed Voldemort. “Attack them, hold them, swallow them! You must not allow yourself to be defeated!”

The great head dived, and then the graveyard seemed to spin as a mound of the worm’s body traveled directly under Harry, aiming for his allies. He instinctively reached out, thinking he might be able to cripple the vines if the worm had disturbed their roots, but his wandless magic reached the limit of his skin and slammed back again. Harry hissed and tugged on his bonds, to no avail.

He did try another warning, though he wasn’t sure how much good it did, given the gag on his mouth and all the other sounds flying around the graveyard.

The ground in front of Augustus trembled and collapsed inward, and then the worm’s mouth was rising, a black hole filled with dirt, its fangs moving like deadly hairs. Augustus only laughed again and pointed his staff downward into the maw.

“Aurora ades dum!” he repeated. Harry realized what was going to happen, and hid his eyes just in time.

A second sunrise blossomed inside the worm’s mouth. Its scream of pain made Harry scream in return. He had never heard any agony so primal, so bestial. The vines trembled again as the worm danced beneath them, and Harry tensed. But, when the creature had flowed past, they were still rooted. He braced his feet as best as he could with nothing to brace them on and resolved to wait for the moment when he could break free.

Voldemort shouted at the worm again, but it was busy hurting. Harry felt the moment when he changed his mind and decided to use his own magic on the interfering Light wizards instead. The intense dawn shining on his closed eyelids dimmed, and night answered it out of the Dark Lord.

Harry opened his eyes in time to see darkness extend like a flow of ink from Voldemort, eating the sunbeams it found. The worm stopped screaming as comforting blackness covered it. Harry supposed the blackness must resemble that of the underground tunnels Voldemort had bred the worm in.

Augustus stood unafraid in front of that looming wave. Harry, again twisting around as far as he could, made out Laura Gloryflower at his side, and Tybalt, and John, and Paton Opalline, and others that Harry suspected were Opalline relatives. None
of them looked afraid, though he was distant enough from them to be mistaking some of their expressions.

Harry shivered. He wondered why they were so calm. They had created this ritual to defeat the wild Dark, not to defeat Voldemort. The Dark Lord could, presumably, still hurt them.

Then Augustus stabbed his staff down, and planted it in the earth. His voice had gone back to its usual scornful self, but this time, the contempt and condescension weren’t buried. They rang in his voice, like the scream of an eagle that scorns the ground. “We have come in answer to impulses that you will never understand, Dark Lord.” He turned his gaze to Harry, and aimed his staff at him. “Admiscerimus dicionem nostrem et accumulamus donis Harry Potter!”

Harry didn’t know what that spell meant, and he didn’t like the sound of it, especially when he felt the earth shaking with the power of it as it spilled out around Augustus. He couldn’t exactly do anything about it, though, not when he was trapped by vines and Voldemort was bearing down on his allies. He gave another yank, hoping the vines might have loosened their hold while Yaxley was distracted by the antics of her Lord. The bonds tightened instead.

Then he discovered exactly what that spell did.

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Augustus smiled as he felt the spell’s power growing in him, whipping his blood to frenzy, filling his mind with light. The oil he’d smeared on his forehead earlier burst into flame, a star-like coruscation that called on the real stars and bade them answer. They still shone, beyond the clouds, and just because the Dark storm had covered them did not mean it could extinguish them.

The magic raced down his limbs, inexorable and majestic as the tide, spreading them out to the left and the right. Augustus lifted his hands, so that his staff could stay exactly where it was, hovering and beaming a straight cone of light into the center of the graveyard. He realized, distantly, that the worm might come back, and that the Dark Lord’s power was heading for them, but those seemed petty concerns in the wake of this radiance growing inside and out. He closed his eyes.

He felt a warm hand rest on his arm, and a voice he hadn’t heard in fourteen years murmured into his ear, “Shall we show them what Light is made of, Augustus?”

He did not open his eyes, knowing that he would not see Alba; he could only hear her. But he nodded and murmured back, “We shall.”

Other stars burst into flame on other heads around him, as the Light wizards who had come with him—even his proud, impatient nephew—yielded to the flow of the spell and the ritual they had prepared, blending their magic into one pool. Augustus grew light-headed with the feeling that they stood on a shore of power. The waves leaped and surged to their heartbeats, bent and blended and broke apart again, and still magic continued to pour in, drawn through the tattoos on Paton’s skin that bound him to his relatives.

Then Augustus turned, and lifted his arm, still feeling Alba’s clutching hands, and sent the whip of the ritual hunting across England, seeking out those Light wizards who might feel a loyalty to Potter and asking them two very important questions.

******

Rufus signed the request from Amelia Bones to use Veritaserum on Hestia Jones, and sighed, sitting back in his chair. He’d only managed to concentrate on paperwork for a few minutes at a time tonight, a shameful record for him. He kept turning his mind to the east and thinking about Little Hangleton, the graveyard, and the young Lord-level wizard who would be facing the wild Dark there in—a few hours? An hour? Now? It was impossible to tell. Since Rufus himself was devoted to the Light, he could feel the wild Dark only as a deep, shifting presence, a negation. He couldn’t tell what it was doing. The first thing he would know of Harry’s loss would be when the storm descended on London.

The Ministry did have evacuation plans in effect, and it had opened its doors to those homeless wizards in London who had nowhere else to shelter. Rufus had allowed those of his people who wanted to to go home. Few had. They knew the wards on the Ministry were sturdier than those on their own houses. Some of them had not only stayed, but brought their families with them. Rufus could hear the laughter of children too young to understand what this night meant, running up and down the halls outside his office and playing tag.

He glanced over at Percy Weasley, who was flipping through a book of laws, trying to familiarize himself with all the edicts the
Ministry had passed in the last ten years. Rufus permitted a small smile to cross his face. Weasley was still a trainee, but he was flying through the training. He’d be an Auror sooner than the normal three years it took, if that was possible.

Rufus turned back to the next piece of paperwork to be dealt with, and started. Staring at him out of the piece of parchment was a gryphon’s face. In fact, the surface of his desk had turned into a deep well of light, and the gryphon gazed up out of that, its beak parted and its feathers blending into the sides of the well.

“What are you?” Rufus whispered, but he hadn’t finished his question before he heard a cry from Percy Weasley, and then a voice speaking in his head, too deep, too resonant, to be denied.

*Are you loyal to the Light?*

Rufus nodded. There was no question about that, and no reason to give any other answer than the truth. He’d been Declared for the Light since he was twelve years old, and in the more than fifty years since, he hadn’t once regretted his decision.

*Are you loyal to Harry Potter?*

Rufus nodded again, and then extended one arm, knowing without speech what he had to do; an almost magnetic force seemed to grab his arm and pull it there. The gryphon reared out of his paperwork, a shining form that didn’t belong in the rather dingy surroundings of the Ministry, and clenched its claws around his wrist. Then his magic ran out of him like blood, and Rufus slumped over his desk, dizzy.

“Minister?” Percy Weasley’s voice was thin and trembling.

Rufus looked up to see that the young man’s face was as white as parchment. Of course, he had one arm extended, too, and magic pounded out of him in a golden-white flood. It swirled into their desks and away. Rufus, if he concentrated, could feel it streaming east—

Towards Little Hangleton.

Harry had said that his Light allies were preparing a ritual they hoped would defend him. Rufus just hadn’t expected it to be so spectacular.

“It’s all right, Weasley,” he said, and then grabbed the edge of his desk with his left hand and held on. He was loyal to the Light. He was, come to that, loyal to Harry, so long as it didn’t mean abandoning the ideals of his Ministry. And this was a contribution to a conflict much greater than that between a Ministry and a Lord-level wizard.

He closed his eyes and opened the gates of his soul wider, giving all that he had to give.

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Fiona Mallory sat shivering on the couch in her flat. She wasn’t cold, not really—she still had her wand to cast warming charms, after all—but she still shook in shock, given what had happened to her a few hours before. Amelia Bones had returned her wand and told her, quietly, that she was sacked from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. She shouldn’t bother applying for another position in the Ministry, either; they would all know where she’d come from.

Fiona wished she could say it was worth it. She remembered little about her days under Dumbledore’s compulsion spell, but she had had the sense of absolute righteousness. The decisions she made were not open to question. She did what she was required to do, always, and it had worked out. She had willingly sacrificed herself so that Lucius Malfoy could get away with his torture of the Potters, and certainly she had cursed them herself with the greatest pleasure.

Now, with the spell gone, she had to wonder if that righteousness had been an illusion, and if the ghost of it could support her against a lonely Christmas and the necessity of finding a new job.

When the wall tore apart and a gryphon’s head projected towards her, Fiona accepted it as just one more illusion, one more dream. It was no stranger than the rest of her life lately.

But then the mighty voice spoke in her head, and shook her to her bones, and she answered that yes of course she was loyal to the Light, and of course she wished to help Harry Potter—he was like her, he had been abused and the last thing she had done to help
him hadn’t resulted in that much good—and she held up an arm, and magic rushed forth from her, and she felt her joy rising along with it, uncontrollable, exulting, so that she almost hoped she would die before she returned.

******

Minerva actually dropped her teacup when she felt the flood of magic traveling towards her. Godric, who stood on the other side of the room, floated through the floor in his surprise, then recovered himself and looked hastily at her, as though trying to reassure her that that didn’t happen every day.

Minerva barely noticed. She stood up, her mind tingling inside her skull. It reminded her of the way Hogwarts’s wards responded to her, but this was much greater than any of the wards. Hogwarts was a tame lake, and the wards surged in it like ripples, tiny waves, always dying when they reached the shore. This was a flood galloping down an ancient watercourse. Minerva knew what the watercourse must be, though she had never thought to see it invoked in her lifetime. The Light only interfered when called. Most Light wizards were content to know it was there and they had sworn their lives to it, and didn’t bother calling it.

“Godric,” she said. “Would you be willing to contribute some of your magic to help Harry? I suspect that the Light is about to ask you in a moment.”


The stones around them became transparent. Minerva heard cries of awe and terror, but she didn’t know if it was her students, or if she heard the sounds she expected to hear, somewhere in her head. She stretched out her hands, her heart singing. This was the force she had once thought embodied in Albus, the one whose loss she had mourned, along with the loss of an old and true friend, when she found out how corrupt he was. At least feeling the Light around her gave her a glimpse of the certainty that she’d felt in the First War, the belief that there was something greater than any one mortal wizard, a set of ideals worth fighting for and which truly separated their side from the side of the Dark Lord. The more she discovered about what Albus had done, the further she traveled from that feeling, but now it was with her again.

She laughed, and when the questions echoed in her head, she held out her arm gladly. Still the laughter spilled from her lips, giddy and joyous, the laughter she remembered giving when she’d finally achieved the Animagus transformation.

When she saw Godric also standing with his arm extended to feed the flood, she smiled at him, and she could have sworn he blushed.

The Light thundered on. They stood on only one stretch of its banks, Minerva knew, and it had far to go.

******

Zacharias Smith was not surprised when the gryphon appeared before him, though the rest of his Housemates fled in terror, or at least drew back and shrieked; the Hufflepuff common room wasn’t really suited for fleeing in terror. How could he be? He was the heir of his family, the latest in a long line of descendants from Helga Hufflepuff, and newly come into adulthood this year. He rose to his feet, and tugged Hermione with him when she might have sat on the couch staring at the enormous eagle’s head and lashing lion’s body that blended into a torrent of golden-white radiance. This was something that one should face on one’s feet, unless one was a commoner—and while Hermione was Muggleborn, she wasn’t common, and Zacharias didn’t intend to permit her to act like it.

The gryphon dipped its head. Zacharias bowed back. The beak shone like diamond as it almost cut the floor. Zacharias allowed himself to be gravely impressed. The gryphon was as beautiful as some of the treasures in the Smith vaults. He saw no harm in admitting that, as long as he did not think it was more beautiful, which would be a betrayal of his family.

“Loyal to the Light?” he said in response to the first question. “I daresay I am.”

“His name isn’t actually Potter any more,” he added, when the gryphon voiced the second question. “It’s Harry. He renounced his last name. I just thought you should know that.”

The eagle’s eyes stared at him, and Zacharias coughed and conceded that such things were less important than others right now. He stretched out his arm, and let the Light take what it had come for. He glanced to the left and saw Hermione doing the same, and gave her a nod and a smile. She was a good student.
“I didn’t do it for you,” said Hermione.

Zacharias blinked. “Who did you do it for?” he asked, having to clutch at her as he swayed. The Light was drawing forth his magic ferociously now. Of course it would. He was pureblood, and his family had been devoted to the Light for more than a thousand years. It would want to feast on that pure power, rooted in the strength of the earth and displayed forth in a beautiful body, if he did say so himself.

Hermione snarled at him—she was always doing that, and it was an endearing habit—and turned her fascinated gaze back to the white fountain that sprang from her arm and joined the rest of the Light as a rushing river.

*Luna looked up when the Light asked her its questions. She thought about it, and then nodded. Of course she was loyal to Harry, at least if one phrased “loyalty” in a vague and convenient way. She was more loyal to the sylphs who danced during the solar eclipses, of course, but then, they’d made her promise and swear twice by her blood. And that was wild magic, anyway, neither Dark nor Light. This was the Light asking, and within those strict definitions, Luna had a greater devotion to Harry than anyone else.*

A few of the other Ravenclaws in the Tower were contributing magic, too, she saw when she glanced around. Cho was practically glowing, as if she would make a fuss about it any moment. Luna didn’t see why. She propped her arm out of the way and returned to her book. It explained about hippogriff teeth that had an association with the dark of the moon rather than the full, and she had to learn about them while the moon was still dark, so she could go gathering them tomorrow night.

*George sensed it first, but even as he lifted his head, he knew that his brother wasn’t far behind. They didn’t quite share a mind—that was just a trick they played at to fool the people who wanted to be fooled—but they had a closer bond than mere siblings, and the rush of the Light wasn’t exactly being subtle, was it?*

When the Light asked them its questions, that was a little more complicated. George looked at Fred and asked, “Well, what do you think, Fred? Are we—“

“Loyal?” Fred chewed his lip. “I suppose so, but—“

“The least we could ask for is brand loyalty from Harry when we set up our shop,” George finished, nodding. “No more—“

“Buying from Zonko’s for him, exactly.” Fred grinned at him and held out his arm. George extended his, and identical streams of radiance burst from them, gushing into the Light that raced past. George had a brief vision of the two of them standing on the bank of a river filled with leaping flames. He grinned as he watched fiery foam leap into the air.

*I bet we could make some fireworks that looked like that.*

*Ron swore and lowered his book. It was no good trying to read for bloody Defense Against the Dark Arts when they might not even be alive this time tomorrow night, was it? He was amazed that the professors had assigned homework, anyway. You’d think the Headmistress would have warned them off for once. If you don’t get a free night for facing imminent death from the wild Dark, what do you get it for?*

He glanced around the Gryffindor common room. Other people had given up on trying to read at all, especially since Hermione wasn’t there to scold them into it. They whispered to each other, or glanced at the fireplace as if that would tell them the secrets of the future, or played Exploding Snap with shaking hands. Ron had to stifle the impulse to go interfere in a game of wizard’s chess that was going incredibly badly. He would have done better than that, even as nervous as he was. Ron had never understood why other people found chess so complicated. It was easy, and the patterns that predicted what would happen if a certain piece moved weren’t any harder than Quidditch strategies, which plenty of people understood.

“What do you think’s going to happen?”

Ron gratefully gave up pretending to study, and turned to Neville, who had taken the chair beside him and was anxiously rubbing
his wrist. “I don’t know,” Ron told him. “I suppose Harry might be able to stop it, but—“

And then he gasped as he felt a warm feeling growing in his chest, a clasp of talons on his shoulders, a head bending and stroking hot feathers on his cheek. It felt like what he had always imagined Fawkes would feel like, if he actually decided to land on Ron’s shoulder, but closer and larger.

*Are you loyal to the Light?* a voice asked, and Ron had the impression that the answer to that question would be the most important he ever gave. He nodded, dazedly, and the talons locked down on him as he got asked another important question. *Are you loyal to Harry Potter?*

*For this, I can be*, Ron thought, as he remembered how Harry had helped him break through the block on his magic last year, and held out his arm as the magic instructed him to. Then he caught a glimpse of a fiery river, and a gryphon flying in lazy circles above it, now and then stirring the flames with a kick of its legs or a flip of its wings. The vision was overwhelming, choking, and he jerked his head back.

He turned to Neville, wondering if he had seen that, too, and found Neville with his right arm extended and a beatific smile on his face, white magic pouring from his hand to join the stream.

“The Light asked me to help!” Neville whispered. “It actually asked me! It doesn’t think I’m a coward!”

Ron managed to smile, and then he, too, lost himself in the wonder of actually doing something to battle the Dark.

******

Ginny jerked awake with a gasp as the Light came for her. She’d lain down on her bed to try and get a nap, never imagining she would succeed. How could she, when she was so worried about what might happen tonight, and if Hogwarts would still be standing, come morning?

But she’d fallen asleep, and for a moment she imagined the vision of white radiance was part of a dream. Then she realized it wasn’t. No light she had ever dreamed was this harsh, this punishing, this—high. Ginny had the impression of incredible compassion, but not for any one person. It was directed towards so many that individual sorrows made very little impact on it.

But now it was trying to save a great many people, and it was asking for her help, so her agreement mattered to it.

Ginny nodded in response to the questions. Connor had told her about how Harry had snatched Tom Riddle’s diary out of her cauldron in Flourish and Blotts the summer before her first year at Hogwarts—the diary Lucius Malfoy had tried to put there, the diary that might have possessed her and forced her to open the Chamber of Secrets. Ginny couldn’t know just what Harry had gone through with that diary possessing him instead, but she had some idea what he’d spared her from. She’d heard Connor talking to Ron about having Riddle in his head.

She owed him a debt, even if it was only for what might have happened. She stretched out her arm, and her magic joined the tide.

******

Connor saw the Light not as a gryphon, not as a river the way he later heard people discussing it, but as a star. Perhaps that was because he was on the Astronomy Tower, gazing to the south, when it came for him.

It was the only connection he could have with his brother, looking up at the sky where the storm would descend from. Harry had absolutely refused to take him along, and while Connor had resented that, he could understand the logic. Full-grown adult wizards couldn’t help Harry tonight, not unless their allegiance was to the Light and they agreed to take part in a certain cooperative ritual. How could another fifteen-year-old help?

*Except that I’m Declared for Light now,* Connor thought, well-aware that he was being mulish, and not caring. *That should make a difference.*

So he stood, and stared to the south, and tried to imagine himself in Little Hangleton and the graveyard, getting ready to fight the Dark Lord. Voldemort would make some stupid crack about using Connor for revenge on Harry the way he had at the end of third year, and Connor would respond that he could actually fight now, and Voldemort would lift a hand and send a beam of dark fire at him, and Connor would dodge it, and then he would say…
A star on the horizon caught his attention. Connor blinked and leaned forward. He had thought there was no star there a moment before. No storm had come in as yet, but clouds blotted out all the light, even as they had during the day.

Nevertheless, a star stone there, bright as the spark in his twin’s eyes when Harry went forth to confront some enemy to freedom. It spun and swirled and shone, and Connor heard the questions in his head.

“Yes,” he breathed. “And yes.” He lifted his arm, both so that the Light could touch him and in salute to his brother.

The magic roared around him, forth from him, a lightning bolt striking from the star and then leaping back again. Connor stood watching it as the gleam grew brighter and brighter, and then the Light shot away from it and towards the south.

“A saying rose to his lips. He knew he’d heard it before, but he couldn’t remember if it came from Sirius or his parents or Remus or the Headmistress, or maybe even Dumbledore.

“Even in the deepest Dark, the Light doth shine,” he whispered, and then leaned forward, pouring all his heart and soul into the beam, hoping that Harry would feel that as well as the magic he was lending.

******

Draco had almost given up on beating on the wards by the time the Light wizards appeared. Panic—for Harry—and hatred—for Voldemort—raked him with iron claws, but the wards held firm, no matter what he did. Snape, beside him, uttered curses in a low, steady voice, but they sparked and died against the snow that separated them from Harry.

Then that pompous Starrise showed up and ate through the wards with his Light, and Draco could get into the graveyard—but not very far in. Mounds of broken earth blocked his path, and the coils of some creature that stank and which Draco did not want to see face to face, and the Light wizards themselves. He heard the spell Starrise chanted, and saw a beam race away cross-country, but his gaze was fastened on Harry. He’d finally located him past the brilliance of the sunrise, a small dark figure borne far too far above the ground, wrapped in vines.

He tried to run forward. Snape’s arms wrapped around him like vines themselves, and his father’s hand gripped his shoulder and squeezed. It was his father who spoke, voice thick and harsh. “No one can do anything for him yet, Draco. Just wait. The Light wizards are helping him.”

“I have to,” said Draco intently, struggling. He understood how Harry felt now, those times when he should have given up and lain back and let someone take care of him, but he just couldn’t. He had to move, had to get up there, had to use Diffindo to cut the vines and Wingardium Leviosa to catch Harry as he fell. It wasn’t a want, it was a need. His father and Snape meant well, but they couldn’t understand. “It won’t take long. Just a moment.”

“You can’t, Draco,” his mother whispered, and her arms joined Snape’s in wrapping him round. “We’ll have to wait, and hope that the ritual the Light wizards performed actually worked.”

The doubt in her voice inspired Draco to new heights of kicking and squirming. He didn’t understand why he couldn’t get free. When he was a child, he’d delighted in wrestling free of the house elves who tried to grab him and bring him back under control. That had been before his father began his pureblood training, of course, but surely he hadn’t lost all his skills in the intervening years?

After a few more moments, he understood that it wasn’t his skills that had decayed; it was his parents’—and his Head of House’s—that had improved. They were keeping him here because they were terrified for him, terrified that he would die if he ran forward and tried to help Harry now.

“It’s very simple, Draco thought. I have to do this. It’s not a choice. I love him, and I have to be at his side.

He finally thought to reach for his wand, but a hand clamped down on his arm and stopped him. He looked up to see his father staring at him with a white face. Lucius shook his head, once.

“You don’t understand,” Draco said, suddenly sure that they would if he could just explain it rationally. He would show how good his pureblood training was, how calm and composed he remained even under intense pressure. “I have to. That’s just the way it is. That’s just the kind of commitment that Harry and I have made to each other. He’d come get me. I have to go get him.
Excuse me.”

He twisted to the side, then dropped to his knees, forcing Snape and his father to loosen their holds. Then he rolled, and Narcissa, already bent at an awkward angle to clutch his arms, lost him. Draco bounced back to his feet, ignored the mud clinging to his trousers, and ran straight for the vines and for Harry.

His mind churned in his skull as he ran, and he knew that he had to reach a patch of ground free of ditches and gaps so that he could safely use his possession gift. His body collapsed like a limp rag when he was gone from it. He and Harry hadn’t been able to figure out a way to stop that from happening, so he had to make sure that he couldn’t tumble down and crack his head when he leaped.

He reached a patch of grass that seemed as good as any, and knelt. Then he looked up and into the face of the witch who stood under the vines holding Harry. Now and then she shook her head, and appeared quietly amazed.

Draco flung his mind like a spear straight at her. He felt the familiar whirling tumble of being inside another mind, the sudden weight of strange skin, the pull of muscles unlike his own—Harry was a fifteen-year-old boy and fairly close to his own height and weight, but this was a woman in her forties—the shift and lift of limbs that all wanted to fly in different directions. To make it worse, this witch recovered from her surprise fairly quickly and started to fight back.

Draco ignored her, though. He and Harry had concentrated on general principles of possession, rather than on commands too specific to any one body, and he knew how to move a right hand. He rotated it sharply, and the vines turned and bore Harry towards the ground.

The witch in his head pushed at him. Draco could ignore that, too, for now. He waited until the vines landed and their leaves opened from Harry’s arms. Harry scrambled to his feet at once, his gaze fastened on the witch.

Draco rejoiced on looking into his boyfriend’s eyes, until he realized that Harry was gathering his strength, and part of that wandless magic would certainly blast straight at him. He leaped out, just as the witch made another bid to retain control of herself, and traveled back to his own body. He rolled over, blinking and rubbing his brow; he had a ferocious headache, though part of that might have come from the way his mother was yelling into his face, loud enough to break an eardrum.

He looked back in time to see the tidal wave of Light gallop through the graveyard and slam straight into Harry.

******

Harry knew when Indigena Yaxley’s vines suddenly released him that Draco must have possessed her. He couldn’t see her turning from Voldemort on her own. He surged to his feet, grateful to have control of his own magic back, and then looked to the east. He knew what was coming.

A tracery of light would extend across the British Isles, and maybe across half Europe, too, if one counted Opalline relatives into the equation. Argutus’s vision had been correct, Harry thought.

He saw the gleam of the wave’s foam, and then the wave itself, tearing through the middle of the Light wizards. It hit the tip of Argutus’s staff, and then focused. Harry braced himself as best he could. Had he had any idea what this ritual entailed, he would have suggested a different one, but it was too late now.

Voldemort’s darkness covered him, swayed, and then struck downwards.

The Light hit Harry.

He felt the magic of more than a hundred witches and wizards flood him, freely given up, freely donated. Harry’s body became no more than a suggestion of outline. His eyes tingled, and he could see everything: the bones of the earth, the veins inside the vines, the thoughts swarming beneath the surface of Indigena Yaxley’s mind and Voldemort’s and Rosier’s.

He lifted a hand, and feathers of power sprouted from his fingers, stroking apart Voldemort’s attack as though it didn’t matter. Dizzy, floating, Harry made a leap in the air and felt himself come down slowly, the way that Muggles were supposed to on the moon. He turned to face Voldemort.

He could do anything at the moment, but he was also filled with the Light’s compassion and tenderness of temper, and he found
that he rather pitied the man who stood before him, all his genius turned to pathetic ends, all his estimation of himself gone false. He imagined that he could harness the wild Dark, and that was not true. No mortal could do that.

“Tom,” he said. In his voice, bells rang. Beneath him, the earth rang where he trod. Power rippled beneath his skin, but Harry remembered, always, that it was not his, and that he had it for a purpose. Defeating the Dark was that purpose, but the Dark storm was only building now, and he had a Dark Lord to deal with first. “Will you give up and go quietly?”

Tom, Voldemort, Dark Lord, laughed at him, and in the laugh were the hundred hisses of a snake. “Why should I?” he cried. “You are nothing but a child, and I will see you destroyed. Abi!”

Harry felt the corkscrew of magic that struck at him then. It was meant not only to rend him apart, but make it as if he had never existed. This was not a traditional spell, but a deep desire of Tom’s, given form by his will and insulation by the Latin invocation.

Harry raised his hand, carefully. The corkscrew broke apart in the face of his own desire, and Tom stared at him. Harry felt a more intense pity well up in him. Really, Tom’s form spoke to the damage Dark magic had done to him. It had blurred his features, melted them and sent them sliding down his face. And it had done the same thing to his mind, only with more violence. Harry had to feel for him. He had caused pain, but he had suffered it, as well.

And he could not stand against what Harry was about to do to him.

“Tom,” Harry said softly. “You are gone from here. You cannot snare the wild Dark. Your worm is dead, collapsed back into the pieces of dead flesh it was created from. Your servants are with you, and unable to cause any more harm to Muggles tonight. You cannot do anything for tonight but brood.” It was not the harsh punishment Tom deserved, the Light knew, but too far, and Harry would find himself using compulsion. He did not want to do that. He would not give up all that he was for the sake of stopping Voldemort. One night’s peace, enforced as much to protect Voldemort from the wild Dark as to protect them all from him, was the limit of what he could do.

As he spoke each thing, it became true. The Light spread around him and fused the night into glass and diamond. Tom vanished. Indigena Yaxley vanished, sent to the same place he was. The worm broke apart, stitches showing clearly where the segments had been threaded together, greasy gray fire consuming it as it sprawled in death. Harry raised his hand higher, and the white force, song and fire and goodness and loyalty, flared around him. Harry had never seen a sight so beautiful as this dawn in the middle of the longest night.

For one moment, all was peaceful. Voldemort’s trap was dissipated, and the ritual had worked to grant him the power needed to defeat the Dark Lord. Harry breathed clear air.

Then the night shook.

Harry lifted his head.

And he knew it had done no good, no good at all, as streams of thunder raced from all four corners of the sky and coiled above him, splitting and dancing and weaving back together again into reaching tendrils of power. The Dark had come, and it was mightier by far than the Light magic of mortal wizards. And this was the Dark’s night, the time when the sun was furthest away from the northern hemisphere, a time of the dark of the moon, a night of clouds blocking out the light of the stars and preventing it from reaching the earth. There was nothing the Light could do to stop it.

The Dark was amused that he had tried; Harry could feel its amusement like a hand pressing against his body. And it would stay and play with him for a bit before it broke past his feeble defense and attacked the rest of Britain. He had made a good showing. It was too bad that good showing could not be permitted to stop the storm.

Harry stood there, the gathering wind sending his hair behind him, and felt the cold of acceptance curdle in his belly. This was a contest he was doomed to lose. The Dark was simply too strong for him to fight, and this time, unlike in Henrietta’s story, it would not lose interest and wander away. It would cause thousands of deaths before the dawn came to stop it. The Dark rejoiced and crooned in the thoughts of those deaths, and more so because Harry himself wanted so very badly for them not to happen.

Harry knew they would happen. But he had to try to stop them. He drew in his own magic, and his borrowed Light power, determined to send a strike into the sky and catch the Dark’s attention. Perhaps he could wound it.

Then wings beat above him, two sets of them. Harry heard a song like thunder and a song like strength, and he lifted his head
again, focusing his eyes this time on something other than the Dark’s display of power.

One of the shapes was very much larger and blacker than the other. It stooped at him, and Harry made out wide leathery wings, dark scales, eyes golden as madness. The Hungarian Horntail landed beside him with a sweep of her spiked tail, her claws delicately straddling the broken earth, and extended a wing towards him. Harry knew he was supposed to mount.

The other shape circled his head like a comet, singing all the while. Harry saw Fawkes, and Fawkes’s dark eyes gazing at him, and Fawkes’s crimson feathers bobbing; he had turned deep red all over, like spilled blood or the heart of summer.

Harry took a deep breath, and a step forward, and a moment to pause and hope. Then he was running up the leathery wing. It was stiff as a ramp, and bounced only slightly where he stepped. He settled into a dip on the dragon’s back, and fastened his hand on the spikes in front of him. It hurt to grip them, but he was used to riding his Firebolt using only his knees now. He thought he could manage with the Horntail.

Fawkes sang again, and the dragon opened her mouth and sang, and then they rose, hurtling upwards into the heart of the storm.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Fifty-Five: Till Earth-Life Grow Elysian There

Harry felt the winds close around him as they rose, curling under his robes, playing with the hem of his jumper, skimming his skin like teeth bared just enough to hurt. He shivered, and then resolutely opened his eyes and peered upwards. The wild Dark had chosen to take the form of rain, not of snow, so the air could not be as cold as it normally would be in winter. He would not allow the wild Dark to reverse its orientation now, and pretend to be something it was not.

Not that it seemed to be pretending as he rose to meet it. It spread its claws wide, and shrieked at him, and he saw the same ill-defined body he had seen when it attacked him that night outside Hogwarts.

The Hungarian Horntail stopped rising and spread her wings, hovering. Harry wondered why for a time, then realized that she saw little reason to close with an enemy in air of his choosing. She would wait here for the strike, where the winds were less violent and the wild Dark would have to come at them nearer to the bottom of its own cloud.

The wild Dark laughed, as if it could sense every thought in the dragon’s head and disdained them all, and then it came for them.

Harry felt a shuddering power slam through him, as though he were back in the dream—of the graveyard, he knew now—where this creature had hit him with its neck. Pain followed pain like bruise following bruise, but he knew he didn’t just bear bruises now. He had broken ribs. He coughed, and the Light fluttering in the heart of him answered with its best flare.

The wild Dark coiled around him, black scale next to black scale, pale belly arching for yards above his head. Then its claws reached out, and plucked the Light magic Harry’s allies had sent him.

Harry sagged as the power left him. He turned his head to see the wild Dark ball it up into a tiny white bundle and toss it contemptuously down through the storm. Clouds parted for it, and then it was gone.

A voice spoke into his mind as if it would smash his skull to pulp. Here is only the Light you bring with you—your gifts, not your borrowings.

The claws closed around Harry’s waist and snatched him from the dragon. Then the Dark was flying, heading straight up so fast that Harry felt his lashes freeze and his ears pop several times. The roar of the dragon was so far behind them that it quickly became indistinguishable from the roar of the winds. Harry could not hear Fawkes at all.

Here we are.

“Here” was evidently the top of the cloud, the top of the storm. Harry looked around, blinking dazed eyes—somehow, his glasses had not fallen off—and saw the lights of Little Hangleton off to one side. Directly below, bits of stone danced like leaves in an eddy. The storm must have uprooted the graves, he thought.

“What do you want of me?” he asked. The wind blew away his words the moment he formed them, but Harry had no doubt that the Dark heard him. Those golden eyes and serpentine neck cocked to look at him.
Your attention. Your admiration. It is wrong that you are always thinking of other things, and not of me. The Dark’s tone had a wild petulance to it that reminded Harry of Connor when he didn’t get a favorite sweet. When you have paid enough attention to me, then I will suck out your magic, and you will become a wind. I will show you all the dark spaces between the stars. They contain mysteries that no mortal has ever seen. You will like them.

“I can’t leave my friends, the magical creatures, my home,” Harry said quietly. He didn’t know if reason was the best course to try on the wild Dark, but fighting had got him absolutely nowhere. “Those are all my duties, as well. I can try to give you more attention than I have, but if you insist on all of it, then you’re depriving others of the same gift that you want.”

The wild Dark laughed at him. Harry felt another rib break, but he couldn’t tell if that came from the laughter or the tightening grip of the claws on him. He held still and tried to breathe as shallowly as he could. Broken ribs hurt so badly.

I do not care about the others. You are a Lord-level wizard, and you can pay attention to me and give gifts to me. We will go shake the stars when we are done here, and make the stars fall down. We will dance with the winds, and freeze the winds and turn them into ice crystals and leave them for future Muggles to discover. We will coat the world with night for three nights and allow no sun to rise. We will be free, and you cannot blame me for that, because you are freedom’s servant.

Harry could see why there were Declared Dark Lords in that moment. Most of them probably hadn’t Declared with the intention of conquering the world like Voldemort and Grindelwald had, even though that was what ended up happening. Many of them had probably wanted the secrets the Dark was promising, the questions parting to become answers, the endless freedom of venturing into corners of the universe that no one else would dare to probe.

But the road of the wild Dark was no more human than the road of the highest Light. Go with it, Harry knew, and he would lose what he most valued: his own sense of limitations on himself, the knowledge of when to use his power and when to cage it, his own tendency to hesitate instead of simply imposing his will on the world. He would become all “I can, and I want to, and therefore I should,” and judgment would be alien to him.

“I don’t want to do this,” he said.

I know you don’t. Your unwillingness tastes sweet. An enormous tongue flapped above him, like a black version of Voldemort’s worn. But I will consume it, and it will become willingness, and then you will see what I see. For now, look down.

Harry looked down. He could have refused and kept looking straight, he knew, but then the wild Dark would have interfered with his vision and made him see what it wanted him to see anyway. If he got out of this alive—and a small part of him said that he might—Harry wanted his normal vision.

The land beneath him throbbed and changed like lightning in the midst of the storm, like wind or water. Harry saw houses dancing on their foundations, the hill outside Little Hangleton rippling up and down as though an army of worms moved beneath it, lights going out one by one as the enormous hand of the Dark stroked them into silence and darkness. He noticed a shape flying parallel to them, too, a grand shape, and tried to turn his eyes away and not notice it. The dragon was following them, waiting for a chance to strike. He didn’t want the wild Dark to see her.

That thing? Oh.

And there came a violent snapping sound, and when Harry looked at the dragon, she was dead, her head lolling on her neck, her wings spread and shredding as particles of ice tore through them, her talons fluttering as though she played a tune. The wild Dark heard Harry’s little pathetic cry of anguish, and laughed. Harry spun around twice in its glee.

You care, don’t you? You still care. You look down at the land and you think more of them than you do of me. For a moment, the enormous voice was displeased, but it recovered its cheerfulness soon enough. I’ll keep you caring, for a little while. You’re fun when you’re in pain.

Harry closed his eyes. There had to be some way he could defeat the storm. This wasn’t like the situation with Durmstrang and the children trapped there, where he would handle it best by leaving it up to other people. There was no one but him who stood a chance of stopping the wild Dark. Voldemort was out of the way, and his allies could not send power to him from beyond the winds.

Here is only the Light you bring with you, the Dark had said.
Was that a clue?

Harry reached into the center of himself, trying to think of all the Light he knew. He turned his thoughts away from things like the green fire of the Killing Curse. There was the white radiance that had saved Connor’s life at the end of first year, and the light of fire in the hearth at Godric’s Hollow as the family sat around it telling stories, and the brilliant fireworks exploding behind his eyes when he and Draco kissed, and the sunrise when he swam with the unicorns on the sea—

The wild Dark shook him, and he lost the thread of his thoughts. When he opened his eyes, the wild Dark said, *I thought you would like to see this. You did dream of protecting them from me, after all.*

Harry had to look again, and he saw a Muggle woman being decapitated, wind sharp as a steel sword sweeping her head from her body. Harry made an inarticulate noise, especially when the wind blew knowledge of him up to her. She had lived in Little Hangleton, and her name was Marie, and she had a daughter named Sarah, and she was concerned about money, scraping it together, just barely making a living selling her paintings.

She would make no paintings ever again. She would never smile at Sarah again, or look out the window at a sunrise she’d seen after hours of being up to create, or do anything but drift as pieces in the Dark’s grip, frozen meat, a victim of forces that Harry should have been able to keep away from her and had not.

“Stop!”

The wild Dark laughed in delight at the force of Harry’s cry. It turned its gaze from the other floating Muggles, awaiting death with terror on their faces, to him. The dark tongue came into being again, and curled, as if tasting and savoring Harry’s anguish.

*Yes?*

“What can I offer you to make you stop doing this?” Harry whispered. He felt the strength piling up behind him, and knew there was more where that came from. This was only the beginning, the Muggles it was killing and the houses it had pulled down so far. The wild Dark had not used the smallest part of its magic. The dawn would stop it, but it was the longest night of the year, and dawn was hours away. “What do you want of me that would make it worth your while to spare these Muggles and their homes?”

The wild Dark cocked its head reflectively. *There are many things you might give me, it said. So many things that I will have to think of them—no, no, I need not. The first thing you can give me is a Declaration to the Dark. Become a Dark Lord.*

Harry shivered, and saw his hopes for his future as *vates* collapse. “You know what I am,” he said.

*I do.* The Dark bounced like an overexcited child. *That is what makes this so much fun!*

Harry swallowed, and swallowed, and swallowed again. His eyes locked on the drifting Muggles in the Dark’s care. He saw Sarah, the dead woman’s daughter; he knew her as well as Marie would have, with Marie’s memory in his head now. Her eyes were wide, and she choked on tears. In her own life, she laughed and cried and was frustrated and grew angry, but here, all emotions save horror had been wiped out of her. No one should have to live like that.

But no one should have to live like the magical creatures, either, imprisoned under webs that stripped all sense of possibility from their futures. And if he Declared now, then he would be taking their best chance at freedom from them. He knew neither Dumbledore nor Voldemort would become *vates*, and he had no chance of knowing when another Lord-level wizard might emerge.

*I grow bored,* the Dark announced, and snapped Sarah’s neck. She joined her mother as a dangling bit of trash in its currents, all the life and possibility fled her in an instant.

“All right!” Harry shouted, the words torn from him by the vision of more Muggles, and wizards, and witches, and magical creatures, dangling like that. “Damn you, all right!”

The Dark purred at him and coiled around him. *We will do this correctly,* it said. *A full Declaration to the Dark is a ritual, you know, and not just a matter of announcing your new allegiance. I will show you all the steps, and you will dance them.* A stage, flat and white, appeared beneath Harry’s feet, then sprouted decorations of mottled gray. Around him, the wind stopped blowing,
and Harry staggered as he landed, wincing as his ribs jostled and poked him. *First, you must stand, and turn to the west. That is the proper ritual direction, since the sun sets there.*

Harry rose and turned shakily to where he thought the west was. The storm approved in a deep rumble, and said, *Now raise your right arm.*

Harry lifted his right arm. He felt hatred dance in his veins like boiling water, and forced himself to breathe. The Dark would win a victory indeed if it made him hate it. He would not hate it. The wild Dark alone was making him hate it. The other parts of the Dark, the parts that wizards like Snape had seen and chosen to serve, were just as worthy of love and devotion as the Light.

*But it’s Light I need now.*

The storm said, *Raise your left—*

The Dark didn’t get to complete its instruction, because its words melted in a flood of song. Harry turned his head. He saw a flake of gold blowing towards him up the rogue winds beyond the stage, bright wings spread, song traveling before and behind it and seeming to smooth the air.

The wild Dark laughed. *Your phoenix has come to say farewell to you. Of course, a phoenix will not serve a Dark wizard. How sweet. I am inclined to permit this, just so that you will have no distractions when you are completing the ritual. Listen to his pretty little song, then, Harry.*

Harry fastened his gaze on Fawkes. The phoenix had tears in his eyes, and Harry wondered why. Had he tried to heal the dying Muggles? Had he tried to heal others Harry didn’t know about, those people he should have managed to protect and had not?

He winced, and Fawkes answered him with a croon, as much to say that that had not been his fault and he was silly for thinking otherwise. Harry nodded. He kept his right arm up, since moving it might make the Dark rethink its permission for Fawkes to sing. He stood there, and awaited the last sound he suspected he would ever hear as a free wizard.

Fawkes spread his wings wide, looking more like an eagle than a phoenix in that moment, and started with a low warble. It rose from deep in his belly, traveled up his throat, and left his beak as shining notes. Harry saw them form and fall, drops of rain like honey. He could not see what happened to them. They seemed to part and become golden steam moments after they were born.

In the middle of them, Fawkes sang, and Harry saw endless golden pastures, shifting with flames. No, they were flowers, bowing and dancing in time to a wind he could not feel, their gauzy petals clasping each other, their stems entwining, their red centers opening to the sun. When the sun rose fully, then they burst into flame, but Harry knew that, even as they burned, they would resurrect themselves during the night, ready to complete a daily cycle.

*Like the phoenixes.*

There were phoenixes flying above those pastures, their tails outstretched behind them, their plumes bobbing, their talons tucked close to their breasts. Harry heard their voices answering each other, one song prompting a hundred others, warble answering warble, croon answering croon, and he had tears in his eyes as he watched one rise out of all of them and look towards the east.

That one was Fawkes.

The vision superimposed the imaginary bird over the real thing, and then Harry was looking at Fawkes again as he was here, as he hung suspended in the middle of this monstrous darkness and sang his heart out.

The music altered, leaping faster and faster, swirling like a tame waterfall down a series of steps. Harry could see a vision of that, now, as Fawkes sat beside such a cataract and drank from it by the light of the full moon, the moon itself reflected in the water but continually broken and disrupted by the coming of a new rivulet.

A free unicorn came to the cataract, shining like wonder. She had never known imprisonment. Beside her stood a foal who had never known it either, and who tossed his head and snorted in excitement at the song of the waterfall. It was music he had never heard before. He began an awkward dance to it, flecks of foam on his coat giving back the moonlight. Fawkes voiced notes he could dance more easily to, and phoenix and river, fire and water, sang together under the moon while the foal danced and the unicorn mare bowed her head and drank, her horn cleaving the waterfall into wilder and wilder reflections.
A blink, and the vision dissipated again. Harry looked up at Fawkes hanging above him, and wondered why the phoenix had chosen to share that with him. Was it a dear memory that he wanted Harry to retain when he was gone? A particularly beautiful shard of Light to clutch when he was all Dark?

Fawkes gazed back at him, eyes wild and black and wise, and then did a half-turn to the left and began another part of the song.

This time, Harry saw the stars. They shone like gems in a mine, but they were the stars, though shaken and rung as Harry had never imagined could happen. He could see immense silver strings running from them, and giant fingers flashing between them, and he realized he heard the harp of the stars being played. Was it real? At least as real as the way that wizards and witches saw the stars, he thought, for this was the way that a phoenix saw them.

Fawkes flew under the stars, and beside him was a creature Harry had never seen before, a winged horse made of silver wire and filled in with silver light. His wings rose and fell with a noise like flutes, just barely audible beneath the sound of the harp of the stars. His tail looped and curled, a shining river of diamonds, down into the night, and his mane brushed Fawkes like the scent of flowers. He flew, and whatever turn Fawkes made, whatever loop he curled, whatever straight-up ascent he executed at an impossible angle, the winged horse was right there beside him. Harry knew, as he watched, that this was a fragile creature, though incredibly strong while he existed, a child of the stars destroyed by the music’s ending or a cloud passing over the light that bore him. Even for a phoenix, this was a rare night, a wild night.

That vision, too, ended, and Harry blinked at Fawkes and wondered again why the phoenix had shared that. Fawkes’s visions were usually not only shorter, but clearer in their import. What message did he mean Harry to carry into darkness? Was it really just a way of saying farewell?

It couldn’t be, Harry thought. The visions were too regular, too detailed. And they all contained creatures that he had never seen before, except for the one with the unicorns—and that contained unicorns who had never known the touch of a wizard’s hand or a wizard’s web. Fawkes would not be so cruel as to remind him of all he was giving up by making the Declaration for Dark. So it must be something else. What?

And then he knew, and felt like a fool for not seeing it earlier. One vision of the sun, one of the moon, one of the stars. Fawkes was showing him all the different kinds of Light.

But why?

Harry frowned, and Fawkes crooned. Then he spread his wings wide and began to dance.

Harry watched him. His heart ached as Fawkes continued, for with every shake of scarlet plumes, golden crest, coruscating blue tail, he knew another moment passed, and he traveled closer and closer to giving up everything he was so that others would not be hurt. Sacrifice had never seemed so bitter.

Fawkes tilted his neck and let fall another stream of honey-colored notes, as if to scold Harry for being so negative. Harry swallowed and tried to stand straighter. Fawkes was right. He had made his choice, even if it was under duress. He couldn’t blame the phoenix, even if he had chosen the visions to show Harry what he would never have. The phoenix had done an enormous amount of work to help advance his cause as _vates_. He had the right to be disappointed that Harry had chosen continued life for some over freedom for all the magical creatures.

The phoenix grew brighter and deeper. Harry could hear his song rising in crescendo, and knew the moment was coming when it would finish, and he would have to say farewell. He swallowed again, and tried to brace himself, determined that no tears would cloud his voice in the final moment.

Fawkes spread his wings wide, and turned entirely gold. Harry tried to hide his eyes, and could not. Light flared, dazzling in the midst of the darkness, a second sunrise, like the one Augustus had brought to the graveyard far below.

Abruptly, the Dark screamed. _No! You cannot! This is not allowed! This cannot be done!_

Fawkes, in the midst of a spin, spread his wings wider, and wider still. By now, Harry knew they were longer than they actually were, and suspected they had begun to blend into the light the phoenix shed. He still could not hide his eyes, and still, somehow, he could see, rather than his vision going dark the way he thought it should have. Wider, and wider, and Fawkes seemed all wing and scarcely any body, dancing, a shadow against the gold.
The light soared. The song soared. Harry thought they were twinned, and when one died, so would the other. He knew his right arm was shaking from being held aloft for so long, but it did not seem important.

Fawkes sang. Fawkes danced. Harry could hear the tenor of his music now—or perhaps he had merely become better at reading the phoenix’s mind, after the visions that had let him see more of his past life. The song had passed a lament and escalated into a celebration. Perhaps for the things Harry had done when he was still free?

*No!* the Dark screamed again.

The sunrise grew. Harry thought of the meadows far away covered with immortal blossoms, and all the phoenixes flying. He wondered if Fawkes would ever return there.

The song turned.

Harry felt it come for him like an arrow.

Fawkes sang. Fawkes danced. The song was more than a celebration now; it was a triumph, a symphony of joy. Harry heard notes in the music he would not have thought it possible to achieve, springing up the scale of delight, soaring and finding their place in a dazzling array of exaltation.

Light welled all around him, deep and tender, a spreading hand of gold in the midst of the darkness.

Harry felt it surround him, slam into him, fill him. Fire swelled beneath his chest. Wings lifted from his shoulders. Golden-white force of being fledged him and made him begin to burn.

Fawkes sang. Fawkes danced. Harry could feel him intimately now, as if the bond in his mind that connected him to the phoenix had spread to encompass the whole of his body, as if Fawkes were becoming only song and only dance and only light, as if they vibrated in harmony.

Fawkes sang. Fawkes danced. Harry felt him climb, spiraling, looking to the stars that shone beyond the clouds, which the Dark storm could dim but not extinguish.

And then Fawkes gave his life away.

Harry felt him die, assumed into the light, ascending into the dawn, a joyous and a willing sacrifice, a gift permanently passed to Harry, rather than borrowed, as the magic from his allies had been.

The Dark screamed in anger, in terror, in fear.

Harry lifted his hand, and it spread feathers of light, the way it had earlier, when he faced Tom. Wings beat from his shoulders, and he felt his face mold and bend into a beak as hard as diamond. His eyes sharpened, his sight turning almost painfully clear. His fingers curled and hardened, and his body slid into a long, sleek shape—lion, he knew, without being told. He felt feathers and fur nip together in the middle of his back, joining. He spread his wings and screamed.

He was a gryphon, the gryphon of the Light—the Light, called and given passage into the middle of the Dark storm by the death of Fawkes, a creature of ultimate Light, the gift of his fire acting as a gateway, doubled or tripled in power by the willing sacrifice of it. For a phoenix, a creature that might live forever, dying and being reborn, to give up his life and interrupt the cycle, was something that snared the Light’s attention. And that death was powerful enough to call it forth on this longest night of the year, this night without a moon, into the heart of the Dark storm.

The Dark had said, *Here is only the Light you bring with you—your gifts, not your borrowings.*

And the Light had been given, and the Light had come.

Harry swam somewhere in the middle of it, his mind ablaze with grief and rage and joy, strands of diamond intermingled with the gold. He felt himself lift, gryphon and human and Light all at once, mortal and immortal and force, and fly forward. The storm was breaking around him. The clouds were no longer thunderheads, but the clouds of sunrise, clinging to the beams but always dissipated by them, melting away before the birth of day and the death of night.
The Dark was revealed now, a looping, ungainly body clumsier than any dragon, retreating hastily before the flying gryphon. Harry wondered why for a moment, and then had his answer, handed to him before he could wonder. So long as it hid, the Dark could draw substance from the night and the storm around it, and appear as graceful as it wished. With the radiance eating into and destroying it, it had to make do with what clumps of black flesh it could gather.

The gryphon slammed into the Dark, and tore through it. *Aurora ades dum*, Harry thought, as he felt his enemy shred before talons that were and were not his own. *Dawn come hither*.

Dawn had come, at least in this place, and as the Dark lashed and hissed and tried to fight back, it kept returning. It shone from every flash of the gryphon’s feathers; it pulsed in every return of Harry’s grief for Fawkes; it leaped from cloud to cloud like the lightning. The sky they fought in was golden and black, and Harry could feel the Dark’s influence retreating, falling away like torn rags, no sturdier than the petals of the phoenix flowers in their faraway meadows.

It retreated only so far and no farther, but that was all right. The Dark could not be stronger than the Light, only as strong. It had broken the laws and disobeyed the rules by gathering up so much power and storming across Britain like this. The Light, which did obey the laws and the rules, had had to have the invitation of mortal and immortal creatures to counter it, but now that it was here, it pinned the Dark to the air and forced it to acknowledge that dawn would come again, that Midsummer would come again, that even as the sun danced far away in the longest night, it was already making the turn that would see light come back once more. Tomorrow’s night would be a little shorter than this one, and on, and on, and on, the summer and the season rising, in the endless dance of dances.

The wild Dark wailed, at last, scolded like a naughty child before the gryphon’s claws. There were parts of it that were majestic, and strong, and even lovable, Harry thought, deep in the Light, but not this one. It wailed, and sobbed, and agreed to the Light’s terms, and the storm broke.

For a moment, the gryphon hung in the midst of the vanishing clouds, gold tearing the black apart, a second sunrise in a night that would not see a sunrise for a very long time yet. And then the Light began gently to separate itself from Harry, brushing his face with its feathers and rubbing his neck with its beak, healing his ribs as it transformed them. Now that the Dark was defeated and the laws of the world set in balance once more, it had no right to stay.

Harry closed his eyes as grief came back to him, as he lost the perspective that one had by existing forever. The Light boiled all around him, a stream of steam and white in mourning for Fawkes, Sarah, Marie, the dragon. It could have been so much worse, and those were the terms in which the Light thought, but it understood that they did not comfort Harry.

The wind bore him gently to the ground, and Harry landed in the middle of the graveyard, catching himself with his knees and his hand. He kept his head bowed. He was certain that his allies stood around him, but he could not bear to meet their eyes as yet.

“Harry?”

That was Draco’s voice, and he only spoke when a moment had passed, meaning Harry was more ready to look. He blinked at him, and then realized the night was brighter than it should have been. He glanced down.

Pale fire shone through his skin, reflections of red and gold and white and blue that seemed to come from far away. Harry drew a deep breath. He knew it was Fawkes’s gift. He wondered how long it would last. Not long, he thought. He was no phoenix, to die and be reborn. Perhaps it would last only the night, or one burning cycle, and then be gone.

While he was like that, he probably had some phoenix gifts. He could do nothing to heal the dead, but there was one here who needed healing. The pain spoke from behind him, a wrongness in the world.

Harry turned and looked up. Yaxley’s thorns still writhed around the graves, and in the middle of them still hung Evan Rosier. Harry lifted his hand, and the fire spread around his fingers and then emerged into a misty, five-pronged shape, part human and part phoenix claw and part gryphon talon. It drifted forward and began to puff the thorns that twined into Rosier’s face and back and sides gently into ash.

Harry stood there, watching. No one said anything. Draco gripped his shoulder, once, but didn’t speak. Harry was grateful for it. He watched Rosier’s dazed face as the pain ceased, little by little, and then the five-pronged shape expanded, gripped him, and hauled him towards the ground, laying him on his stomach.

Harry knelt over him and blinked. For the first and only time, he cried phoenix tears. It was like crying hot flowers. They welled
past his lids and fell onto the immense wound in Rosier’s back, and it turned gold instead of red, little by little. The gold hardened into a scab so beautiful that Harry had to resist the urge to touch it. Then Rosier moved, and it peeled and tumbled away from him, leaving unmarred skin in its place.

Rosier rolled over and stared up at him. Harry stared back. He could not make out anything in those dark eyes. He found that he didn’t want to.

“Sometimes,” Rosier breathed, “I hate you, Harry.”

He stood up, and clutched something in his pocket Harry thought must have been his wand—it would have amused Voldemort to leave it with him while he hung helpless from the thorns, unable to access it—and then Apparated. Harry knelt in the grass, and blinked.

A cold feeling infested his eyelid. He rubbed at it, wondering what it could be. Normal tears? Draco’s arms were around him now, light and hesitant, as if afraid to touch. Harry leaned back into him.

Another cold kiss brushed his cheek. Harry blinked, and looked up, and realized then what it was.

Snow.

Snow snow snow, tumbling from the sky as if the stars were shedding it between the tattered shreds of clouds, shaking out like salt from a cellar, coming to coat Britain, as the natural balance of the seasons was restored and winter came at last.

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Intermission: Ten Leagues Beyond the Wide World’s End

Snape did not know what he felt as he stood in the graveyard outside Little Hangleton, beneath the falling snow, and watched Harry lean back into Draco’s arms and Evan Rosier Apparate away. He did not know what he felt even when the thorns trembled and then coiled around the graves like snakes all binding up into a nest against the winter cold. He did not know what he felt when the wind stirred and sent flakes of snow skittering up into his face, proving beyond doubt that it was real and not just another manifestation of the Dark, or wind and rain frozen into pellets.

He felt—empty, he thought, fitting the words carefully around the thoughts. Yes, that was the best description. He had surged with so many emotions, awe and terror and horror and rage, as he watched the flashes of lightning tilt through the clouds and occasionally caught a glimpse of beautiful, impossible things, that it was as if he were bled dry. He reached out a hand, and it trembled as it brushed Harry’s shoulder above Draco’s arm. Then it steadied.

Harry turned and looked at him.

And then Snape felt a surge of fear again, because that was the first time he really understood how close they had come to losing Harry.

Harry’s eyes were blasted, like forests scarred by fire, like green lands newly turned into deserts, like villages fallen into pestilence from a nundu’s breath. He was empty, too, numb and in shock. It made a jarring contrast to the fire that still fluttered beneath his skin like a little live thing, beating wings like the phoenix Snape was slowly accepting would never come fluttering out of the clouds again.

They had nearly lost him to greatness, to Dark winds and Light dawns, to sights that Snape couldn’t imagine and didn’t want to. He had known, on some abstract level, all his life, that Lords and Ladies wizards faced and saw things that other wizards and witches didn’t. He had sometimes caught a glimpse of that in Dumbledore’s eyes, but Dumbledore had compensated with his slightly mad persona, and Voldemort had, of course, paid the price with his sanity. Snape had never really known either of them as mortal, had never seen the cost of their magic burning away what had made them, once, human and like others.

A large swathe of what Harry had been was gone now.

And Snape knew exactly what he felt—the desire to heal what he could, and to preserve what was left.

He gathered Harry roughly into his arms, drawing him away even from Draco. Draco tried to say something, but Snape shut him
down with a glare that would have made Neville Longbottom faint dead away. He held Harry close to him. Harry leaned in a little, but made no attempt to embrace him back, and that chilled Snape’s mind with worse fear.

“We are leaving,” he said, not caring who heard him, not caring who followed, and he left the graveyard with his arms closed around Harry like steel bands. His goal was to reach the Apparition point and then return to Hogwarts, where Harry might learn something of what it was to be human again.

Harry, of course, being Harry, stirred as they passed the graveyard wall, and whispered, “But the Muggles—the ones the storm snatched—”

Snape paused with a frown and looked towards Little Hangleton. The houses stood there exactly as they had done, the lights showing through their windows. Snape shook his head. “The storm didn’t disturb the Muggles, Harry. What is wrong?”

Harry struggled upright enough to look on his own, then shrank back within Snape’s hold as if the sight of the houses standing untroubled had upset him more than what he’d faced in the clouds. “Perhaps the Light put them back,” he whispered. “But I saw the Dark kill two Muggles, and the dragon who came to help me. And Fawkes gave up his life for me. I don’t think any of them are alive again.”

“No,” said Snape quietly, thinking of the great shape he had seen come hurtling out of the sky to land with a thump that jarred the hills miles away. “We’ll alert the Ministry, Harry, and let them investigate. I think you’re right, and the Light made it as if it were a bad dream for the Muggles, but it couldn’t have brought the dead back to life. No magic can do that.”

“I should go look—”

“No,” said Snape. That was the voice he’d once used to silence Rosier, and Harry fell quiet, too, before it. “Not you. Not tonight. The Ministry can do it, Harry. I’ll send an owl to Scrimgeour the moment I see you safely settled.”

He kept walking, ignoring all the silent offers to take Harry from him, ignoring Draco trotting beside him, looking anxiously upwards. He should have grown tired long before they reached the Apparition point, but he did not. He kept on walking, and around him the snow shone as if every flake were a window with a candle behind it.

And then they came out on the Hogsmeade road, and the true Hogwarts was before them, with its hundred lighted windows with candles behind them, and it was a welcome sight indeed.

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Lucius thought he had had the best view of all of them.

He had cast a spell to make his eyesight clear the moment Harry had risen into the clouds. He knew there was very little—likely nothing—he could do to interfere, but if a chance for his help did come, he wanted to be ready.

No chance had come. He had seen the Dark snatch Harry from the back of the dragon and rise, and then he had seen little more until the dawn had arrived in the middle of the storm. Those moments had been spent in grim silence, cold white silence polluted, just a little, by his shadow of curiosity over the way Draco had charged forward. He would be talking with his son later, learning what the reason behind his strange behavior might be.

He had seen the gryphon of Light appear, and take over Harry, and he had felt a mingling of both apprehension that the Light would take their ally away completely and the worshipful hatred he felt before a respectable enemy much more powerful than he was.

The gryphon had fought, Harry had fought, and the clouds had slid past them and around the dancing Dark beast. Lucius thought it looked like a chimera, neither one thing nor the other, an ugly, lumpish beast that every sane creature in the world disdained. They danced on a dark stage, with a golden backdrop splattered with black clouds that shone as flat as the most inexpensive scenery, and above them the stage closed into a funnel that Lucius’s eyes, even helped by magic, could not penetrate.

He had not known what gave the light to Harry until he returned to the ground and pulsed gently, with a phoenix’s heart, in the snow, and then he had been, for one of the few times that he could ever remember—the last had been when he heard that a one-year-old baby had defeated the Dark Lord—at a loss for words. Phoenixes did not die. They rarely bonded with wizards, and when they did, it was a condescension and an honor. Lucius was willing to admit that, even though phoenixes were creatures of
Light and he was a creature of Dark. The idea of a phoenix loving a wizard enough to die permanently for him was foreign, utterly outside Lucius’s element.

And he might even have been able to assimilate that, if not for the light beneath Harry’s skin. Fawkes had apparently given part of himself to Harry, passed into his body. That was stunning. That was too sharp to grasp. That was new.

For the first time, Lucius had the feeling that he wasn’t participating in just another political struggle, but that he had come close to something higher and mightier than his world.

It made him—quiet for a while.

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Hawthorn had smelled the battle.

The air had been sharp with the smell of a storm when they appeared in the Apparition point near Little Hangleton, and the only thing that had displaced it until the arrival of the Dark Lord himself was the shack they had passed on the way in. The reek there made Hawthorn growl and want to raise her hackles, even though she didn’t have hackles as a human. It smelled like camel dung in the desert sun. Hawthorn had never smelled camel dung in any kind of weather; that knowledge came from the wolf inside her. The chant of blood and hatred and killing in the back of her mind had gone silent, and the wolf had sniffed warily, knowing it was in the presence of evil and not just darkness, before it dived into a corner of her soul and refused to come out.

But Hawthorn could still smell with its nose—they were too thoroughly united now for it to be otherwise—and she had smelled the storm brewing, and then foul flesh as the Dark Lord appeared. Apparently, the wards he’d cast on the graveyard were not enough to keep out odors. Of course, Hawthorn was rapidly finding that non-werewolves didn’t care that much about smells. She did, and she had to pinch her nostrils shut to keep her mind concentrated on rescuing Harry. The smell of the worm and the vines would drive her mad otherwise.

The wards had broken, and the Light had come with a scent like bluebells, so thick and overwhelming that the wolf had risen out of the back of her mind to complain about not smelling anything else. For a moment, as she watched the white flood slam into Harry and fill him with power, Hawthorn had felt ridiculously cheerful, even though she didn’t serve Light.

The storm had arrived, and put an end to that, and an end to the bluebells. There was only sharp tin, then, the fragrance of brewing rain. Hawthorn had watched as Harry rose with his phoenix and his dragon, and she did not expect him to return again. Whatever her human heart might say, her nose announced that the Dark was just too strong.

And then…

And then…

And then she might have pinched her nostrils shut again, except that the scents lapped her like magic itself, and she didn’t have that much presence of mind.

She breathed terror, hope, despair, clarity, things she had never known had a smell until just then. She smelled justice, and it was like white fire, but not very like it; that was simply the best analogy her thoughts could come up with. She smelled the moment when the phoenix sang and died, and she saw the golden flowers like drifts of sweetness around her knees, and she trembled and wanted to do nothing but bathe in unicorn spoor until the end of her days, and she compared the winged horse of the stars to snow and lost her heart in longing to see one. She smelled the moment when the light passed into Harry, and saw him come nearer and nearer, like a tumbling comet that would grace and not hurt the earth when it landed, but she could have closed her eyes and seen him just as well; his scent was that sharp.

She sniffed as he landed, and found that his scent had changed. It had a garnish of fire that had never been there before.

She needed no one to tell her that a phoenix had died and yielded part of his light to Harry. It was there for anyone who wished to smell it.

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Ignifer saw little of their journey back to the Apparition point, because she was lost in the memory of an old tale that her father
had told her.

That had been in the days before she knew she would ever Declare for Dark, when her father could set her on his shoulders and wander in the Apollonis autumn garden and she had not the least shadow of a suspicion that it would ever be different. He’d walked under the red trees with her one day, when she was nine years old, and told her one of the history chants that made up their family’s most precious legacy. Other families sang history songs. The Apollonis family chanted, in Latin, the language Ignifer had learned at her mother’s knee.

Calypso McGonagall, he’d told her, had been the last Light Lady truly worthy of the name. She had defeated the Dark, in the form of the Eagle Lord, when she had to, but then she had lived in peace, and used her power in the service of those who came to her requesting help. Nothing had changed in years on years except to grow better, as the British Isles flourished in the reign of the Light and all the snakes lost their fangs.

All had gone on this way until Lady McGonagall was one hundred and fifty years old. At that time, there had been one of their ancestors working in her home, a young woman by the name of Praeferox Apollonis. She had been a gardener, and she had taken well to the humble work, since she was a naturally humble person. But she was very curious, and she would follow any sound or investigate any strange happening if she was done with her duties for the day.

She had heard a strange sound one day just as she finished planting a new stand of phoenix flowers, and she had followed it down the garden’s winding paths, until she reached the decorated window of her employer’s house that looked out on the gardens, a place where she almost never dared venture. Praeferox turned and would have gone away again, but the sound repeated itself. It was a clear song, one perfect note held and sustained. Curiosity made Praeferox step up to Calypso McGonagall’s window and press her face against the silver of it, spun to a lightness clearer than glass.

She saw a golden stone on the floor, alight with a shimmering, vibrating flame. It sounded the note one more time as she watched, and then collapsed into stillness. It had words written on it. Praeferox hesitated a long time, thinking of Lady McGonagall’s unpredictable experiments, but at last she opened the window and climbed through it, so that she could read the fire-bright letters incised into the rock.

_Do not mourn for me_, they said. _I have gone where you cannot follow._

The letters faded as she watched, and Praeferox blinked as one of the servants burst into the room, saying anxiously that they couldn’t find the Lady anywhere, had she seen her?

They searched everywhere, but they never did find Calypso McGonagall. They theorized at last that she must have Transfigured herself into the golden stone, and been unable to undo it. They tried, they brought in experts to try, and they performed rituals on the rock, but of course no other wizard or witch was nearly as powerful as the Lady of Light, and none of them could unwind her invocation.

Praeferox told no one of the letters she had seen, for she was only the gardener, and no one would believe her. But she preserved the story, and passed it on to her daughter and her sons, and since then the Apollonis line had clung to it. It was Praeferox’s theory that Calypso McGonagall had indeed gone where no one could follow, assumed herself into the Light as she had sometimes spoken of doing, walked the strange roads that wizards and witches of lesser power could not comprehend, much less see or walk.

Ignifer remembered her younger self going silent in awe, and her father stroking her hair, walking with her along the scalloped paths, the red and golden leaves tumbling down onto their shoulders.

Ignifer was sure the same thing had nearly happened to Harry tonight. It would explain the shattered look in his eyes, the way he kept his face buried in his guardian’s shoulder other than that one glance at the Muggle village, the flicker and blaze of radiance beneath his skin.

She did not know if he would have gone to Light or Dark, and she knew it was none of her business. She only felt honored to have witnessed something so near to a fading, and if her father ever lifted the sterility curse on her and she had children of her own, she would tell them the story, as Praeferox had told her children hers.

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“Harry?”
Draco wouldn’t have voiced the question if he hadn’t been startled. He’d noticed that Harry turned his head when someone spoke to him since they’d arrived back at Hogwarts, but did nothing else. And the sight of those shattered eyes, so terribly attentive, made Draco prefer to just hold him and lean his forehead on Harry’s shoulder and not meet his gaze.

Yes, that wasn’t terribly brave. But bravery was for Gryffindors.

He’d fallen asleep in one of the hospital beds, with Harry in his arms; Madam Pomfrey knew better than to scold them for that, after one look at Harry. He hadn’t even felt Harry wake and slip free of him, walking towards one of the open windows in the hospital wing. Then he’d opened his eyes, and seen the small figure standing in front of the windowsill, and spoken without thinking.

But Harry didn’t turn towards him. He continued staring out the window. Draco wondered what he was seeing. It couldn’t be anything very clear. Even though the clouds had parted, the stars were the only light available tonight, and Harry had left his glasses on the bedside table, beside the faint glow of his own wand, which Draco had retrieved from the graveyard as they left. He hadn’t wanted to leave Harry entirely alone in the dark.

Draco wondered what he saw, but not for very long, because then he heard Harry singing.

The song was soft at first, a trembling whisper that probably wouldn’t have awakened Draco if he’d managed to stay asleep. Then it built, and acquired the sound of a sob. Draco stirred, thinking he should move from the bed and go to cradle Harry, but his arms wouldn’t move more than one inch. They froze as Harry’s voice climbed higher and higher, swirling around the towers and walls of Hogwarts like spreading wings, as if he were embracing it from above.

Draco lay there and listened to phoenix song blended with a human voice, and thought he might die of it. The purity of the grief in it touched him to the quick. A wizard would have been choked with tears, a phoenix would have mourned in such a high and unearthly fashion that Draco might have escaped tears of his own, but this dirge was both, humanity mingled with clarity, and it hurt.

The song flurried, beating back at the darkness with small sharp flashes of light; Harry had a fire burning in his palm, casting his face into edged shadows. Draco watched the shadows dancing around him, and saw them grow human forms, robes and arms, swaying and bowing. What they bowed to wasn’t visible.

Harry’s voice soared, and Draco heard other people crying, or calling out in confused tones, but they fell silent as the song continued. It didn’t have words. It didn’t need them. It fed the proper visions into students’ minds, showing them, the way Harry had said Fawkes showed him, scenes from a life of mountains and meadows and moons. It showed them immortality cut short, and Draco didn’t feel ashamed of the tears that soaked his cheeks; he knew that his parents, sleeping elsewhere in the castle, would be crying the same way.

Harry’s song turned one more time, and then came diving down, becoming softer, pursuing the path it had climbed. Draco heard no more than a golden corkscrew, at last, and then that faded and went out at the same moment as the fire in Harry’s palm did.

He waited a moment more, and found he could move. He climbed slowly out of bed and went over to Harry, tucking his arms around his waist and his chin onto his shoulder.

“Is that the gift Fawkes gave you?” he whispered. “His voice?”

Harry glanced up at him. The green eyes weren’t human, for a long moment, reflecting shining, shifting shadows from a moon that wasn’t there. Draco saw him somewhere in darkness, in light, lost ten leagues beyond the wide world’s end, and shivered. The wild Dark, he thought, had been the greatest threat to Harry tonight, but not in the way they all believed. What if it had tempted Harry to come with it?

Then Harry trembled, and he was human again.

“Yes,” he whispered. “His voice, and some of his fire, and—maybe other things that I don’t know about yet.” He shook his head. “I can’t tell you what it was like, Draco, up there, seeing the way the Dark and Light saw, for just a moment, knowing—“

“You don’t have to,” Draco said, ducking his head and whispering into Harry’s hair. “I don’t want to know. Honest, Harry, I don’t.”
Draco nodded, and cast a powerful Dark Arts locking charm on the doors of the hospital wing, though in truth he didn’t think they needed it. The students and the professors and their guests for the night might wonder, but they wouldn’t intrude on someone who sang like that. He climbed back into the hospital bed, and held out his arms, and Harry climbed into them and leaned against his chest.

Long after his breathing had evened out, Draco remained awake, watching the dancing shadows on the wall from the fire glowing beneath Harry’s skin.

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Chapter Fifty-Six: Rejoicing

Harry woke with a start. For a moment, he thought he was back in the hospital wing, and that it was the morning after the battle with the Dark, and he flinched, because people had come to see him that morning before he was ready.

Then he remembered that two days had passed. He let his head fall back and breathed deeply. When he closed his eyes, no frightening visions danced on the inside of his eyelids, but only memories of what had really happened.

He’d been excused from classes on Friday, of course; no one was going to force him to go. He’d wandered around the school in strange, fragmentary circles after that morning adventure in the hospital wing—which had resulted in Slytherin losing ninety points because Draco couldn’t stop hexing people—and talked to whom he found. There had been a surreal conversation with Acies in a room near the North Tower where she asked him if he believed that things which were lost might come back again. He’d met Remus on the grounds, and they walked in silence, so deep and profound that Harry could have believed he was alone with the snow-covered Forbidden Forest. He’d seen Cho Chang watching him solemnly from a distance; she’d inclined her head and then left him to stand on the shore of the lake, obviously sensing without words that he didn’t want to talk just then.

He’d ended up down in the dungeons. He no longer remembered if he’d been trying to find the common room. Perhaps he intended to stand outside the door and listen, since he didn’t think he could face large groups of people just then.

But he’d wound up outside Snape’s private rooms. Snape had taken one look at him, and opened the door, and let him in. Harry had fallen asleep on the couch and not stirred for hours, which was unusual. He more often woke up at least a few times in a night.

Then, today, Saturday, he’d helped Snape brew potions, speaking and being spoken to only about instructions or what ingredients to substitute when he found out that Snape didn’t have any more dried Still-Beetle shells. It had made Harry feel like a pool of deep water slowly closing around a dropped stone. They’d brewed until noon, and then he’d gone to sleep on the couch again.

Judging from the candles around the room and the pit in his stomach, he’d slept until evening, and he was hungry for the first time in two days. He sat up and reached for his glasses, which Snape had taken and put on the table next to the couch.

“Harry?”

He glanced warily to the side, blinking as the world came back into focus. Snape sat in his chair, sipping from a cup of tea and holding open a place in his book. He looked mildly curious, which made the tray in front of him, holding bread thick with butter, pumpkin pasties, some kind of light and fluffy fish, and a cheese sandwich, seem almost a coincidence.

Except not quite, Harry thought, and smiled at him. “I’ll be better,” he said, and then used a Levitation Charm to move the tray over to him. “I assume you’ve had dinner already?” He glanced at Snape, who inclined his head.

“Eat your fill.”

Harry was more than happy to. The bread and the fish never seemed to end—just when he thought he’d eaten everything, there was one more crumb—but they broke apart so gently that he never felt overwhelmed by the amount. The cheese was of a kind
that he couldn’t remember having before, so sharp it seemed to score patterns on the roof of his mouth. He ate three of the pumpkin pasties without stopping, aware of Snape’s gaze on him, now amused, now evaluative, but demanding nothing.

He was drinking the last of the glass of milk that had come along with the tray when he realized that the pasties were in the shape of Christmas trees. He blinked and glanced up. “It’s two days until Christmas,” he said.

Snape arched his eyebrows. “One, actually. Today is the twenty-third.”

Harry felt the first bubble of worry break through the calm surface of his being. “I don’t have gifts for anyone,” he said, so quietly that he almost thought Snape wouldn’t hear him. But if Snape didn’t hear something that passed in his private quarters, Harry had not yet found out what it was.

“I would not worry about that, Harry,” he said dryly. “I think saving Britain from the wild Dark is enough of a gift.”

Harry shook his head. “That’s not what I meant. I don’t think myself bound to get gifts for everyone. But I’d like to have them for you, and Draco, and Connor, and the Malfoys.” He plucked at the side of the tray, nearly upsetting it.

“Finish your food,” said Snape mildly. “Then you can worry about it. But it’s not the kind of thing to contemplate on less than a full stomach.” He went back to his book.

Harry stared at him for a while. Snape gave no sign that he noticed. Harry warily returned to eating from his tray, though he couldn’t help sidelong glances.

Why is he being so gentle? Does he really think that I took that many wounds in the clouds?

Well, maybe he had, Harry admitted grudgingly, as he licked pumpkin pasty crumbs from his fingers. The loss of Fawkes was still an ache that he didn’t really want to touch; the numbness had worn off now, and it had begun to hurt properly. And he felt as if the Light, cautious though it had tried to be with him, had flayed his mind. He still shrugged his shoulder blades sometimes expecting the weight of wings, and moved his hand in patterns that would have seemed more natural to a gryphon’s talon. Even those few moments in another body had molded him to it, rather than the other way around.

And the deaths…

Harry closed his eyes, and shivered, and sat still for a moment. That was the worst part of it. That was the weapon he had to allow never to be wielded against him again. For the sake of sparing lives, he had been willing to give up everything that he was. It had been an untenable choice, between life and freedom. He thought Fawkes had intervened not only to stop the wild Dark, but to prevent Harry from Declaring and the magical creatures from losing their vates. That meant he had to find some way to make sure that that sacrifice was not meaningless.

So what would he do, if it happened again?

Harry swallowed, and stirred pumpkin pasty crumbs around on the tray with a finger. The trouble was, he couldn’t say his answer would be any different. If Voldemort lined his allies up in front of him and began killing them one by one, only stopping when he agreed to stay out of the War, wouldn’t he have to do it? He owed his allies too much for it to be otherwise.

But it was wrong, too, to say that he would give up fighting for the sake of a few people, when Voldemort would go on to torture and enslave many more people than that. Wasn’t it?

For the first time, Harry thought, he was really hanging between the horns of Dumbledore’s dilemma, the awful choice he’d made so many times and which Lily had so admired him for. She’d whispered tales of those decisions to Harry as she put him to bed each night. Confront him with a few allies and the whole population of Britain, and Dumbledore would choose the whole population of Britain. He had done it so many times that Voldemort, disgusted, had at last given up using that tactic against him.

The problem was, Harry couldn’t see that it was as simple as that. He could foresee having to make a different choice each time, because sometimes, the sacrifice really wouldn’t be worth the cost.

So, he thought, as he realized that there were no more pumpkin pasties and there wouldn’t be more just because he wanted there to be, the best thing would be to make sure that you can’t be forced into making that choice. It’s not the decision you fear so much as being forced into making it. You might choose to save the people in front of you not because it’s the right thing to do, but because you can’t stand seeing them tortured, and others are far away. And that’s wrong. Dumbledore could afford not to think about Peter because he was in Azkaban. But he was still doing the wrong thing.
Harry gave a sharp nod of his head. That would be it, then. Rather than try to make one decision now that would guide all his choices in the future, he would do his best to change the circumstances in the future, so that neither Voldemort nor anyone else could force him along a certain path.

“Harry?”

Harry blinked and glanced up. He’d been lost enough in his thoughts that Snape could have addressed him once or twice, and he wouldn’t have noticed. His guardian’s face reflected no impatience, however. He merely nodded, as if it were good enough that Harry were looking at him now.

“Regulus has decided that he would like to have a small gathering on Christmas Day at Cobley-by-the-Sea,” he said. “He and Pettigrew will be there, of course, but otherwise only you, Draco, your brother, the elder Malfoys, and I are invited. Will that be acceptable?”

Harry sighed. “That will be more than acceptable,” he replied. “I don’t think I could join in the Christmas celebrations of the whole school right now.”

“Assuredly not,” said Snape. “You may stay here tomorrow, or, if you feel up to braving the Great Hall, you can do that.” There was the faintest undertone of hope in his voice, like an aftertaste of sorrow. He hopes that I’ll stay here, Harry thought.

And he did want to. For the moment, his anger at Snape, though not gone away, was at low tide. Harry had been at peace enough to fall asleep here, something that would happen nowhere else he could think of. Even the Slytherin common room, though people might shut their mouths with Draco around to hex them, would be full of questioning eyes and questions in minds. Harry needed the sensation that no one cared if he talked, that he could do it or not do it, and either would be acceptable.

“I want to stay here,” he said quietly.

Snape nodded. “Do you feel up to seeing Draco tomorrow?”

Harry blinked. “You kept him away today?”

“I did,” said Snape. “Try as he might, Mr. Malfoy would interrupt your work. He is a brilliant hand at Potions, but he is at the point in his education when he wants to brew complicated ones only. I knew he would not settle for doing the patient, undemanding work you wanted to do today. Nor would he have left you to sleep for so long without trying to squirm onto the couch and sending you both to the floor:"

Harry couldn’t make out the emotions in Snape’s voice—whether Snape was exasperated with Draco, or amused, or just stating that that was the way it was. He tried to reason them out for a moment, and then realized that he didn’t need to, and didn’t want to. He deserved a few days to relax and not tease out emotions and implications if he wanted. The thinking he’d done about his choices in the future was as much vates work as he wanted to do today.

“I feel up to seeing him tomorrow,” he said. “But he’s not to spy on me while I make his Christmas gift.”

“There’s a potion he won’t figure out, and won’t make the cauldron explode with,” Snape replied in the same tone. “I’ll set him to working with that.”

“Why won’t he figure it out?” Harry had to ask. Draco’s talent with Potions was natural, rather than learned with long practice, as his had been. It seemed odd that there were any he wouldn’t learn to brew with a few hours of trial and error.

“Because,” said Snape, “the instructions in the book are wrong.”

Harry snickered, and then paused. He was fairly sure that was the first time he’d laughed since he lost Fawkes. He blinked and lay back on the couch, a bit overwhelmed.

“Feel free to rest,” said Snape.

As short a time as a month ago, Harry would have been certain that he should be up by now, that the rest he’d taken so far was more than he needed. But either the change in the Room of Requirement, or the losses he’d suffered since then, made him know,
now, that he couldn’t go out and be the cheerful savior that people would expect him to be yet.

“All right,” he said, and closed his eyes. His breathing evened out. He had the easiest slide into darkness he’d ever experienced, and was vaguely surprised about it. He supposed the loss was still too near and too great to make a temporary escape from the world difficult for him.

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When he was sure Harry was asleep, Snape put down his book and leaned forward, staring intently into his ward’s face.

It did look better, he had to admit, even since this morning. Harry had brewed with single-minded concentration, as if the Boil Cure Potion they were making for Madam Pomfrey were in reality the elixir boiled from the Philosopher’s Stone. His face had been tight and hard. Snape would have expected that look from another Potions Master, but no one else.

Then he’d slept, and twitched and muttered in dreams, and woken up looking like someone who’d been through torture, but more human. Snape was beginning to accept that Harry would come back to them, slowly—not exactly the same person he’d been before, but not as lost as he’d feared.

Slow and steady and gentle was the way to work. Merlin knew Harry was quick to pick up on the slightest hint of an expectation, and think he had to work to fulfill it. Give him nothing, let him do what he wanted, and he would relax.

A ward rang silently in Snape’s head. He rose, laying down his book on his chair with a little more noise than he would have dared earlier. Harry slept on. Snape could feel himself trying to smile, but he squashed it as he went to his door. That ward had rung twice in the morning and three times in the afternoon. Harry had never noticed when he went to answer it, but then, Harry deserved the luxury of not noticing things right now.

He opened the door to find Draco staring anxiously up to him. “I want to see Harry,” Draco said, hardly unexpected words. He’d started out with a tirade that morning, and Snape had shut the door in his face. Each attempt had gradually stripped the pomposity from him. Snape approved of the simplicity, if not the wish.

“You would wake him up,” he said.

“I wouldn’t,” Draco said. “I only want to talk to him.”

“Talking to him would involve waking him up.” Snape stared directly into Draco’s eyes, brushing his thoughts with a bit of Legilimency, and uncovered visions of chattering to Harry, who didn’t have to respond, but whom he wanted to listen. Snape nodded. “Leave him alone for now, Mr. Malfoy. He has said that he will see you tomorrow. That is soon enough.”

Draco sulked. Snape wondered where he’d picked that up from; Lucius would never have dreamed of doing it, and Narcissa got her way with other expressions. Of course, Lucius’s father had never been as indulgent with him as Lucius and Narcissa were with Draco, and Narcissa had grown up knowing she had a mad sister, so perhaps it wasn’t surprising that Draco would act more like a spoiled child.

“I just want to talk to him,” Draco said, pulling Snape away from thoughts of the past. He found himself grateful to Draco for it. He rarely had luck with thoughts like that. He tended to brood on the cruelty of the Marauders, the reasons he’d joined the Death Eaters, the reason he’d left, and other things it was not good to think.

“I know you do,” he said. “And tomorrow is soon enough.”

Draco opened his mouth as if he would throw a tantrum, and Snape said, “If you speak much louder, you will certainly wake him up.”

Draco shut his mouth, looking chagrined, and nodded. “Tomorrow, then,” he said, between lips pursed so tightly that his voice was just a whisper.

Snape nodded back. “You might tell Potter about the Christmas gathering Regulus is planning,” he added, as he moved to shut the door. “I am not yet certain he knows.”

With Draco on his way to do something useful, and Harry soundly asleep, Snape felt prepared to take up his book again. He was
reading about Potions Masters, for once, and the history of the art. Thoughts about his own past were not productive, but thoughts about the past might be. If nothing else, the book could give him ideas on what kind of defensive potions he might teach Harry to brew.

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“So how do we get there?” Connor asked, bouncing up and down and rubbing his hands on his trousers.

Harry shifted the bag he carried, making sure the presents he’d prepared didn’t click together. “Regulus sent us a Portkey,” he said, and then glanced at Snape to make sure that was right. Snape nodded and held up a bit of what looked like tinsel, glancing around at all three boys to make sure they stood close enough to him to grab it.

“What did you get me for Christmas?” Connor asked, reaching out and grasping the tinsel. Harry felt a bit sorry for him. He hadn’t seen Harry until this morning, and he seemed to be under the impression that bright chatter was the best way to get past the inevitable awkwardness of the aftermath of the Dark storm. Harry had tried to tell him it was all right, but Connor hadn’t understood. Now, Harry decided to play along.

“I’m not telling you,” he said, and chanted a non-verbal spell that gave Connor the sensation of being rapped on the wrist, a spell more often used by mothers to stop children from reaching for biscuits. Connor pulled his hand back from the tinsel and gave him a wounded look.

“Please stop being utterly ridiculous, Mr. Potter, and grab the Portkey,” Snape said, with ice in his voice.

“But—”

“Now, Mr. Potter.”

Connor did so, sneaking Harry suspicious glances all the while. Draco took hold of the tinsel from the other side and was unexpectedly diplomatic, at least for Christmas morning, Harry thought. Of course, the other Christmases he’d spent with Draco tended to be atypical in some way. “It’s all right, Connor. He won’t tell me what he got me for Christmas, either.”

“It’s a secret,” said Harry, and then the Portkey grabbed them and whirled them all away, knocking Connor and Draco’s conversation into oblivion.

They landed in a large room Harry hadn’t seen before; the one other time he’d been in Cobleby-the-Sea, Regulus had been far more intent on showing him the hippocampi. It was aboveground, and had a window drilled through the stone, looking out over the sea far below. It must be right on the edge of the cliff, Harry thought, since they stood fairly far back from the window, and he could see the wrinkled gray waters of the ocean even from here.

“Welcome! Happy Christmas!”

Regulus’s hug bore Harry off his feet. He hugged back, and looked over Regulus’s shoulder to see the room decorated with so much tinsel that it entirely erased its cavernous qualities. Artificial Black spiders charmed to glow silver and gold and green and crimson marched up and down the walls between the garlands, now and then mingling with them as if the tinsel were burning. A tree stood in one corner, overflowing with gifts hanging from its branches, as if Regulus had been determined that none of the presents should touch the floor. Harry eyed it with resignation.

“Are you all right?” Regulus asked, setting Harry back on his feet and making him have to shift his grip on the bag of gifts.

“Better,” said Harry. “Recovering.” Regulus gave him a long glance, as if he really didn’t believe him, which made Harry sigh. “I am,” he said, catching and holding Regulus’s eye. “I promise.”

“You don’t just recover from something like that,” Regulus muttered at him. “But, if you say so.” He brightened abruptly and turned to sweep Draco, who was looking smugly at Harry, off his feet. Draco’s expression changed at once, but his struggles didn’t do him much good as far as winning free went. “And welcome, little cousin!” Regulus exclaimed. “Happy Christmas to you, too!”

Draco looked extremely ruffled when Regulus put him down. Harry linked his left arm with his and pulled him towards the tree. Draco forgot his indignation in exclaiming over its size. “Do you think there are an equal number of gifts for each of us?” he
Harry turned sharply. He hadn’t seen Lucius and Narcissa standing in the corner diagonally opposite from the tree, next to the room’s entrance. It was Narcissa who spoke, coming forward to give her hands to her son. She kissed his forehead, then looked at Harry. Harry didn’t think he was comfortable enough yet to step forward and let her hug him, though. He simply nodded to her.

Narcissa uttered a little sigh, then turned and faced Connor, who was just escaping his own welcoming embrace by Regulus. “I cannot believe Draco has been Harry’s friend for four years, and yet I have never had a formal introduction to you, Connor,” she said, stretching out her hand. “I should have arranged one after your parents’ trial. It was remiss of me. I am Narcissa Malfoy.”

Connor looked abashed as he clasped her hand and kissed the back of it. Harry could see why. Narcissa wore a pale blue gown that floated around her like spiderwebs and made her look more fairy-like than human. Connor mumbled his way through an introduction that seemed to satisfy her. Narcissa smiled at him, and then turned and took Lucius’s arm, guiding him over to a divan beside the tree. Harry wasn’t surprised to see Lucius watching his brother like a cat.

“Where’s Peter?” he asked, since another glance didn’t reveal Peter lurking in any of the corners.

“On his way up,” said Regulus. “He made a present that was too big to wrap, so he had to leave it downstairs until we were all ready to gather here.” He stepped toward the entrance and listened anxiously for a moment, then relaxed. “He’s on the way up with it,” he announced. “Of course, he’s worried about his wandwork, and I don’t blame him, so he’s carrying it in his arms instead of using a Levitation Charm.”

“Shut it, Black,” Peter’s voice said from below. “I wanted to carry it. I wasn’t afraid it would bang into corners if I used a Levitation Charm.” He came into view, going backwards and dragging the gift with him so that Harry couldn’t see what it was at first. When he finally turned around and shoved it forward, Harry knew it was for him.

It was a carving, made out of some wood—oak, perhaps—that glowed as if it were still part of the tree. Bodies of various magical creatures coiled and writhed as if from the center of a fountain: dragons lying piled on each other, house elves peering warily from corners, great cats prowling with their mouths open in snarls, unicorns balancing Runespoors on the tips of their horns. Harry let his eyes wander over it for a longer period of time than was strictly polite, and still it seemed that there was no end to it. He could look at it for hours and never see all its secrets.

“It’s beautiful, Peter,” he whispered. “I never knew you carved wood.”

“It was an old hobby of mine,” said Peter, his voice lacking the pain when he spoke of the past that it’d had in Harry’s third year. Harry glanced up to see Peter smiling at him over the dip in a unicorn’s shoulder. “I took it up again when I went to the Sanctuary. And since Regulus had plenty of wood lying around, and I have nothing else to do yet…” He shrugged. “I made this. Merry Christmas, Harry.”

Harry nodded to him and floated the carving gently over to the side of the chair he already planned on taking. Then his plan was spoiled, because Draco insisted on sitting on a couch together, and Harry had to move the carving again. Peter was already passing out small packages that Harry knew must contain carvings to the others. He heard Connor laughing, and saw him holding up what looked like a lion in the middle of a somersault, chasing its tail. Draco got a complicated sculpture that meshed the old Black and Malfoy crests, with a dragon curled on top of it, fast asleep and scowling. Draco scowled, too, until Harry nudged him, when he roused himself and thanked Peter in a somewhat stiff voice.

Harry already knew that Snape had got everyone books of one kind or another, plucked from his own library; he’d tried not to peek, but working on his own gifts in close quarters with Snape made it hard. He smiled at Snape over his own book on the history of medical magic, and then angled himself to one side. He already knew which Potions book Draco would have.

Draco unwrapped it eagerly, then frowned at the slip of parchment fastened with a Sticking Charm to the front of the book: Look at page 65. Slowly, Draco opened the book, and studied the recipe. A moment later, he was looking up in outrage. Harry knew page 65 contained the proper instructions for the potion Draco had tried and spectacularly failed to brew yesterday.

“Professor Snape,” Draco said.
“Yes, Mr. Malfoy?” Snape, who had taken the chair Harry had originally intended to sit on, scowled at him.

Draco took a deep breath, then obviously realized that, to scold Snape for what he’d done, he would have to reveal his own mistake to his parents, his cousin, his cousin’s friend, and Harry’s brother. He sat back with a little mutter instead, which Harry translated as, “Thank you for the book.”

Harry took pity on Draco—and distracted himself from his own snickering—by fetching Draco’s gift from his bag. He’d chosen a box that Snape had said once contained Still-Beetle shells to wrap it in. Draco gave him a wary look and opened it slowly.

A moment later, he gasped and held up the bracelet inside. “Harry, it’s beautiful,” he murmured. “What is it?”

“I don’t know for certain,” Harry admitted. He’d concentrated on what he wanted and spun magic out of himself, an effort that left him exhausted for an hour afterwards. What had resulted was a band of, seemingly, metal that looped back on itself like a unicorn’s horn, and was not so much golden as the color of candlelight. “Call it magic.”

Draco slipped the bracelet around his wrist, and looked startled when it shook and tightened itself to a perfect fit. “What does it do?” he breathed.

“Who said it did anything?” Harry leaned back, grinning, the first genuine smile he’d been able to give since Fawkes.

“Harry.”

Harry relented. “All right. If you touch it with your left hand and speak my name—and you have to be touching it, mind, or it would be working every time you spoke to me—then it’ll tell you my current state of health, if I’m wounded or sick or whole.”

Draco’s eyes widened as if they were going to fall out of his head. “If you curve back your right hand and touch it, and wish greatly for it, you’ll get pulled to my side, wherever I am. It’s like a Portkey focused on me. Powerful wards will be able to keep you out, but not much else.”

Draco shook his head in wonder. “I—isn’t that a bit intrusive, Harry?”

“Not if I want it,” said Harry, and locked his eyes on Draco. “And I want you to be able to do this. I do.”

Draco leaned forward, staring into his eyes. Harry flushed, wondering if Draco was about to kiss him here, but Draco only stared as if he were memorizing every inch of Harry’s face, and then nodded. He didn’t need to say thank you. It was written in every line of his cheeks and jaw.

Harry turned quietly away to present the rest of his gifts: a cauldron enchanted with automatic self-cleaning charms and spells to prevent ingredients from sticking to the sides for Connor; a stirring rod bent into abstract shapes and figure-eight designs for Peter; a box filled with trick sweets for Regulus, which he’d arranged with the Weasley twins by owl to send him; and another stirring rod bent into a case to hold his wand for Lucius. Lucius eyed him for a moment, then bowed. Harry nodded back and looked away. He wasn’t in the mood to try to figure out Lucius’s games right now, and if his entirely blank face was a good thing or not.

His gifts for Narcissa and Snape were more personal, and Narcissa’s was formed of pure magic the way Draco’s bracelet had been. Her face softened as she held up a mirror that showed shifting visions of light—moonlight, starlight, sunlight—like the mirror she had given Harry last year that showed different visions of fire. “Thank you, Harry,” she said quietly. “I have always delighted in watching changing patterns.”

Harry smiled back at her, but looked away when the smile threatened to become too inquisitive, towards Snape.

Snape was unfolding a small scroll of parchment with a puzzled expression. Harry stifled a laugh; Snape had actually seen him working on that yesterday, but assumed it was an essay for Defense Against the Dark Arts, because Harry had told him it was. *He really should have noticed my hand shaking when I wrote,* Harry thought.

Then those thoughts melted away in nervousness as Snape actually began to read the damn thing. His face sharpened and grew paler. He looked at Harry once, then rose and strode out of the room.

Harry stood and went after him. Draco was the only one close enough to try to stop him, and whether because he had seen Snape’s expression, or because he was occupied in exclamining over his mother’s present for him, a coin that was one of the Black
treasures, he didn’t hold Harry back.

“Sir?” Harry asked as he moved through the door, unwilling to startle Snape, just in case he was too deep in thought to notice him coming.

Snape turned and stared at him. His face was still pale, but Harry thought he understood why the man had left the other room now. He was afraid that he would express too much emotion in front of Regulus or Peter—probably Peter, Harry thought, and the Malfoys. He thought Snape considered Regulus a close enough friend that he wouldn’t mind him witnessing this.

Then Snape said, “You—you mean this,” and Harry realized that he was shaking.

*Perhaps he wouldn’t want Regulus to see this, after all.* Harry moved forward and stood staring at his guardian. “Yes,” he said. “I did.”

“You didn’t need to,” said Snape quietly. “There was no need to force yourself into discomfort just to make me a Christmas gift, Harry.”

“I wanted to,” Harry repeated. “Just what I told Draco. It might have made me a little uncomfortable, but I wanted to.”

Snape looked aside from him.

“I needed reminders that I was alive, after—after Midwinter,” said Harry. “And that I had commitments to people who were still here. I think I’ve done enough thinking about the past and the dead in these last two months.”

Snape nodded shortly. The scroll dangled limply from his hand. Harry glanced at it once, then away. He knew what it said as well as Snape probably did. The words had burned into his memory as if they were etched with acid even as he wrote them.

*I am trying my best to forgive you. It’s hard, and it will take a longer time than this, but I do want to forgive you. I don’t want anyone else for a guardian. I understand why you did what you did, so that I could have a future. We’ll probably always disagree as to the method, but I know now that something like this was necessary. Merry Christmas, sir. Love, Harry.*

Harry hesitantly moved forward and embraced Snape. Snape didn’t seem to notice for a moment, and then he hugged Harry back, with an abrupt, desperate fierceness. Even then, Harry noticed, he was careful not to let the scroll crumple between them.

“I’m sorry,” Harry repeated aloud.

Snape said nothing. Harry didn’t think he needed to.

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By the time they returned to the Slytherin common room—encouragingly empty, as almost all the students had gone home, and those who hadn’t were currently attending the Christmas Feast in the Great Hall—Harry was almost in an agony of impatience. Draco had claimed that he’d forgotten his Christmas gift for Harry at Hogwarts. He’d also refused to even hint at what it was. Harry didn’t believe for one second that he’d really forgotten it. More likely, he didn’t want to give it to Harry in front of other people.

But now Snape had brought them back—with all the gifts that Regulus and everyone else had insisted on giving Harry safely shrunked and placed in his robe pockets—and Connor had pounded up to Gryffindor Tower to share his story with the four younger Weasley siblings, who’d all stayed at Hogwarts for Christmas. They were away from Lucius’s gaze, which had frosted over several times during the day, always locked on Draco when it did. Harry didn’t believe for one second that he’d really forgotten it. More likely, he didn’t want to give it to Harry in front of other people.

Now Draco could show whatever it was that he’d been afraid to show when they were in public.

Draco had gone to his bed, and stood there fussing with the sheets, his back to Harry. Harry studied him for a moment, then went to his trunk and began putting his shrunked gifts away with more than usual fanfare. That should tell Draco he was willing to wait.
He was trying to figure out the proper place for the dagger Narcissa had given him when Draco tapped his shoulder. Harry turned and looked up at him, to find Draco actually biting his lip. It wasn’t something he did often, probably because he had the twin disapproving gazes of his parents fastened on him for far smaller offenses.

“Here,” he said awkwardly, and pushed a silver frame at him. Harry dropped the dagger on top of the rest of the items in the trunk and caught the frame with his hand, cradling it before it could fall.

The frame was tastefully plain, except for the Malfoy crest discreetly tucked in one corner. Harry skimmed his fingers along it, not yet looking at the center. The frame held a piece of parchment scribed with words, and he could tell that looking at them would make things close. “Someone planned for Christmas,” he said lightly. The frame must have come by owl.

“Some of us didn’t have to worry about the fate of the world for the last month,” said Draco softly, lightly and yet not lightly at all.

*He isn’t going to let me joke about this,* Harry realized. He swallowed, and sat on his bed, aware of Draco’s gaze as he hadn’t been aware of any of the looks they got at Cobley-by-the-Sea. He started reading the words written on the piece of parchment inside the frame.

*I love you, Harry, because you have the deepest soul I’ve ever known.*

*I love you, Harry, because you make me want to be closer to you in every way possible.*

*I love you, Harry, because of the fact that you survive everything the Light and the Dark and Voldemort and Dumbledore throw at you, and you don’t just survive after it, you live.*

*I love you, Harry, because you were able to overcome prejudices you were raised with to consider me a friend and then as a lover, and yourself a Slytherin when you resisted it at first.*

*I love you, Harry, because of the fact that you honestly can’t see why people wouldn’t care about the fates of unicorns and centaurs and Runespoors and Augurey chicks.*

*I love you, Harry, because of the fact that you argue with your snake at the breakfast table about whether he can have more sausages.*

*I love you, Harry, because you’re fierce.*

*I love you, Harry, because of the fact that you could so easily leave me behind, and the way that you try not to.*

*I love you, Harry, because you value healing and forgiveness more than killing and revenge.*

*I love you, Harry, because of the way you kiss.*

*I love you, Harry, because I don’t think I know the slightest shadow of the splendor we’ll be in five or ten years’ time.*

*I love you, Harry.*

Harry looked up. He knew that he was crying, but his sight seemed utterly clear. Perhaps he was seeing Draco in between the tears. “How did you know how much I needed to hear this?” he whispered.

Draco blinked. “It’s perfectly obvious that you don’t really get it, Harry, and I really wanted to do it. I—”

Harry lunged at him—that was the only word he could use to describe it afterward—dropping the frame on the bed and wrapping his arms around him. Draco gave an undignified noise like *whumph,* but that only lasted until Harry lifted his head and kissed him.

This was deeper than the kiss they’d shared in the hallway after the trial. Harry poured gratitude into it, and gladness, and sorrow, and as much as he could of the love that reading that list had made him feel. He’d always tried to use words and magic to express his feelings, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t use gestures, too.
Draco regained his balance with a jolt, and kissed him eagerly back. Harry sighed as pleasure struck him, but it wasn’t cloudy this time; it was sharp and as brilliant as if he were flying straight into the sun. He pressed himself closer, and moved his hand, which was gripping Draco’s back, up until he had hold of Draco’s hair, and was tugging at it, not gently.

Draco fell. Luckily, he landed on his bed, and Harry was able to shift his face so that his glasses didn’t dig into Draco’s cheek and hurt him. Draco blinked a moment, then resumed the kiss. Harry rolled off to the side and stretched out, feeling like a cat must feel when it sunbathed.

Draco drew away at last, and stared at Harry. Harry lifted his head and looked straight back.

“Merlin, you look good,” said Draco. “I’ve messed your hair all up—yes, you can tell—and your mouth looks like you’ve been chewing a peach without caring where the juice goes.” He looked smugly pleased with himself.

“I can see why you didn’t want to do this in front of your parents,” Harry murmured. It was the only thing he could say. He shifted restlessy, wanting to kiss Draco again.

Draco’s expression altered into one of horror. “Harry, I don’t want my mother knowing we snog.”

“I’m fairly sure she’s guessed,” Harry pointed out, and wriggled closer. He felt absurdly happy. He wanted to run around the room and shoot balloons out of his wand. He wanted to jump up and down in place until people came back from the Christmas Feast and wondered what all the banging was. He wanted to laugh until he was sick. He wanted to touch Draco.

That last want, at least, he could gratify, and he reached out and put his hand firmly on Draco’s chest, feeling his heartbeat. Draco sucked in a breath, and it was Harry’s turn to grin smugly.

He kissed Draco one more time, lightly, then lay down beside him and started telling Draco all the reasons he loved him, laughter and tears and survival and brattiness and all. Draco closed his eyes, hummed contentedly in the right places, and suggested new reasons, mostly involving the words “perfect” and “wonderful,” whenever Harry paused to think about his wording.

Harry didn’t know when he fell asleep. He only knew that, for the first time in four days, he was looking forward to waking up more than he was to spending time unconscious.

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Chapter Fifty-Seven: Resolutions

“Harry? Harry, are you all right?”

“I can already see, Harry thought, as he sat up in bed and wiped at his forehead, where his scar ached from a dream for the first time in a month, that that’s a question I’ll get asked a lot in the life we share together.

“I’m all right, Draco,” he said, blinking as Draco yanked the curtains of his bed back and the light of a Lumos charm burned into his unprepared eyes. “Come on, crawl in before we wake Blaise up.”

“Blaise is already up,” said a cranky voice from the other end of the room. Blaise had stayed over the Christmas holiday, since his mother thought the wards of Hogwarts would protect him better than the wards on her own home, Wyvern’s Nest, which had already been broken into once. “You might as well talk loudly about whatever melodramatic plan you have going this time. I’m going to go to the library and sweet-talk Madam Pince into letting me in.” He climbed out of bed and padded towards the loo.

“Madam Pince won’t be in the library!” Draco yelled after him. “It’s New Year’s Eve!” The door of the loo shut without Blaise giving a response. Draco shrugged and looked at Harry. “Do you think she’ll be in the library?” he asked, as he climbed into bed and pulled Harry’s curtains shut.

“Yes, she will.” Harry sat up. “Now, how did you know I was having a dream?”

“That connection we share from you letting me practice possession on you, I think,” Draco said, leaning forward. His face assumed a pensive expression. “I didn’t actually experience it, the way I did that time you leaped into V-Voldemort’s mind.” He gave Harry a stern look. Harry stuck his tongue out at him. Draco frowned and went on. “But I knew you were dreaming—and
that’s a strange feeling to have in the middle of my own dreams, let me tell you. And then I woke up, and I could hear you making those little sounds you make when your scar hurts.”

Harry decided not to ask, just in case the answer embarrassed him further. “I did have a dream,” he whispered. “But it wasn’t like either the visions I have of Voldemort when I’m spying on him, or those misty dreams he sent me when he was trying to make me do something. This was more like I was sharing his head while he dreamed. And the image makes no sense. I mean, it doesn’t seem like it’s anything particularly powerful or threatening.”

Draco nodded. “What was it, then?”

“Just a hallway,” said Harry. “A hallway that ended in a dark door. I wanted to open the door, but when I touched it, nothing happened. I could feel frustration and rage, but I don’t think they were mine. I think Voldemort dreams about opening that door, and knows he can’t.” He looped his arms around his knees. “Why would that image, of all of them, cross over the barrier between us?”

“Are you sure you didn’t let the barrier down, Harry? Or have a hole tear in it somehow?”

Closing his eyes, Harry felt for the grass that barricaded the Occlumency link, and had to shake his head at last. “I can’t feel any holes. Of course, if Voldemort opened a tunnel, would I know?”

“Go talk to Snape tomorrow,” Draco urged him, one hand finding his elbow. “Or—well, in a few hours, really. He has to know about this.”

Harry nodded. Then he yawned. “I am still tired,” he said. “If I’m going to the Isle of Man to visit with the Opallines for their New Year’s celebration, then I should probably rest some more.”

“Of course,” Draco agreed. Then his face changed. “What?”

Harry, about to lie down again, found himself yanked up to face a scowling Draco. “You never told me that,” Draco insisted.

“I did, too,” said Harry. “I must have. I wouldn’t forget to mention it, and I’ve known for a month. You just weren’t paying attention.” He pulled away from Draco and burrowed under the sheets.

Draco spluttered above him for a moment, then said, “Yes, I was. I always pay attention to you. Nothing you say escapes me.”

Harry snorted.

“It doesn’t,” Draco protested. “And anyway, that’s not the point. The point is that you’re not going to the Isle of Man, not by yourself. I’m sure that Snape is going to want to come along, and I certainly do!”

Damn. Trying to get him involved in a different argument didn’t work. Harry pulled his sheets off his head and scowled at Draco. “Paton didn’t invite you, though,” he said, knowing he was being childish. It had taken more than a week, but he was finally feeling that shying sensation inside himself whenever Draco or Snape came near, that indication that he’d spent too much time with them now and they would start seeing too much. He knew he couldn’t ask to be perfectly alone, but being among the Opallines would at least provide him with strangers for a night who didn’t know him as well, and would miss any subtle signals he gave.

“I’m sure he would say it was all right,” said Draco firmly. “He doesn’t strike me as an impolite man, or an ally who would think it was proper for you to go anywhere without guards.”

“Draaaco,” said Harry, and now he knew he was being childish, and that meant he’d lost.

Draco patted his back. “Go to sleep. I think you need rest.” He snickered. “Then talk to Snape in the morning, and talk to Paton with that communication spell. He’ll make room for two more guests, and he’ll do it a lot more graciously than you think he will. The Old Blood was famous for its courtesy, Harry, at least in days where there were more of those families.”

Harry sighed and closed his eyes. Draco bent down and brushed a light kiss over his cheek, then went back to his own bed. Harry heard him shut his curtains, and his breathing resumed a soft, regular rhythm in moments. Draco could always fall asleep easily, unless he was worrying about something; Narcissa had confessed to Harry already that Draco had slept through the night when he
was three months old.

Only then did Harry stretch out and frown reluctantly at the ceiling of his four-poster.

He knew that he would have to find some way to sever the mental connection he and Draco had. For one thing, if Voldemort did launch an attack that could get through the grass barrier—and since he was the best Legilimens Harry had ever met, that was possible—then Draco could get caught up in it. Harry was sick of having other people suffer for his sake. That connection had to go.

For another, Harry knew he would have to reopen the Occlumency link. Without it, he was blind to what Voldemort was doing. He was sure that he would have been able to figure out part of the plans for the graveyard ambush if he’d been listening to Voldemort’s thoughts. He was given to gloating. And Harry might have seen a demonstration of Yaxley’s plants, too, and come up with some idea how to counter them.

How are you going to counter them?

Well, there were a few people he could speak to about that. In the meantime, he needed that dream connection. Even figuring out why Voldemort had the dream about the corridor might help him in the end. He’d keep their connection shut until he learned some way to separate Draco from it permanently, and then he’d part the grass and go in as quietly as he could, to see what could be seen.

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“Neville? Can I talk to you?”

Neville turned around, a look of plain surprise on his face. Harry wondered if he was surprised at being talked to or surprised that Harry had wanted to talk to him. But, after a moment, he nodded. “Sure, Harry,” he said, and then cast around vaguely until he apparently decided that sitting in the corridor was the best they could do. He sat down, and Harry sank down the wall to sit beside him.

Harry decided to come straight to the point. “Neville,” he said, “I have an enemy who fights with plants—vines that can bind wandless magic, and grass that can twine around people and hold them prisoner, and thorns that were holding a man by being embedded in his skin, and slowly eating him alive.” Neville’s face had rearranged itself into an expression of fascinated horror. Harry nodded to him. “I know. Do you know what those things are? Do you know how to counter them?”

Neville frowned and rubbed his wrist. “They all sound bred, Harry,” he said at last. “Crossed from other plants. I don’t know anything like that that occurs in the wild.”

Harry sighed. “That’s what I thought. Would you be able to figure out counters to them?”

“M-me?” Neville dropped his Defense Against the Dark Arts book in surprise. “You want me to help you, Harry?”

“Of course. You’re the best at Herbology in the whole school, except maybe Professor Sprout herself, and I don’t know her that well.” Harry leaned forward. “And Ron told me about you contributing your Light magic to the stream to help me, Neville. I’m not going to be fooled again, you know.”

“Fooled?” Neville blinked at him.

“I’m never going to think that you’re clumsy and bumbling and a coward again,” said Harry softly. Neville blinked some more. “Too many people dismiss you as just that. But I know that you have courage, or you wouldn’t have gone into Gryffindor. And now you’ve demonstrated courage. I’m afraid I’m going to insist on seeing you as brave now. Sorry, but the spell’s broken.”

Neville lowered his head, a flush of pleasure on his cheeks. “That’s all right, Harry,” he said. “And I think I might be able to help. Can you describe exactly what the vines and the grass and the thorns look like? If I can figure out what species they were bred from, then I can see about breeding crosses of those species’ predators or competitors.”

Harry had to admit that wouldn’t have occurred to him. He began to describe the plants in as much detail as he could remember them, deliberately crowding back the emotions that threatened to overwhelm him. They could shove off. He didn’t want to brood on them, so he wouldn’t. And if what he had experienced could be useful to the war effort in any way, then he had no excuse for
ignoring it.

Neville asked several questions that Harry didn’t know the answers to, like what kind of soil the graveyard had, but overall seemed satisfied with what he told him. He smiled at Harry and then stood and wandered down the hallway, muttering about where he was going to find trumpet-heart seeds at this time of year.

Harry grinned, watching him, and then stood and went to cast the communication spell and speak with Hawthorn. Her estate was called the Garden, and she had created the hawthorn plant that he could use to call out to her. She had some skill with plants, though he didn’t think it matched Yaxley’s.

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Harry waited in patient silence as Snape stepped delicately around inside his head, examining the grass barrier that shut off the Occlumency link from several angles. At last, his guardian’s presence slipped out of his mind, and he opened his eyes to find Snape shaking his head.

“There appears to be no hole whatsoever,” he said. “Describe the dream again.”

Harry did, but it had been misty and fragmented even when he first dreamed it, not holding the unnatural clarity of one of the visions, and he couldn’t add any useful details. No, he hadn’t noticed any unusual patterns in the stone, but that didn’t mean there hadn’t been; he might just not have observed them. No, there didn’t seem to be curses or wards on the door, but Voldemort hadn’t cared about that. No, he still couldn’t open the door, but how did Snape know that was the result of a curse or ward, and not something inherent in the place itself?

At last, Snape pinched the bridge of his nose and exhaled in frustration. “I can only tell you to keep the barrier up, Harry, and detach the connection with Draco if you can. That is dangerous.”

Harry nodded. “That’s what I thought. I’ll do what I can, sir, but Draco won’t like it.”

Snape snorted. “Mr. Malfoy does not like many things, and the majority of them are good for him.” He paused and studied Harry critically. “Sometimes he is right, however. He came down here this morning to tell me that you had received a New Year’s invitation you didn’t see fit to warn us about. Why?”

Harry lowered his head, flushing uncomfortably. “I—sir, please don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m starting to be too conscious of what you see when you look at me,” he said quietly. “I’ve spent days in your company, longer than I usually go, and when I’m not with you, I’m with Draco. I want some time alone, or with people who don’t know me as well.”

Snape was silent for a long moment. “And have you told Draco this?” he asked finally.

Harry shook his head. “I tried to convince him at first that I’d told him about the invitation, and he just hadn’t paid attention. He didn’t buy that, of course. And now he’s set on going with me, and I don’t know what to do.” He felt a rush of relief that he could talk with Snape about this, even as Snape studied him and his discomfort increased. He wondered if he’d ever be able to spend endless amounts of time in the presence of other people and never long for solitude. Connor seemed to manage it just fine.

“I will talk with him.”

Harry could feel his mouth drop open. “You would?”

Snape nodded. “You must not ever be afraid to ask me for something like that, Harry,” he said, catching Harry’s eye. “I would brave far worse than a Malfoy temper tantrum for you.”

His ears heating, Harry nodded. He knew that, he did, but he couldn’t seem to hold it in his head all the time. He still preferred to do things by himself. Unless it was a problem he knew he absolutely couldn’t handle, like Yaxley’s plants, then seeking out help was always a distant, second option.

“Thank you, sir,” he murmured.

“You are welcome.” Snape stood and gently ushered him towards the door. “Now, you said that you had other things to do today?”
“Other things I should do today.” Harry cast several warming charms on himself, and then touched his neck. Yes, the Many snake was there, curled closely into his warm skin. “It’s New Year’s Eve, the last day of the year, and that’s a time for making vows.”

“Make sure you can keep them,” said Snape, his hand straying to his left arm for a moment.

Harry smiled at him. “I’ll make sure I can.”

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The trees of the Forbidden Forest seemed to have seriously embraced the idea that it was winter, now. Harry saw some of them encased entirely in ice, their twigs puffing into fairy flowers of white and gold. Others rose bare and high against the diamond-bright, diamond-colored air, arms lifted as if to catch and hold the clouds. The ground beneath his feet squeaked as he stepped on frozen leaves and mud, and shattered in splashes as he broke small patches of ice.

He was aware of the centaurs tracking him the moment he entered the Forest, of course. No longer inclined to attack intruders the moment they saw them, they were still proud and wary. Hooves splashed and broke the ice in larger noises and patches than his feet could, and when Harry turned his head, he could sometimes see a black or palomino tail weaving in and out between the branches. Soon the centaurs showed themselves, trotting easily beside him: a bay Harry didn’t know, and Firenze. He inclined his head to the latter, who nodded back.

“Have you come to visit us, Harry Potter?” he asked.

Harry didn’t bother correcting Firenze on his last name. It wasn’t something that would matter to the centaurs. “Yes,” he said. “You, and the Many if they’re awake at this season, and anyone else who will meet me. I want to renew my vows to them, to reassure them that I’m still vates and will be unless something kills me or I fall from the path.”

“Even if you die, you are still vates,” said Firenze. “We would hold the memory of you sacred.” He nodded to the bay, who began to gallop ahead, his footing light on the treacherous ground and not all that cautious. Firenze went on, forcing Harry to turn and look at him instead of waiting for the other centaur to break his neck. “We have heard that you tried to convince the half-giant to travel and speak to his kin, and that you were unsuccessful.”

Harry grimaced. “Yes.” Hagrid had, after long thought, told Harry that he really couldn’t do it. There had been tears in his eyes as he explained that he couldn’t use his connection with his mother that way, to serve some political purpose. Harry had been disappointed, but had understood.

“I will offer to go,” said Firenze.

Harry blinked. “I wasn’t aware that centaurs and giants shared any kind of connection,” he said.

“Not centaurs in general,” said Firenze patiently. “My mentor went once to giant country, and preserved the maps, and showed me the way. He was more curious than the majority of us, more willing to venture into strange paths with only the stars to light him on his journey. I once meant to take the trip, but of course the web prevented me. The web told the wizards that he had left the Forest, and they caught him a few years later and killed him for being ‘a danger to wizard kind.’”

Harry winced. “I’m sorry. You have little reason to love us.”

“Freedom from their web, as soon as it can be negotiated.”

Harry looked away, uneasy with the courtesy—it would have been all right if it just weren’t a bow, implying that he was higher than others—and then realized they were coming up on the clearing where he had met with several species before. A small gathering of centaurs stood there now, shifting their haunches and shivering to keep warm, and a writhing tangle of the Many
coiled on several of their backs, to keep their scales out of the snow.

What really caught Harry’s attention, though, was the creature standing on the other side of the clearing. He stopped and stared. He thought it was a dryad at first, though he hadn’t been aware that any of them lived in the Forbidden Forest. It was slender, pale green of skin like new leaves, and it had many arms, most of which started out as skin, corkscrewed into bark, and ended up in delicate bunches of twigs and brilliant leaves. Harry thought it had two legs, but he couldn’t be sure; perhaps those were more of its branches. It moved forward lightly enough, and then the branches swayed enough to let him see the face.

Harry stared again. The face was like the memory of his fragmented dream that morning; it had been real at some point long ago and far away. It slanted from right to left, a diagonal face, with ears so sharp they looked like knife-blades and enormous green eyes that dominated it. Harry looked hastily away from those eyes. He had seen sparks of silver begin in them, as if they were deep pools, and he knew instinctively that he could fall into them and never come out.

“Who are you?” he whispered. “The spirit of the Forest?”

A gentle voice, filled with the music of roots, answered him. “You knew me once, Harry vates.”

Harry turned back, careful to keep his gaze not directly on those green eyes. He had a suspicion now, but this was so—strange.

“Dobby?” he said at last.

The figure inclined itself, like a tree bowing before the wind, and said, “Yes. I have changed, Harry, have I not?” He supposed he was still a he, and not an it—stroked his skin with two twig-like fingers.

“The last time I saw you, you were an elf,” said Harry. “You looked more like one of the Sidhe than a house elf, but still…I don’t know. Is this more like the form your people once had?” He nodded at the curling branches and the roots that snaked shyly across the frozen ground. He found it hard to think of it as human, or elven, or anything but strange.

“No,” said Dobby. “We had no fixed form, Harry. I am remembering now. We changed from century to century, or we changed as we pleased. We would inhabit one form and learn it completely, then become another. This is the form I have chosen at the moment.” His smile, when Harry glanced cautiously back at his face, was delirious with pleasure. “The other was pleasant, but not what I wanted to learn.”

Harry nodded slowly, swallowing back his anger; the wizards who enslaved house elves had compounded their sin, then, not just tying up their magic and making them glad to serve, but binding them to one form. “And you have come to meet me now?”

Dobby looked up abruptly, and those green eyes nearly drowned Harry. “Yes,” he said, as if recalled from his delight to his purpose. “Yes, I did. I would like your word that you still do mean to free house elves, Harry. Forgive me, but you have freed none of them since me, and you have made many allies who hold house elves. It will not be easy to persuade them to give up their possessions.” A noise like wind blowing through leaves twisted those last words. “Can you do this? Or is your commitment to human political alliances greater than your commitment to us?”

Harry felt a solid weight settle into the middle of his stomach. He had been right to come out here, after all. The last day of the year was a good one for renewing vows, or taking them.

“I am vates first and foremost,” he said quietly. “It is the only path I have truly chosen to walk. My parents, and Voldemort through their machinations, inflicted me with my scar and my magic, and my training made me into my brother’s guardian. I would have been an ordinary wizard without that, and happier for it. But I have the magic now, and that makes the vates path possible. I will walk it.”

He opened his hand, wanting some way to mark the occasion, but not wanting to use blood. He started when fire abruptly burned in the center of his palm. He recognized the brightness of it, and the sweet, mind-stirring scent that poured from it. It was phoenix fire, one of the gifts Fawkes seemed to have granted him with his sacrificial death. Harry hadn’t chosen that, either, but phoenix fire was the perfect way to mark this occasion.

He looked up at Dobby, or the creature that had once been Dobby, while the flame in the center of his palm hissed and spat and cast sparks into the snow like fireworks. “I swear to you,” he said, “by this fire, that I am vates first and foremost, and for however long it takes, I will free the house elves of their web, along with all those other species who wish to be free.”
The fire shot up into the air, abruptly, spreading bright red wings. For a moment, Harry caught a glimpse of Fawkes hovering there, and blinked back tears. Then the fire dived down into the snow, melting it and creating a burned patch on the Forest floor. Harry felt part of his magic flowing into the scar, linking him firmly to his promise.

“That will do,” said Dobby, his voice soft. “I see now why Fawkes died for you. Live well and peaceably and powerfully, vates.” He uncoiled, and his branches lifted, and his eyes grew greener until he was nothing but a patch of green and silver, and then he was gone.

Harry, breathing deeply, turned to the centaurs and the Many. “My commitment to you is renewed, as well,” he said, first in English and then repeating himself in Parseltongue. “It always will be. I know that you are free of your webs, now, but that all communities of your kind are not. They will be, someday.”

“We are willing to wait,” said Firenze, mildly. “We owe you a debt we cannot repay, Harry Potter vates, and we are more patient than humans understand. And we remind you, as well, of our side of the bargain. We will come forth to war when you need us.”

Harry nodded. “A storm of Light will be coming to Hogwarts on Midsummer day, or a prophecy lies,” he said quietly. “I will probably ask for your help then.”

“And you shall have it.”

“And you shall have our help,” hissed the Many, their voices ebbing and blending in his ears as they always did. “We can help you as no others may. Our daughter is small enough to be carried about you, in your clothing, in your pockets, and no one will notice. And what she sees, we will see, and what she does, we will note. You need not wear her about your neck. Keep her secret, and safe.”

Harry nodded. “And is there nothing else I can do for you?”

“Nothing yet. Another hive will not be hatched until next year. Then, we will need you to break the web that will try to reestablish itself.”

Harry bowed a bit, grateful that the magical creatures were so much more straightforward than his human allies. Half of them would try to bargain with him in more complicated terms, and half wouldn’t reveal what they wanted at all. It didn’t occur to the Many to lie, though, much less arrange some dance where Harry didn’t know the steps. “Thank you.”

He spoke with the centaurs and the Many for a short time more, arranging the details of Firenze’s visit to the giants and when exactly the Many’s children would hatch, and then headed back towards the castle. He did pause on the edge of the Forbidden Forest to tuck the Many snake into his pocket. He felt quietly pleased with how his visit had gone. Snape had trusted him to go into the Forest without guards, probably knowing that nothing lived there that would hurt him, and he had managed just fine.

When he looked up, he saw a unicorn running across the grounds.

Harry caught his breath. The unicorn was little more than a streak of white, marked out by deep, dusky purple lights on his horn and hooves. Otherwise, he looked like a spirit of the snow given intelligence and substance, and he ran as if it were the morning of the world and he had never known imprisonment.

A moment, and he was gone, fading as he neared the lake, but Harry was left shivering with an awe deeper than the contentment had been. He supposed it wasn’t his fate to be at peace for long.

Ah, well. This is more interesting.

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“Ready, Harry?” Paton’s face grinned at him through the fire. “Then come through!”

Harry tossed a handful of Floo powder into the flames, calling out, “The Welcoming Room!” He spun around several times, then got spat out into a shadowy place he’d only seen behind Paton’s head as they spoke a few minutes earlier. He felt his arm clasped and tugged, as Paton both balanced him and shook his hand. He turned and looked at his ally, and wound up catching his breath.

Paton wore his tattoos without a glamour here, making his face into a mask of lines at once beautiful and strange. His dark blue
robes revealed more tattoos, links that marked members of the Opalline family, soaring and spiraling around his body. Harry wondered who drew the tattoos. Was it a common pattern copied from an earlier artist? Did the magic just know instinctively how to make them? What happened when a new Opalline child was born?

“Welcome, Harry,” said Paton, and bowed to him. His white-blond hair, still cropped from Fergus’s death, was growing out again, and coiled neatly into a braid that he’d attached to a silver ring of the chain collar around his throat. “I cannot wait for you to meet the rest of my family. This is only the Welcoming Room,” he added, waving one hand at the stone room they stood in. The decorations on the walls mimicked the spreading whorls of his tattoos. “We have some space to walk before we come to the rest of Gollrish Y Thie.” He smiled at Harry, and opened the door on the other side of the small, box-like room.

No, Harry corrected himself, the small, box-like house. The Welcoming Room really was completely detached from the rest of the home the Opallines lived in. He took a few careful steps out the door, and froze.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” said Paton at his shoulder, with a self-satisfaction that Harry had to grant was justified. “Welcome to Snaefell.”

They stood on the upper edge of a long stone staircase, carved so neatly into the rock that it would be invisible from below, Harry thought. Of course, there was probably magic helping it along. All the steps bore a dip in the middle—worn by generations of feet walking up them.

Beyond and around and below the staircase extended Snaefell, which was quite obviously a mountain, and not a hill. Harry shivered as he took in the sight through the clear air; the unparalleled view over rising and soaring snowfields made him feel colder. Snaefell canted high enough, or they stood in just the right place, to see an incredible distance across both the Isle of Man and the Irish Sea. Harry saw shades of blue and gray in the water he’d never seen before, and the distant blur of land.

“The Muggles used to say that you could see six kingdoms from the top of Snaefell on a clear day,” Paton murmured to him. “England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, the Isle of Man, and the Kingdom of Heaven. We say that we have a seventh, though, properly speaking, our home was never a kingdom. We’ve just lived here a long, long time.” Gently, he gripped Harry’s shoulder and turned him around, unresisting, so that Harry could look to the left of where they stood.

That’s Gollrish Y Thie, Harry thought. Another span of stone steps extended from the Welcoming Room across a shoulder of the mountain, faithfully following its lines, though they rose out of the snow enough that Harry knew they must be huge. And on top of the next ridge curled a home as splendid as a rearing dragon.

Harry would have said it was a castle, but its spare, clean lines made even Hogwarts look unwarrantedly bulky and bumpy. Various wings, patterned with what looked like scales, wavered in several directions, bending and curving where another structure would have stood square or straight. Harry could make out windows sparkling with something that might have been glass or wards. The noise of voices chattering came across the distance to him, and he saw numerous small shapes, children, darting about furiously on the icy flat rock right next to the drop.

“How do you hide this from the Muggles?” he asked Paton.

Paton laughed. “We have a pretty solid illusion that makes the whole place feel like part of the mountain—something the one Light Lady ever born to our line did for us. So far as the Muggles are concerned, all of this is just part of Snaefell. They have a railroad that runs right over our roof.” He nodded towards the steps. “Shall we? It’s safe, I assure you. We have wards to either side that prevent anyone from falling off the ridge, though they won’t keep you from getting a faceful of snow.”

Harry nodded, and they began to hop from one large stone to the other, heading towards the house.

It was harder than it looked, Harry quickly found. The rocks had warming charms that melted some of the ice, but what the Opallines considered “some ice” was obviously different from what he did. He had to hop across the gaps and windmill his arms each time to stay upright. Paton, unsurprisingly, strode along as sure-footed as a mule. He smiled at each gap in between the stones, too, as if they told him tales that Harry couldn’t hear. For all Harry knew, they did.

They reached the other side with no more than one really serious slip on Harry’s part, though, and then the ground was flat with flagstones all the way up to the main staircase of Gollrish Y Thie, where Harry could see a figure with long, blowing hair waiting for them. The children, who were throwing snowballs at each other and practicing spells to dump ice down the back of each other’s necks, turned around and stared at him with unabashed curiosity. More than one, though, abandoned the staring to run up to Paton and clasp their arms around him with small cries of, “Jishag mooar!”
Paton scooped them up with the ease of long practice, swung each one around, and said a quick phrase in what Harry knew must be Manx. The older children, once he’d spoken to them, turned to Harry and introduced themselves with perfect politeness, hands held palm-up in front of their bodies and their heads bowing over them. Harry heard a dizzying blur of names which he didn’t try to retain, though he nodded and smiled to each one. The younger tended to cluster behind the older ones, or behind Paton, chewing their braids—mostly white-blond, but with some dark and Weasley-red mixed in for variety—and watching him shyly.

Harry tried to count all the children, but since some of them raced back to the snowball games the moment introductions were finished, it was difficult. There were more than fifty, though. Harry shook his head in wonder, and gave a sidelong glance at Paton as they finally worked their way out the other side of the crowd and towards the great steps. “You weren’t kidding when you said that you’re rich in blood,” he said.

Paton smiled. “No. Of course, most of the time, not all of the children live at Gollrish Y Thie. We’re scattered all around, as I’ve told you. But the New Year’s celebration is a big deal, thanks to the Cooinaght. My children come from all over the world to attend it.” He glanced around him with another self-satisfied look. Harry knew the expression of a man on his home ground now; Paton seemed more thoroughly at home here than even Lucius did in Malfoy Manor.

They had reached the staircase that curled up towards the main entrance of the house, and the standing figure had come down to meet them. Harry faced her, and blinked as he saw a young woman, probably Honoria’s age, with smooth brown skin and dark eyes. Her white-blond hair stood out against her coloring, and unlike most of the people around her, she didn’t have it coiling in a braid, but blowing free.

“Fastyr mie,” she murmured, dipping her head and holding her hands out to Harry in a version of the gesture the older children had used with him. “Good afternoon, Harry vates. My name is Calibrid.”

“May I present, as she’s already taken up some of the work of doing—” Paton’s voice was warm and rich with affection “—my daughter and heir, Calibrid Opalline.”

Harry spread his own hand in a mimicry of her gesture. Calibrid smiled, but never stopped studying him. Harry could see already why Paton had chosen her as his heir. If he wanted an observer and someone who intimately knew the strengths and weaknesses of others, he could do much, much worse.

Something was off about Calibrid, though, Harry thought as he studied her back. It was as if a song that played around most people were silent with her. He thought for a moment that she must be better at hiding her magic than many witches, but abruptly he realized what it was, and he blurted his realization out before he could stop it.

“You’re a Squib!”

Calibrid’s eyebrows rose, and her smile sharpened. “Ah, yes. I did wonder when you would notice. I hope you won’t be unpleasant about it.” Her new smile said that she could make life more unpleasant for him than he’d ever dream of making it for her.

Harry shook his head, his cheeks already burning. His training and his etiquette conscience, which had a voice like Narcissa’s, were both scolding him soundly for his slip-up. “I’m sorry, my lady,” he murmured. “I didn’t think. I’m used to being around Dark pureblood families who value magical power when choosing an heir before all else. I didn’t realize it would be different for the Old Blood, but of course I should have.”

Calibrid relaxed, and dropped her hands back to her sides. “Of course it is,” she echoed, and brushed her fingers along her cheeks, dissipating her glamour and calling Harry’s attention to her tattoos. “I can call on the combined magical power of my family any time I should need it. Why do I need to be magical in my own right?”

Harry grinned a bit. He could think of several people in pureblood society who would be horrified to hear that, Augustus Starrise first among them. He thought they could stand to hear it.

A cutting buzz sounded from overhead, and Harry started a step back as a wasp circled around Calibrid’s shoulder. Calibrid showed no alarm, but moved forward a bit as the wasp dived down behind her. A moment later, a tall young man with white-blond hair was standing where the insect had been, staring at Harry in absolute silence. Opalline tattoos curved and writhed on his fine pale skin, and his hand clutched a wand hard enough that his knuckles had lost all color.
“Doncan,” said Calibrid. “He was just startled when he called me a Squib, that’s all. He intended no insult to me.” She reached back and laid a hand on the stranger’s shoulder. Harry saw some of the tension alter in him, rather than melt, shifting to other places and positions. Doncan now leaned forward as if he were studying Harry like an insect under glass in his own right. Harry conquered the temptation to shift his own weight and stared back.

“May I present my son Doncan,” said Paton, his voice dry, “a wasp Animagus and the guardian of my daughter Calibrid.”

Harry turned at the use of the term “guardian.” “He protects her because she has no magic?” he asked.

“That was the original justification for it, yes,” said Paton. “But he also chose to do the work. And he underwent the original training that Dumbledore and your mother warped when it came to you, Harry. That training normally begins at ten years old, and the child must consent to it. Doncan consented. You did not.” His eyes were dark, and his mouth tightened the slightest bit. Harry decided that he didn’t want to see Paton truly angry, ever.

Harry had a few more questions now, though. “I didn’t realize that Lily had the idea from anywhere,” he said. He met Doncan’s eyes, and realized they did look familiar, all his own emotions subdued beneath a sternness that watched for any danger to his charge. “I thought she just trained me in accordance with Dumbledore’s ethics of sacrifice.”

“She did,” said Doncan, speaking for the first time. His voice was deep and hoarse, as if he spent a lot of his time shouting. “But she used our methods, and applied them to a flawed ideal. I am sorry for what happened to you, little brother. No one should have to suffer it. My service is joyful to me. Yours has not been.”

Harry studied him some more. It was true that Doncan didn’t have the lines of tension that Harry remembered as being almost constantly a part of himself when he guarded Connor. He seemed confident that most of the people around Calibrid didn’t want to hurt her. Harry had never been allowed to relax to that extent; Lily had trained him to think there were Death Eaters around every corner, and in places where no Death Eaters could have been, she tested him. Harry supposed he could see how that decision, freely made, would turn out a fine warrior, and not one who resented his lot.

It made his skin prickle a bit, all the same.

“Come,” Calibrid said then, extending her arm. Harry placed his hand hesitantly on it, folding his thumb back in the proper manner for a pureblood wizard being escorted by an older witch, and she nodded approval. “You have not seen the inside of Gollrish Y Thie, and you should. Everyone who comes to the Isle should.” She shot a sly glance at her father. “I have even contended that we should invite Muggles here. My father says very tiresome things about the International Statute of Secrecy, but all my travels through other countries did not make me change my mind. Wizards and Muggles should know each other, I think.”

“My little Calibrid is a self-styled revolutionary,” said Paton, with the tone of someone pursuing an old argument.

“Because you raised me to think for myself, Father, even when that disagreed with your own thoughts,” Calibrid replied sweetly, and then they were through the great arched entrance and into the main hall of Gollrish Y Thie, and Harry was too busy staring to pay attention to the course of the argument.

The inside of the hall was patterned with more scales, but this time, Harry could see that they weren’t merely indentations or fancy carvings in the stone. They were actual scales. The great hall was made of a pair of widespread jaws that answered the question, once and for all, as to whether Gollrish Y Thie was molded after a living creature or had once been a living creature. They stepped into a lower jaw, and above them slanted another, extending on a constant angle back to the still-enormous throat. Harry swallowed as he looked up at the fangs hanging overhead like enormous stalactites. The fangs on the lower jaw had probably been broken away long ago for the safety of walkers. Rope ladders dangled from the ceiling, leading to faint darknesses of tunnel entrances among the teeth. Harry imagined they ran back into the skull proper, probably up to the muzzle and eyesockets.

“I deliberately didn’t warn you,” said Paton, standing at his side, and, Harry realized, enjoying his reaction. “I like watching the way it takes visitors. Our home was a dragon once, a dragon’s skeleton—we like to say the dragon that St. George battled, though Merlin knows if she was really that. We know her kind doesn’t exist in the British Isles any more, though.” Paton brushed a hand fondly along a wall that Harry supposed was partly bone and partly stone. “Too big, too destructive, and their fire was too hot; it vaporized instead of just burning. Wizards hunted them to extinction long ago. In fact, there’s speculation that the Killing Curse was developed to kill these dragons without close battle, since the wizards inevitably lost in a close battle.” He sighed. “Can you imagine the glory she must have been when she was alive?”
Harry could. He imagined the jaws closing on all of them, the great head lifting, the mouth tilting to spill them all down the throat…

He shivered, partly with fear and partly with a pang of loss at the thought of anything so grand and beautiful dying. Then he shook his head resolutely. He couldn’t be too angry at those ancient wizards, unless they were also the ones who had bound the house elves and the other species with webs. He had enough to worry about with the living magical creatures to protect and free.

“Now, Harry,” said Paton, drawing his attention back. “The Cooinaght is coming.”

“You mentioned that,” Harry murmured. “A ritual of some kind?”

“It is a ritual.” Paton’s face was solemn, with no hint of teasing now. “A ritual of memory. It helps keep our family together, by showing us what we have been through and lost and won in the past year. However, I am not sure that it would be the best thing for you to experience, given all the losses that haunt your memory.” He was studying Harry intently. “You are perfectly welcome to abstain from it. No one will think it an insult.” Harry couldn’t help glancing at Doncan, but he shook his head, eyes merciless as a hawk’s. “I merely wanted to warn you, so that you don’t get caught up in it, and can leave the room when it begins.”

Harry thought for a moment. Did he really want to relive the graveyard twice over, and the trial, and Merlin knew what else? But he remembered the promise he had made to himself earlier, and fulfilled in the Forbidden Forest. This was New Year’s Day, a day of renewing vows and commitments. He didn’t want to retreat in fear, even if it was a wise idea.

“I’ll stay for it.”

Paton blinked. “You are sure?” he asked, canting his head to study Harry as if he were a new tattoo unexpectedly appeared on his skin. “It is intense.”

“I want to,” Harry said.

Paton smiled at him. “It is wonderful to hear you say that,” he said simply. “Very well, then. Calibrid will show you around Gollrish Y Thie for a time, and let me know when she must attend other duties.” He glanced at his daughter, who nodded.

“I don’t want to keep her away from her duties,” Harry protested, a little alarmed at the thought of that much trouble being taken for him. “I mean, she’s your heir—“

“And you are a member of the family as important as any other,” Calibrid said firmly. “You were that from the moment my big brother shed his blood for you. Come along, Harry. You haven’t enjoyed a game until you’ve watched children playing tag in a dragon’s eye.” She pulled him towards one of the rope ladders, with Doncan pacing along behind them, silent as a great cat.

Harry sighed once, then gave himself over to being treated like a guest, or the little brother that both Doncan and Calibrid called him.

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By the time the Cooinaght came, Harry thought he was more than ready.

He had stood in the Great Hall of Gollrish Y Thie, the dragon’s belly, and watched a display of magic meant to mimic the Northern Lights storm around him. Shining threads of purple and blue and gold and green reared up and then ran down the walls. Harry thought for a moment of dripping blood, then shook the image away and deliberately replaced it with the thought of the memory that had shone when he freed the unicorns. Then he could laugh and applaud with the rest, and admire the skill of the two girls, twins, whose magic had produced the light—two of Paton’s younger daughters, just sixteen. The twins had grinned, bowed to the crowd, and slipped away hand-in-hand.

He’d met Angelica Griffinsnest, Paton’s first wife, the mother of Fergus and Doncan and a few of his other children, who had wound up parting with him over “differences that made us good friends and not good spouses,” as she’d described it to Harry. She seemed to enjoy the company of the Opallines, though, and associated freely with all the children. Harry watched her Levitate a squeaking grandchild around the room, and had to look away, a burning in his throat.

He’d seen Calibrid carefully retrieve a Pensieve that two enormous owls had arrived carrying. She’d noticed his look, and
explained, stroking the sides of the Pensieve as if it were the most precious thing in the world, that it had come from her mother, a Pakistani witch who had loved Paton and planned to marry him. Her family had required her to marry elsewhere, though, and her mother had not wished to disobey their will. She had loved Paton for a year, given birth to Calibrid, then given her to her father when she was three months old and her mother had to leave the Isle of Man. She sent a Pensieve at the end of every month containing memories of what she’d been doing in the recent past, since her husband forbade her contact with Paton. Harry swallowed down envy, and courteously—he hoped—declined the invitation that Calibrid gave him to look into the Pensieve and get to know her mother. He was just a little too jealous of her for having a mother who loved her that deeply, even years after she’d embarked on a different life.

He felt a little out of place, in fact, though everyone made some effort to include him—and for the younger children it wasn’t even an effort; they showed off new spells to him and told him tales of their exploits and insisted that he play tag as naturally as they did with everyone else. A few asked about his missing hand, but accepted the story Harry invented about an evil snake biting it off. But they were so obviously a family, and Harry couldn’t help feeling his lacks in the middle of them, from his parents to his missing last name.

“Gather.”

Paton spoke just the one word, and all the shouting and laughter in the hall ceased. Harry knew it was deep night from the torches that flared from cavities in the dragon’s ribs, and thought it was about an hour before midnight and the turning of the year. Hundreds of solemn faces turned up now, and parents put their hands on the shoulders of children. Harry felt Calibrid draw up beside him.

She began softly translating the speech that Paton made, in rippling Manx that Harry suspected everyone in the hall but him understood.

“Now is the time of the Cooinaght, the Remembering, the ritual in which we recall the intense passages of our past year.” As Calibrid finished translating that sentence, the torches sparked higher and higher. Not all of them, though, Harry realized with a glance. Only the twelve largest were leaping and acquiring a white tinge to the flames, twelve spaced at equal distances around the hall and from each other. “We recall this to challenge ourselves, for in remembering our mistakes, we learn not to make them in the future. We recall this to brace ourselves, for the next year may contain challenges greater than any we have faced so far. We recall this to cheer ourselves, for our victories in a year of life are never minor. We recall this to give ourselves life, for we are alive in the past as in the future, and the present is the moving shuttle that connects the tapestries of both.”

At the end of the speech, the torches extended their flames until they touched overhead. Harry couldn’t help staring, trying to judge the shape of the arch. But it remained no more specific than an arch, and when sparks began to fall from it like shooting stars or fiery snow, he could do no more than watch.

The sparks grew larger, impossibly larger, as they waltzed downwards, until Harry saw the first one to come towards him like a draping blanket. He raised his arms, uncertain of what he was about to do, and then found another place, another time, tumbling around him as the spark expanded to take him in.

He stood in the Slytherin bedroom, watching himself in a tight embrace with Draco near the foot of Draco’s bed. He recognized the scene after a moment’s blink: the hug they’d shared after his vision of Voldemort last January, when Draco had somehow ridden along with him and ended up killing Nagini. Harry felt a shiver of several emotions, all of them too intense to be separated, ride up and down his spine. It was strange to see himself from the outside, strange to see himself with two hands, strange to really notice the content expression as he snuggled into Draco’s shoulder.

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The walls of the memory fell straight down around him, and another took its place. Harry smelled blood and magic, saw himself with hands extended towards a figure lying motionless in a bed, and knew he was witnessing Marian Bulstrode’s birth again, at the end of February. He’d saved Elfrida’s magic, after she’d drained her own because Marian was her heir. Harry smiled. He was allowed to be proud of that, wasn’t he? Yes, he thought he was. It had been the first time he’d reversed his magic-swallowing ability, and seen that he could use that swallowed strength to give life and hope back to others—the first time he’d really felt like a wizard doing what he could to help and serve other wizards, not just magical creatures.

A roar, and he was in a memory so vibrant with life that he flushed even before he saw what it was. The first kiss he and Draco had shared, which came on the spring equinox, the brightest day of his March. Harry was torn between surprised that he’d looked terrified, and pleased that Draco looked more satisfied and deliriously happy than he’d remembered. He’d been rather too occupied with his own feelings, and expectations, and fears, to realize that it had been exactly what Draco wanted.
Darkness attacked next, erasing the bright memory like ink spilled on an overdue Potions essay. Harry looked up, and above him danced the monstrous storm that had come on Walpurgis, the wild Dark stupefying by Voldemort’s attempt to capture and manipulate it. The rage seemed almost innocent, now that Harry had seen the fury of Midwinter. He watched himself flying, hurtling through darkness with a vengeance that made him wince and suspect that Draco and Snape might have a point about how reckless he was with his life. He looked like a bit of rubble just then, a piece of trash the wild Dark might fling however it chose.

April had been an intense month for him altogether, with the Maze as well as this, but this was by far the wilder memory.

Sunshine and color and light broke the darkness like dawn, and he stood in the cavern beneath Gringotts, in May, gathering and taming the magic of twelve different wizards in an effort to free the southern goblins. Power rushed into him and made him able to do so many things for those brief moments—more even than he could have done if he had swallowed their magic, since it had been willingly given over. But he had chosen to turn it back, tuck it gently into their bodies once more and refuse the temptation. Harry was less proud of that than he was of freeing the goblins, but only just.

He was prepared when sunshine became dusk, color because gray, light became darkness. It was inevitable that this would be his memory of June, burning the twenty days before it and the nine days after it to ash. He stood in the graveyard, and watched himself writhe on the stone, and heard the screams, not mindless but full of terror and pain, and watched Bellatrix sever his left hand. It did not really take as long as he had thought it did. It was less painful to watch than it was to experience. He had survived it. He told himself that, and still had to look away when the hand came free and Bellatrix laughed aloud.

July unspooled in Godric’s Hollow, with him lying flat on his back next to the old isolation wards, gritting his teeth and wrinkling his forehead as he rebuilt his own mind. Harry would have preferred to watch the memory of his birthday, the day when Argutus had joined him, but he found this an unexpectedly quiet scene. He didn’t stay long enough to see his own magic explode in negation, attacking the power the place had held over him, and without that, there was almost no sense of what rushed and churned in his brain.

August, and he rode the Light gryphon’s back, vaulting and turning as it claimed the magic Voldemort had torn from it. Harry forced himself not to think of what would surely come with December, to try and see this memory as it had been when he experienced it. There were some advantages to the outside perspective, though: the Light gryphon flicked its tail in disdain at Voldemort as it flew away, something Harry definitely hadn’t noticed at the time. He grinned, and when the next memory strewed sand beneath his feet, he was braced.

He watched himself confront Voldemort in the circle of wooden disks he’d used to destroy the sirens, and shook his head in wonder. He looked so small, so fragile. It was a wonder that his allies trusted and would follow him. Then he saw the expression on his own face when he lunged up to take the curse for Connor, and revised his estimate. He supposed it was only a mystery some of the time, and that battle on the autumn equinox had given them a chance to see both sides of him.

He was hovering in the air, a change so sudden that Harry squeaked and reached for the ground before he caught himself, shaking his head in embarrassment. He watched himself jerk at Henrietta’s sharp reminder that he was their leader, and shout warnings as he pushed his broom into a dive towards Woodhouse. Henrietta went off to play with Evan Rosier, something Harry hadn’t noticed at the time. He grinned, and when the next memory strewed sand beneath his feet, he was braced.

He kept his head half-bowed during the memory of November, because sound and not sight was the important thing here. He heard his voice reciting the speech for his parents, impassioned and yet strangely dry, as if he were a cracked bone pouring all his marrow and strength into the words, keeping nothing for himself. He heard the mutters and creaks of the Wizengamot quiet, and he breathed in the absolute silence, knowing that the memory of himself would be climbing back to Draco.

Darkness and wind bore him up. Once again, he hovered, and watched as Fawkes danced and sang his death, winding down his life into a tight bolt of fire that he flung directly at Harry. This time, Harry could make out the fire fluttering beneath his chest like a heartbeat—at least, when he separated again from the Light gryphon and the tears left him in peace. He frowned and touched his own chest uncertainly. What exactly did Fawkes leave me?

The memory broke, and Harry found himself on a vision of a high mountaintop. Dark, undefined country lay below, and above him shone innumerable stars, so bright and so far away that Harry shivered. Behind him lay green, well-traveled country, he knew, but he could not turn and look at it. This was a representation of the future, and at the moment, the Cooinaght insisted he look forward.
This is still yours to choose, said a voice in his ears that might have been the Light’s, if the Light knew personal compassion.

The dark land smoothed and flattened, and he stood in the Opallines’ Great Hall once more, his cheeks wet with tears. A hand touched his shoulder, and he was turned to face, not Calibrid, as he’d assumed, but Doncan.

Doncan stared into his eyes, so keenly that Harry had to control the impulse to turn away. He stared back instead, at this man who was, in an odd kind of way, his brother—trained in the way that Harry should have been trained, if Lily and Dumbledore had sought his consent in protecting Connor; part of the Opalline family, as Harry could be considered with Fergus’s sacrifice of blood; a guardian in a way that Harry knew he never would be, but sharing some traits with him.

Doncan nodded. What he had seen in his face, Harry didn’t know. He laid a hand on Harry’s forehead, light and cool as the touch of a spiderweb, and spoke in his hoarse voice. “Welcome to the rest of your life, little brother.”

Harry blinked, and realized the Great Hall was alive with fireworks, with more dazzling bursts of light, wilder than the controlled performance from earlier, and with torch flames that had abandoned their holders to dance in waltzes. Midnight had passed, and the new year had stalked in.

Harry didn’t know the proper, ritual response, but he managed to incline his head, his heart beating with the weight of the past year and the excitement over what was yet to come, and say, “Thank you…brother.”

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Chapter Fifty-Eight: Captio Horrifer

On the tenth day of January, 1996, Albus Dumbledore broke free of his Still-Beetle confinement.

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Rufus grinned. To most people who knew him, it would have been a frightening expression, but Percy Weasley knew him just that little bit better than the rest. Rufus wasn’t surprised when Percy grinned back at him.

“Who is it today, sir?” he asked, with fierce eagerness.

Rufus glanced back at the list of names in front of him. “His name’s Hector Dawlish,” he said. “Brother of our own Auror Dawlish. We investigated him casually when his brother’s name came up, but we didn’t find any incriminating evidence on him. With Hestia Jones singing so sweetly, of course, we know that he’s a member of the Order of the Phoenix, however much he doesn’t look like it. He’ll have to come when the summons arrives.” Rufus clamped his teeth together, well-aware of the glow in his own eyes. This was the reason that he found paperwork so exciting. The other Aurors had always thought only a chase through the field could be this grand, but Rufus had long ago become accustomed to letting his mind do the chasing, since he had a bad leg. “And if he doesn’t have anything to hide, if he’s innocent, why wouldn’t he show up to help the Ministry with its inquiries?”

Percy laughed, his teeth flashing. “Brilliant, sir.”

Rufus grinned again. The young man was turning out excellently—a prime Auror candidate. He still spent most of his time acting as an assistant to Rufus, despite the training he was undergoing. Amelia had to admit that she could think of few better trainers in procedure, paperwork, and the rule of law than Rufus, since he’d been Head of the Office. And it helped that Percy was intelligent and didn’t need much conviction on whether it was right to treat criminals just like other people. Those were the Gryffindor sensibilities shining through. What Rufus had to work on was getting him to accept that, sometimes, it was all right to bend the rules. Percy currently admired the way Rufus did it, but didn’t seem able to do it himself.

Ah, well. We’ll use that wand when its core is formed, as Grandmother Leonora liked to say. Rufus looked across his office at the portrait of his Muggleborn grandmother, who was looking at Percy. She tipped him a wink when she noticed him staring. Rufus nodded in satisfaction. They’d train him yet.

A knock on the door announced the arrival of Hector Dawlish. Rufus sat up. “Send him in, Tonks!” he called.

The door opened, but it wasn’t Hector Dawlish who came in. A flood of darkness traveled inward, rippling, a cloud of ink that might have escaped from the Department of Mysteries and the Unspeakables’ bloody experiments. Rufus opened his mouth to
shout, and then it engulfed him.

He found himself kneeling in mud, blinking away rain as it fell into his eyes. He glanced down, and realized his hands were younger—about sixteen years younger. Fear clawed up his throat in metallic bitterness.

“No,” he whispered, just as he had the first time this day happened, but nothing and no one heard him.

He had to stand, had to scramble up, had to turn. And then he could see. He was back on the mud-churned battlefield of the wizarding village of Valerian, in northern Scotland.

Correction. What had been the wizarding village of Valerian. Voldemort had utterly destroyed it, in the single most devastating strike of the war so far, killing not only the several hundred villagers but the twenty Aurors sent to protect them. Rufus had been among the second detachment, and he had arrived to find people who Apparated a few moments before him already dying.

And Valerian was hell.

Voldemort had turned the very rain into a weapon, with a spell that Rufus didn’t know and sincerely hoped he would never see again. When the water struck his fellow Aurors, it turned into silvery knives, and began flaying off their skins. Next to him was Georgina Catawampus, already a mindless thing screaming in so much pain that Rufus wanted to cut his ears off. The skin was gone from her chest and cheeks, revealing muscle slick and gleaming, threaded through bone, and breasts that dangled like sacks of rotten meat, and a skin slowly peeling down her sides like the wrapping of a Christmas present. Georgina was begging for death with those words that Rufus could still understand.

He’d Apparated in just the right place to avoid the spell, or else it was faltering thanks to the extra-strong waterproofing spells on his clothes, which Grandmother Leonora had made him. Either way, he had to venture further on foot into that place of mud and blood and rain and knives, and figure out some way to stop the Death Eaters, whom he could hear laughing like rats from a short distance away.

But he was afraid.

He forced himself a step forward.

Then a Death Eater appeared before him. Logically, Rufus knew he must have Apparated, and he just hadn’t heard the crack amid the screaming, but he shuddered all over anyway. It really did look as if the Death Eater had sprouted out of the chaos around them, with robes of flayed flesh and a mask of bone.

“You will die,” said the Death Eater in a confident, smooth voice, the voice that Rufus knew he would hear again a year later, when Lucius Malfoy widened his eyes and denied being in control of his own will for as long as he’d been a Death Eater. It was one reason Rufus was never going to trust the bastard. Imperius Curse or not, he’d stood on a battlefield with that screaming going on around him, and still been able to concentrate on fighting an enemy.

Rufus managed a shaky version of the correct head-bow that began a duel. Malfoy laughed, and then moved forward with his cloak boiling behind him. No fool, he tried a Killing Curse first, and Rufus barely managed to dodge it, limping thanks to his bad leg; he still wasn’t completely used to the wound then, and how it slowed him in battle. He still saw it in his dreams, sometimes, how close that green fire had swooped to him.

And then their duel began, the most fearsome hour of Rufus’s life. Even knowing he had survived it once, that he must be caught in a memory, did not keep him from shaking in fear.

And then his leg went out from beneath him, and he looked down the end of Lucius Malfoy’s wand, and he realized there was no guarantee that this memory would end like the real thing, not at all.

******

Lily lifted her head slowly when the darkness came hunting down the corridors of Tullianum. She thought it might be Harry, come to free her, but cloaked in night. Perhaps this was his last act before he completely became a feral Dark Lord, she thought: freeing the mother who had tried to keep him from becoming one, letting her walk in the sunlight one more time. And then she would help to lead the force opposing him.
So strong was the fantasy that she at first didn’t realize her surroundings had changed. When she did, she sat up and looked around, hopeful. Had Harry simply Apparated her out of her cell and into freedom? That would be best. Then she wouldn’t have to face him until the end, when she could look into his eyes and hear him say his last words before Albus cut him down.

Then she recognized her surroundings, and long dread and slow terror clutched at her gut like tapeworms. She was in the kitchen of Godric’s Hollow, and behind her was the glow of Christmas lights. There was soft music playing. She’d been levitating the dishes to clean them, just a moment ago. This was the Christmas when she had lost her magic. But what had brought her back here? How could she have come back here, when she knew that that time was more than two year ago?

“Mother.”

And the voice behind her was the one she feared so much that she still woke shaking from dreams of it. It was Harry’s voice, but stripped of all the compassion she had taught him. It was a simple, blank thing full of childish glee. That she had never heard it like that didn’t matter to Lily. What mattered was that someday, she could hear it like that.

And now she was.

She tried to back a step away from him, but she knew even as she moved that her magic was gone, that aching hollow feeling that she’d only got used to with a year’s passage. She could do nothing to oppose her son. She was utterly helpless.

And Harry stepped forward with his magic visible around him as a darkening of the air, full of crows and gibbering faces and impossible things, his mouth twisted in a sneer.

“I’ve already drunk Connor’s magic,” he whispered. “And James’s, and Sirius’s, and Remus’s. Why do you think I was hiding from your notice all these months? To prepare myself, Mother. To learn things that you would never have let me learn. Dark Arts are the least of what I can do.” He smiled, and the smile made Lily sink to the ground, arms over her head, screaming.

“Let me show you what I can do,” Harry continued, and he moved one arm down and to the side.

Lily jerked as he yanked her spine free of her body. She had never imagined pain like that. It spread through her, touching every nerve, making her shriek and shriek and shriek as the middle of her back went missing and the spine danced in front of her eyes, a long strip of bone ornamented with gore.

“You might be wondering why you’re still alive.” Harry’s eyes were merciless. “Because we’re just getting started, you see. And I’ve enacted spells that will make you survive much worse tortures than this. Connor, too. Would you like to see him raped by a werewolf? I think I can manage that, since Remus’s going to be turning soon.”

Lily knew this wasn’t how the memory had gone, but it didn’t seem to matter. If someone could find a way of altering the past, then Harry would. The fear ate her alive, and as Harry called for his brother, she let it. It seemed so much better than remaining sane through what was to come.

******

James woke to light of a kind he hadn’t seen in months. He blinked, and shook his head, and stumbled to his feet. He’d been dreaming a moment ago. He didn’t know what had awakened him. But if it made him stand in a street like this, with sunlight pouring over him—even if the street did seem to be in a pretty shabby part of London—he wasn’t about to object. Perhaps the Aurors had been transporting him and lost control of the Apparition in such a way that he landed alive and out of their custody. James had heard that that sometimes happened with Muggles and Squibs.

He looked around hopefully, and then caught sight of a house in front of him. It was familiar: Sirius’s home, Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. He supposed it was Regulus Black’s house now, since there was news that he’d come back from the dead, but either way, the wards were down. He could hide there. James stumbled forward, then shook himself and tried to walk confidently. He was free. He should act like it, or someone would notice and get him arrested by the Muggle authorities, even if the Ministry had lost track of him.

Heavy robes swished around his feet. James looked down, curious. He wore an Auror’s uniform. And then he realized there was a wand in his pocket, and magic burning in his body.

And he knew where he was. When he was.
His eyes rose back to the house, and he whispered, “No. I—I can’t.”

But he knew what he would find if he opened the door: Bellatrix and Rodolphus Lestrange hiding there. This was just after the attacks on his boys and the Longbottoms, the night that Voldemort fell. James, in blind rage, had chased the Lestranges through one safe place and finally worked out where they must be hiding. He’d gone in, and dueled Bellatrix, and done something, literally, Unforgivable to her.

_Held her under Crucio, his brain whispered gleefully. Did you forget? And did you forget how good it felt?_

James shuddered and buried his head in his arms. He’d had to face the Dark in himself, and he’d hated it. He’d quit the Aurors the next day and gone home to live in peace and quiet with his family—until he realized that one of his sons might carry the same Dark seed that lived within him, that same love of pain.

He could just refuse to go into the house, though. If he had this memory to live a second time, then he didn’t need to do things exactly the same. He’d refuse.

And perhaps that would change everything, James thought suddenly, his heart rising like a phoenix. Perhaps he could go home to Godric’s Hollow and pay attention to both Harry and Connor, and insure that they were raised the way they should be. He’d spoil Harry just as much as Connor, and then Harry would love him and never turn against him. He would never be a failure. He would never be arrested. He could remain in the Aurors and have the life he should have had.

But the moment he decided that, an outside force seemed to grip and move his body. James found himself walking steadily towards the house, his wand in his hand, his lips twisted in a sneer.

“No!” he screamed, his mouth twisting weirdly; it wouldn’t move out of the sneer even while he yelled the word.

The force made him march up the steps. The force made him kick the door in. The force made him duel Rodolphus, and take him out easily, and then it puppetted him through an intense fight with Bellatrix Lestrange, in which he had to leap and dodge hexes and fire them like a much younger man. But James felt old, old, filled with dread and terror that should have weighted his limbs down, and did not.

Then Bellatrix said what she did about wanting to put Harry and Connor under Crucio.

And James snapped, and struck her with the Cruciatus Curse. This time, though, when sanity had eventually returned to him in the original memory and he had let her go—though with her mind already broken, of course—he didn’t let her go. The force made him open his mouth in a laugh as he watched her writhe, and he realized that, in this new version of the past, he would torture Bellatrix Lestrange until she was dead. But that would not be for a long, long time.

This was not a dream. It was a nightmare.

And within himself, since the force that gripped him would permit no new tears to run down his cheeks, James wept.

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Albus stretched his arms and stepped out of the wreckage of his cell. It had taken him nearly two months to work up the rage necessary to break free of his confinement, and to overcome his commitment to the Light so that he could reconcile himself to using Dark Arts. But now it had been done. Albus felt a great peace welling up from the center of himself. He had accepted that he was a sacrifice, that it was not his destiny to face Harry and Tom and rid the world of them. His life was given over, instead, to using this spell, a Dark Arts one so powerful that his mentor would be unable to ignore it. It would blaze across Britain like a great fire, and draw Tom’s attention, certainly, but also that of his mentor. Tom would be cautious, unwilling to approach a sudden, unknown rival. The man Albus loved and revered would come, though he would hang about on the edges first and observe matters before diving in. It was his way.

He’d used _Capto Horrifer_.

He passed men and women writhing on the ground, or standing still with desperate faces, or screaming, as they relived their most fearsome memories. Each memory was twisted in a new way, so that they couldn’t have the comfort of knowing they would live through it again. In some cases, the memory would simply form new mental scars. In others, if the spell lasted long enough and
the memory was intense enough, the victim would die.

Albus knew some people would probably perish in the Ministry before the day was through—the old witches and wizards whose hearts had labored long, those whose most fearsome experiences had taken them close to death, those who lost control of their sanity in the midst of the memory and committed suicide rather than continue to face the endless creative horrors of the spell. That was all right. He accepted it. Better some sacrifices than all of them dead before Harry or Tom’s will. And he regretted those of his own followers caught in the maelstrom, because they happened to be located in the Ministry, but there was no way to spare them. *Capto Horrifer* was limited by the walls of a building. It had to be cast on everyone in the Ministry or no one at all.

He paused, though, when he’d worked his way out of Tullianum and was standing in a hall filled with writhing and crying Ministry employees. It wasn’t true that he could do nothing but wait for his mentor to arrive. After all, he’d accounted for him and for Tom, but there was one more person who would sense an explosion of Dark magic this intense and probably try to interfere. *Harry.*

If Albus gave him time, he’d arrive with Severus at his back, or possibly Severus and Minerva, and Albus had no doubt he’d arrive prepared. *Capto Horrifer* had a distinct feel to it, especially across distances and with as much power as he’d put behind it. The moment Harry described it, Severus would know what spell it was, and he could give Harry a potion that would guard his mind against it. There was a possibility that Harry might stop him before the spell could penetrate the deep walls guarding his mentor’s mind and bring him back.

For that matter, Minerva, bound as she was to the wards of Hogwarts and the Founders’ spirits now, might sense him.

That could not be allowed to happen.

Closing his eyes, Albus reached for bonds in the center of himself that he’d let lie for a long time. Once he’d worked the initial spell to establish that web, the best thing was to leave it alone. He’d wanted it intact, of course, and then he’d had some notion of using it as a bargaining chip when they arrested him. But the Still-Beetle confinement, and the fact that only Hestia Jones came to talk to him when he was free, didn’t allow him to tell anyone.

Inside him lay a web connected with the wards of Hogwarts. He’d tied some of them to a statue deep in Hogwarts’s tunnels, but Minerva could have found and destroyed that. He’d also, unknown even to Godric, looped some threads around his own magical core. If worst came to worst, he would destroy Hogwarts and the secrets and treasures inside her before he allowed Tom to take her.

Now, he didn’t see the need to do that. And he couldn’t use the Light portion of the spell that would have made him kill himself for the good of others anyway.

But he could and did send Dark Arts flowing down the web, poisoning it, making it collapse, and causing Hogwarts’s wards to start to unravel.

*There. That should give Minerva something to think about.*

And as for Harry…

Albus didn’t have his wand. He didn’t need it. He was as competent with wandless magic as Tom or Harry, but he’d seen fit to hide that. He thought even Severus, more observant than most of them, believed that he mostly used his wand and his compulsion gift, and forgot the immense reserves of his power sleeping below. But Albus was a Lord, as strong as a Lord, stronger than Harry was. He’d never figured out quite how he matched up against Tom, but then, they’d never fought directly long enough for him to do so.

Now, he reached out, and when he spoke, his voice was strong and firm and carried all his will. “*Accio Harry Potter!*”

******

It was…strange, coming back to the world. He’d gone wandering in his own mind five decades before, rejoicing in the secrets of Light and Dark without fading into either one of them. So long as he stayed wrapped in his own preservation spells, and made both Light and Dark think they might be able to claim him as a Lord, he’d stayed alive. He was nearly six hundred years old now, and had pretended to die multiple times. Strange, that.
Everything was strange in the first moments he was back in his body, though. He stretched stiff limbs, and massaged his left arm. Then he stilled and turned his head to the south.

There was an explosion of Dark magic swirling there, and it had Albus’s distinctive touch. He felt himself catch his breath. What could have happened to make Albus choose Dark Arts? His commitment to the Light had been complete—a good thing, given the compulsion gift he carried. And it had been satisfying, too, to know that a Light Lord was emerging into a world shortly to have two Dark Lords in a row. Life was about balance. So he had always claimed, and so he had deliberately retained the ability to pass between poles, never quite Declaring. He had to be able to dance in order to balance the wizarding world, in order to give it stability and the unchanging equilibrium it so badly needed after the centuries of chaos it had endured. He’d been glad to hand that task on to Albus and retreat into his own mind and the Strange Paths, but he’d known it couldn’t be forever.

It had to be a sacrifice. Albus had encountered something he couldn’t handle, and called on his old mentor to handle it instead.

Falco Parkinson nodded, and slipped into his sea eagle form, and rose, wings cutting the air strongly as he remembered how to fly, speeding south. It seemed that it was his duty to save magic from itself, again.

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Harry frowned and bent over the book. Now that he had some leisure to study the Durmstrang problem again, he thought he was on to something. This book, which was about life debts, argued that any kind of powerful bond between strong wizards, even one of hatred, could let someone pass through a lightning ward. Harry hated Bellatrix Lestrange enough that he had to wonder if this would work after all.

Now if the book would only give him some details on how to do it, instead of just claiming it was possible!

The world around him blurred and began to swing. Harry lifted his head, startled. Then he found himself looking at the far wall of the library, as if a string were extended from it that controlled his movements.

*Merlin.*

Somewhere far to the south, Dark magic was burning. A greasy film slid along his skin. Harry shivered in fear and disgust. This wasn’t quite like the Unforgivable Curses, but nearly as bad. He shoved his chair back, ignoring Madam Pince’s squawk, and began to run. He had to find someone who could tell him what that spell was. Acies or Snape would be the best choice.

It had to be Voldemort who was using that much Dark magic, and that meant he’d made a major strike. Harry felt his mouth thin. He still hadn’t managed to sever his mental connection with Draco completely, but he’d come close in their last practice session; just as Draco could feel the boundaries of his mind and Harry’s body, Harry could feel the boundaries of their separate selves. If he collected only the bits of himself that were himself on the next jump into Voldemort’s mind, he should go alone. And then he could learn when the fuck Tom was planning things like this.

He came out of the library and paused, for a moment, his mind glittering like the crystal it had become on his way to the battle on the beach. Where would Acies be? No telling, since she didn’t have a class right now. Where would Snape be? Teaching one of the fourth-year Potions classes. Harry nodded and turned. The dungeons were fairly far away, but it was better to seek someone whose location he knew than waste time in fruitless hunting. Time was already wasting.

He got exactly three strides down the hall, and then Hogwarts’s wards gave a little sigh and melted.

Harry froze, his heart hammering. *He’s here.*

Voldemort must have coordinated simultaneous strikes on whatever target in the south he’d chosen—the Ministry, most likely—and the school. Somehow, he’d undone the wards, and now he could come into Hogwarts and hurt defenseless children, if he chose to. And of course he would choose to.

Harry’s mind became extraordinarily clear. He was ready to die, if that was what it took. He turned to find a window, so he could see how many Death Eaters Voldemort had come with, or if it was only the Dark Lord himself, hoping to get inside the school before anyone could notice him. Harry had noticed him, though.

He began to call up his magic as he had only called it up once before, the night that he battled the Tom Riddle of the diary, possessing him in his head.
And a great, Portkey-like pulling hooked into his navel and jerked him away. Harry had the feeling of trees and countryside and villages skimming past, and then he landed in a corridor thick with the greasy feeling of the Dark spell. He barely caught himself with his hand before he went spinning into a wall.

*Good plan, Tom, you bastard*, Harry thought in cold admiration as he balanced. *Don’t know how you did it, but moving me to the site where you’ve already got followers and away from Hogwarts itself was a wonderful idea. Too bad it won’t work, since I’m just going to Apparate back, and to hell with all the Ministry wards I’ll tear along the way.*

He was tensing to do so when darkness ate him alive.

Harry blinked and tried to stand up. Then he realized he couldn’t. He was flat on his back on a reddish-black block of stone, and Voldemort stood before him, laughing, and Bellatrix Lestrange was approaching with a knife, and overhead hung the looming dusk and living warmth of Midsummer.

And he had two hands.

*Some kind of memory spell*, Harry thought, forcing his brain to think, to move, wielding Lily’s training like thorns to sting himself into flight. *That’s all it is. What happens to me here isn’t real. And I know what’s going to happen, don’t I? I relived this on New Year’s night, though not, I have to admit, in this position. I survived it once, so I can survive it again.*

His first indication that something was wrong came when Bellatrix knelt and roughly grabbed his right hand instead of his left. She gave him a grotesque smile, and whispered, “Wonder, baby, what you’ll look like with both your hands and both your feet gone? So cute. So cute.”

Harry heard himself scream, a cry that seemed to empty his brain and his lungs both at once. Voldemort moved in front of him and cast the *Crucio*, and then his scar began to burn, and Bellatrix’s knife was descending on his right wrist, and Harry was panting and thrashing and screaming hoarsely, and he wanted to die or disappear or run or lose his mind or—

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Albus shook his head sadly as he watched Harry writhe. He knew exactly what memory the boy would be reliving, and he was sorry for it. But Harry would survive this. He was too young and too strong to commit suicide or have his heart give out under the fear. Albus would do his part in weakening him, though, so that Falco could have an easier task of it when he returned.

Harry’s magic, bucking fiercely, nearly shook off the *Capto Horrifer*. Albus clucked his tongue and pressed down with his stronger power. That wouldn’t do, if the boy woke up before Albus was ready or Falco was here. Then he would probably strike back at the author of his torments without pausing to see who it was. That wasn’t part of the plan.

Albus paused when he’d contained Harry in the memory again. Someone else could still come after Harry, couldn’t they? They might not know he was missing yet, but they could find out, and possibly cast spells that would tell them where he’d gone. He had to prevent that, too.

He wove wards around the Ministry, his own, Dark defensive spell piled on Dark defensive spell. Many of them were wards the Death Eaters had once used to protect their own homes from Auror raids. Albus was sure they could appreciate the irony, if they ever noticed it.

Then he sat back and watched Harry scream, and was content.

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Draco slipped into the library. Harry thought he didn’t know that he’d been studying ways to get rid of the lightning ward again. Harry was wrong, and, sometimes, dense. Draco knew, and he planned to surprise him in the library and haul Harry outside to get some fresh air. The Slytherin-Ravenclaw Quidditch match wasn’t that far away. Draco wanted to see Harry flying and laughing and practicing his Seeker skills.

*All right, maybe I just want to see him laughing. Besides, it’s a nice distraction from Father’s latest letter.*

He found Madam Pince screeching over a book at the table Harry usually studied at, and frowned. Normally, he would have beat
a hasty retreat so the librarian wouldn’t accost him, but she was near Harry’s table. “Madam Pince?” he ventured.

Madam Pince spun around, and apparently found him a convenient audience to rant at. “You tell your friend Harry that he’s not allowed in here again, never! Not if he’s going to fling books down and dash out of the room! Not if he won’t treat my babies with the care they deserve!” She wrapped her arms around the book as if it really were a baby and rocked it. Draco couldn’t see much of the title, but he did make out Bonds.

He swallowed. That didn’t sound good. If Harry had found something useful in the book and dashed away, he might be on his way to Durmstrang right now to see if he could break through the lightning ward.

“I’ll tell him, Madam Pince,” he said, and then ran out of the library, touching the golden bracelet that had been Harry’s Christmas present to him with his left hand. “How is he?” he whispered.

Into his head spoke a cool voice that sounded disconcertingly like Hermione Granger’s. Suffering. Tortured. In intense mental and physical pain.

“Fuck!” Draco didn’t realize he’d said that aloud until a Hufflepuff prefect, passing him in the hall, gave him a scandalized look. Draco sneered at her and curved his right hand back to touch the bracelet. “Take me to him.”

He felt a deep surge of magic that seemed to rise from beneath his feet, as if a fountain would spring up and carry him there. For a moment, the world turned into blurs of color and motion, and then stopped. Draco blinked at nothing. He wondered why the bracelet could possibly have failed.

Then Harry’s words came back to him: the bracelet couldn’t take him to Harry’s side through powerful wards. And, of course, if he’d gone to Durmstrang and made a mistake that got him Crucio’d under Bellatrix Lestrange’s wand, the lightning ward was probably still up.

Draco’s mind galloped in circles for a moment. Then he headed for the Slytherin dungeons, so fast that he knew several professors would yell at him for running in the halls. He didn’t give a damn. There was one more thing that might work, and even that was chancy.

And if it didn’t work—

He just wasn’t going to think about that, was all. He was more frantic than he’d been in the graveyard when he had to possess Yaxley. Then, he’d been able to see Harry right in front of him, and know what had to be done. This time, he had no idea what was happening, and no idea what he should do when he got where he was going. He only knew he had to go.

He flung himself through the door of the Slytherin common room, lunged up the stairs, sent the door of their bedroom banging off the wall and into himself with the push he gave it, and suppressed a furious howl as he fell to his knees beside his trunk and began to dig through it. Ceremonial dagger, dragon carving, Potions book, no no no—

There it was. Draco’s hands shook as he uncovered the coin that his mother had given to him for Christmas. It looked like a Sickle, if a Sickle had the Black crest on one side and Cousin Arcturus’s head on the other. His mother had pressed it into his hand when he gave her a questioning look, and explained the use of it—that it would grant him one wish and one wish only, if it came down on the side he’d called while it was in flight. Draco had been awed, and promised to keep it safe and only use it when he had true need.

Now, he did.

Trying not to think of what would happen if the coin didn’t come down on the side he called, he tossed it into the air. For a moment, his mind blanked on what side he should call, but then he remembered what Narcissa said had come up when his mother had taken Aunt Bella’s hand, and he shouted, “Heads!”

The coin came down. Roll, roll, roll—and it collapsed, showing his cousin’s head uppermost. Draco wanted to shut his eyes in relief, but he kept them open long enough to see the black sparkle that told him the coin was ready.

Draco nodded. “Send me to Harry’s side,” he commanded, “and let me be prepared to help him when I get there.”
Black forks of lightning struck from the coin, grabbed him, and shot towards the opposite wall. Draco felt his substance sucked and pulled out of him as if he were a spider and the lightning a wasp, and then he was sent.

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Chapter Fifty-Nine: First Time, First Choice

Draco landed on stone, which told him this was probably Durmstrang, and rolled over, springing back to his feet, where a single glance told him that, no, this was not Durmstrang.

He stood in the middle of a corridor filled with wizards and witches clad in robes with plebian designs on them, their eyes fixed on nothing and their voices moaning or crying for help. And in front of him lay Harry, his voice uttering screams that made Draco twitch, and his eyes shut hard enough that almost no tears leaked out from beneath the lids, and in front of him stood Dumbledore, lifting his head to regard Draco with slow surprise.

Draco felt a surge of terror try to take him. In another life, he might have knelt shivering on the floor, unable to do anything. But rage ate the terror. As long as he was acting Gryffindorish, Draco supposed, then he might as well be hideously angry at the powerful wizard hurting the boy he loved.

“What spell did you use on him?” he demanded.

Dumbledore smiled. It was the kind of smile Draco had seen the Headmaster give in the morning across the staff table, when he was benevolently observing his contained little world of Hogwarts and seeing nothing wrong with it. “You’re about to find out,” he said, and nodded over Draco’s shoulder.

Draco turned to look. Darkness came at him, whirling like the central funnel cloud of a great storm.

But, when it touched him, it shredded into black ribbons and fell to the floor. Draco blinked and turned back to Dumbledore.

I did say that I wanted to arrive prepared to help Harry, he thought. The coin probably protected me from the effects of this spell, whatever it is—no, wait, I know what it is. Reading the books on Dark Arts that his father had suggested he study over the past few summers had come in handy after all. This would be Capto Horrifer.

And that would explain why Harry was on his back, too. The spell caused the victims to relive their most fearsome memories, but twisted them into a new abundance of horrors, so that the victims couldn’t simply count on surviving the way they had the first time. Harry must be dreaming of that moment in the graveyard when Bellatrix had taken his hand.

Draco’s rage blasted away his surprise and his rationality again. He could sense Dumbledore getting past his own surprise, probably preparing another spell to attack Draco and hold him there, or perhaps torture him, or perhaps kill him.

He didn’t hesitate to think whether this was a good idea. It was the only one which might work, so he did it. He fixed his eyes on Dumbledore’s and jumped, out of his mind and into the former Headmaster’s, wondering dimly as he flew why it felt as if the air had turned heavy and surging, filled with thunder as well as the greasy film of this particular spell.

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Albus had been surprised by the arrival of the Malfoy boy, but there were Dark artifacts that could have permitted the boy to pass his wards. At least there seemed to be no rescuers coming after him, and once the Capto Horrifer spell failed, he knew something stronger would be needed. He started to prepare a binding curse that would make Draco see what Harry was seeing and suffer, helpless as a ghost in his memory-world, even if Albus could not bind him into his own thoughts.

Then his head rocked on his neck, and someone struck his mind a powerful blow. Albus slid down a long, dark tunnel, scrabbling frantically for control. It didn’t come to him. He was falling faster and faster, into some quiet corner of his thoughts where he would be able to watch but do nothing to control his body.

No. Somehow, the boy had acquired the power to possess other wizards, which Albus wished he had known before now, but he had faced this before. Tom had tried to possess him more than once. Albus was a master Leglimens, and he knew his own mind too well to permit someone to intrude for long.
And there was no way that Draco Malfoy could be more powerful and experienced than Tom Riddle.

Albus imagined a tunnel opening in his mind, taking him to the side instead of down as the boy envisioned, while at the same time using a whisper of Legilimency to make it look as if he had been sufficiently startled to fall all the way. Draco was satisfied, and turned his body, making it step forward and kneel beside Harry. One hand reached out and stroked Harry’s forehead. Draco said soothing words in Albus’s voice which Albus didn’t let himself listen to. They would only distract him at this juncture.

He had thrown Tom off with an attack from behind and below, clad in Legilimency that continued to make it look as if he cowered in the background and didn’t know what to do. He employed the same technique with this boy, swimming undetectably as he gathered his magic, focusing on the incantation that he wanted to use. It would be best if he killed Draco Malfoy the moment he threw him out of his mind, so that he would not continue to be a nuisance.

He thought he could do it. Draco Malfoy was not Harry Potter, any more than he was Tom Riddle. Albus had been cautious about pushing Harry too much; threaten to kill him, and his magic might rally and defend him, to the point of slaying Albus before he could be sure that his mentor had seen his signal. Trapping him in his mind was the best way to both weaken him and make sure the Capto Horrifer burned until Falco arrived. The spell would end when Albus died—and he fully expected his mentor to kill him, but by then, the magic would have served its purpose.

Draco Malfoy, though, was not a Lord-level wizard, nor a Legilimens. Albus sharpened all his thoughts, bearing down on a certain spell, a Dark Arts one he had studied but never cast. That was not going to matter, though, not with his will and not with the strength of his magic.

Diduco mentem. It would divide and scatter Malfoy’s thoughts to the point where he could never draw them back together; fragments and sparks of himself would wander into corners of the Ministry and the wizarding world. It had to be cast when the victim’s mind was out of his body, tumbling helplessly through the air, and thus it wasn’t often used. Albus thought it would be perfect for the moment before Malfoy managed to recover from the shock of the attack.

He waited a moment more, to be sure that Malfoy was engaged in fumbling for his magic, trying to figure out how to use it to perform a wandless Finite Incantatem on Harry.

Then he struck.

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Draco felt a shock wave travel up to him and try to bear him out of Dumbledore’s body. It had edges, and it had strength, and he knew it could cut him up or crush him if he stayed. The overwhelming impulse was to flee the foreign mind and go back to his own body.

But if he did that, then Dumbledore might kill him, or Harry.

Draco didn’t want that to happen.

He instead turned and leaped as the shock wave of magic came at him, possessing it as, a moment ago, he had possessed the whole of Dumbledore’s mind. He felt wrenched out of all proportions. Of course, he had no body now, and it had always been the body that he and Harry practiced with, and which he’d learned to wield like a weapon. Draco felt strange sensations crowding in on him, the reports of strange senses, and knew that trying to interpret them all would drive him mad.

And then he’d either die, or fade away, or return to his body and be helpless.

He forced himself to ignore all the oddities that being a piece of magic was giving him. He concentrated on only two things: the image of Harry screaming in pain at Dumbledore’s hand, and one of the training exercises that his father had taught him long ago, when he was learning to control his accidental magic and move to a practice wand.

Can you envision the wand core? It will be dragon heartstring, or phoenix feather, or unicorn hair, because those are the cores from which Ollivander makes all his wands, and a Malfoy buys only from an Ollivander. Now, ignore the dissimilarities between the cores. What matters is that they are all long and thin. Your magic runs up them, constrained, narrow, and then spreads out of the end of the wand like a blade of sunshine. That is the image you must learn to master, Draco. Your accidental magic is too wide at the moment. It must be focused.
Draco had learned to focus; he’d managed his first spells with a practice wand while he was still very young. He fell easily into the old visualizations now. The piece of Dumbledore’s magic he’d snatched wasn’t a wand core, but the same principle applied. Draco compressed it firmly, and let his own magic pass through it like a narrow beam of sunshine, which widened when it had the room to spread.

He didn’t know exactly what he’d done, but he knew, as if he had ears attuned only for this, that Dumbledore was in pain. He turned and sent the narrow beam of his own magic through the magic he’d possessed again, and this time felt whatever spell or trap Dumbledore had prepared tremble and shatter like ice.

Now he had to move quickly, because Dumbledore might try something back in the world of bodies. The quickest, the cleverest, the most imaginative wizard was the one who most often won on a battlefield, both his parents and Professor Snape had taught him, rather than the most powerful, because power didn’t mean anything if you didn’t know where to send it or what to do with it. Lashing out with accidental magic and hoping to hit something was so much less elegant than aiming a wand, chanting a spell, and having it do exactly what you wanted it to do.

Draco aimed himself. He forced and focused all his will onto one target: Harry free from the spell Dumbledore had cast and back in possession of his sanity. He remembered what he knew about inventing spells. Will was important, and need, but if he could give it an incantation to focus it, that was wonderful; raw, new magic responded best to incantations, following the example of countless other spells as they came into existence.

“Exsuscitatio!” he cried—if not aloud, then somewhere in his mind. He certainly seemed to hear the word, blowing past his ears on wings of fire. “Exsuscitatio iterum! Exsuscitatio iterum atque iterum!”

Awaken! he thought, flinging the words through the narrow core of his will, towards the vision at the end of his wand. Awaken a second time! Awaken again and again!

The words coiled through him like a tearing fire, or like a filament spun from his very being, pulling so much material from him that Draco wondered irrelevantly if this was what it felt like when a woman gave birth: the pulling and parting of her own flesh, the sudden separation of what had been a smaller piece of her. Then he lost all considerations of such things as his thoughts fell away from him, and he blended into pure white fire. There was a moment when he knew nothing but what he was doing. Awaken, act, rise, be awake--

The next moment, Dumbledore threw him out of his head.

Draco came back to himself in mid-tumble. He slammed into his body at the next moment, and if Dumbledore had flung a spell at him to try and kill him, it missed altogether. He bent over, his breath rasping in his throat, burning as if he had been breathing air thick with ice. He noticed the odd, thundering feeling around him again, but he still didn’t know what it was, and he barely cared. Creating that spell on the fly had taken nearly everything out of him. He started to sag forward.

A hand caught him. Draco looked up. His heart bounded, and he found a new strength and cared again, as he realized that he had landed near Harry’s head, and Harry was sitting up, his hand on Draco’s arm to prevent him from falling. His eyes were fixed on Draco’s face, solemn and wide-awake again.

Then dark snakes lashed into being around him, and the walls of the corridor turned to ice.

Harry turned to face Dumbledore. Draco stepped up, grinning, ready to help any way he could, and to enjoy the fun.

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Harry heard the voice as a distant cry on the horizon at first. Bellatrix had removed his right hand and right foot, and was moving to start on his left foot. Her hoarse laughter never varied. Neither did the burning scarlet gaze fixed on him, and of course Harry had no way into unconsciousness to escape the pain.

Nevertheless, the voice was there, repeating, in Latin, “Awaken a second time!”

Harry blinked as the poison-colored sky of his hell began to burn. White flame was consuming it, bit by bit. Neither Voldemort nor Bellatrix appeared to notice, but Harry didn’t care if they noticed or not. He wanted to escape, and he was beginning to think, for the first time since the horror had taken him, that perhaps this was not real, after all.
The voice soared again, triumphant as a diving falcon. “Exsuscita iterum atque iterum!”

The sky tore apart as if it were sliced by the dive of a falcon itself. Light poured in from every corner, and Harry remembered that this had happened once, and no matter what the pain, he had lived through it the once and had no reason to live through it again. He was not guilty of a crime that horrible. He was not ashamed of what he was, to think he had to return to the last days before his parents and Dumbledore were arrested and make things right again. And he was not that weak-minded, to think that he somehow deserved this.

The mental chains holding the horror in place slipped. Harry sprang upward as if he had wings, and then he was back in his body, and he knew the voice that had called him for Draco’s.

He turned just in time to keep Draco from falling to the floor, and hoped that his eyes said all the things he didn’t have the breath or the time to speak right now. Draco smiled as if he had heard them, and then moved to stand behind him as Harry felt his anger ride the air. Cold and snakes, he thought, the ways he always got angry.

And he was angry, but there was something more to it, this time. He recognized the thunderous feeling in the air, the shifting and stirring of power, though he didn’t know what it meant. It said a prophecy was in motion, and from the spell Dumbledore had used and the way that Draco was standing at his right shoulder, Harry suspected he knew which one it was.

But that’s impossible, his mind tried to chatter at him, distracting him. That would mean that the prophecy talked about Dumbledore and not Voldemort, and that’s simply fucking impossible—

Harry shut the voice away. He had a Dark Lord to deal with, and the spell he could see the people in the corridor under, the same one that had enslaved him, had stripped away his every impulse to mercy. He meant to kill Dumbledore, now.

He moved a single step forward, noticing that Dumbledore had come back to his feet and was watching him calmly. At least, most people would have thought he was calm. His eyes had none of their usual twinkle, and they moved in more than one direction, instead of staying focused solely on Harry’s face. He was frightened, Harry knew. Good. He should be.

He eased another step forward, Draco right behind him, a hand resting on his right shoulder now, and Dumbledore broke the silence.

“There is no need to settle this with violence, Harry,” said Dumbledore, in a soft, pleasant voice that Harry just barely remembered from his childhood, when he’d used it to reinforce the lessons that Lily taught him. “We are both powerful wizards. We are both doing what we do for the good of the world. Why should we not form an alliance? I will speak for the rights of witches and wizards, and you can speak for the rights of magical creatures.”

“I don’t trust you,” said Harry. He had never felt like this before. The whole world was crystalline, and forgiveness had no place in it. He saw a road leading him straight to Dumbledore, and at the end of that road was death. “Never again.” He reached down into his magic, gathering it the way he had when he thought Voldemort had come to Hogwarts. The snakes and the ice vanished; Harry didn’t have the strength to waste in frivolous displays of his anger. His magic began churning around him, not wild, but cold and calm and deep, a spreading maelstrom. Harry fixed his gaze on Dumbledore and waited to see how he would respond to that. Did he recognize the feeling of prophecy in the air?

“I can feel the thoughts of your parents, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “Did you know that you are the central figure in your mother’s nightmares?”

“I’m not surprised.” Harry was pulling up strength that he didn’t know he had, until the heavy feeling of his magic was barely distinguishable from the feeling of prophecy in the air.

“But don’t you care about it?” Dumbledore twinkled at him now, but it was as false as the shine off leprechaun gold. “You could still change her mind, Harry. Go to her and show her how great and noble you truly are. We could heal her mind, together.”

“I don’t care about my parents anymore,” Harry told him, and heard his voice come out as calm and flat as a glacier. He’d taken his magic away from the semi-permanent Levitation Charm around him; he wasn’t likely to need it right now. Spread and spread and spread, and his magic had overwhelmed the feeling of prophecy. Harry nodded. He was nearly there. He’d nearly gathered enough strength to do what he wanted to do.
Dumbledore sighed. "I hoped I would not have to do this, Harry. I hoped even now you would see that the good of the wizarding world is little served by making me into your enemy. There is still Tom to fight."

"Both of you are my enemies," said Harry, and envisioned a smooth, icy, bottomless pit.

Dumbledore attacked.

Harry had expected it. The attack overwhelmed him, throwing him back into Draco, and he’d also expected that. Dumbledore was stronger than he was, after all. Where Harry’s power could feel like boulders falling from a ceiling, Dumbledore’s could feel like the whole Ministry coming down on their heads.

That didn’t matter, not when Harry’s magic seized it and funneled it straight past Harry, swallowing it harmlessly. This was not the snake Harry had used to constrain his gift at other points in the past. Instead, he was opening the pit he’d envisioned wider than the snake’s mouth could ever go, and he wanted to drain all of Dumbledore’s magic, not just the small amount he’d spend in attacking an enemy.

It was working. His power absorbed his enemy’s power into itself, and it didn’t touch him or Draco. Harry held Dumbledore’s eyes, totally without pity, and waited for him to catch on.

Dumbledore’s eyes widened, and then he launched such an avalanche of magic that Harry staggered, falling to one knee. But still he went on draining, his goal clear in his mind: Dumbledore a Muggle or a Squib, the way that Harry had never willingly made anyone but Lily.

The avalanche tumbled past him and into the icy pit, too.

Dumbledore’s eyes narrowed. Harry felt him gather himself, reaching for old and familiar weapons, calling them, readying them, pointing them straight at his enemy. Harry raised his head and waited. He’d had a dim idea of what would happen from the moment he felt the prophecy in motion, and if he was right, then he could resist the attack.

If he was right.

But then, if he wasn’t, no one else had a chance of facing Dumbledore, either, so he would succumb knowing he’d done the best he could.

The compulsion sank home into his mind like a knife, and it was simpler than Harry had thought it would be.

"Be what we trained you to be," Dumbledore whispered to him. "Be what you were for the ten years before you came to Hogwarts."

Harry felt his own mind surrounding the compulsion, aiding it in its persuasion. After all, wasn’t that what he wanted? To be the obedient trained little puppet that Lily would have made him, safe to lurk in the background and lead no wars? In the shadows, he was responsible for no one but his brother. He didn’t have to make hard decisions. It was not part of a war effort against him when Voldemort and Bellatrix took Durmstrang, but of the effort against his brother and the side of the Light. He hadn’t needed to question; other people told him what to do and he did it. And other people didn’t bother with trying to know or love him. It had been a shadowy paradise, the one he’d instinctively sought when Voldemort’s curse had trapped him in his own mind on the day of the autumn equinox, the one his Complete Vanishing spell had mimicked when he’d known he might destroy Margaret in his anger.

Harry swayed. The compulsion could overbear him, not because Dumbledore was still that strong magically, but because it had assistance from his training and his own desires. Why not surrender? The compulsion made it sound so tempting, and once he was under it, Harry wouldn’t know the difference between being forced to choose it and choosing it, anyway. He could have everything he wanted with just a bit of effort.

Everything would be so simple.

And Harry lowered his head and pushed back. Because nothing was simple, nothing was easy, and he knew that.

The knowledge had been bred in his bones and blood from the time he’d learned about the phoenix web—no, maybe from the time he’d begun to accept himself as part of Slytherin House—no, maybe from the time he realized that, no matter what he did,
Draco was his friend. The moment the training had come in contact with the real world outside the isolation wards of Godric’s Hollow, it had shattered. He was not that fragile, and he had grown around it and survived and lived and thrived, and he had made hard decisions, and no matter what he tried to think, these obligations would never release him, because those who wanted the power to change the world had to be prepared to bear the costs of changing the world.

He pushed and he pushed and he pushed, and he willed the compulsion to break, and it did, shattering into small flying shards.

Harry shook his head and stood. Yes, the prophecy had been right. He did have a kind of power the Dark Lord knew not. Dumbledore had never understood free will. He understood webs, and compulsion, and manipulation, but he did not understand the free choice to do something. He still thought, even now, that he could press a single button, tug a single string, and Harry would go back under control.

Harry felt his first coloring of pity for the man since this had begun, staining the clear dome of his anger, but he kept right on pulling Dumbledore’s magic down into his pit. He did it with his eyes fastened on Dumbledore’s, though that meant he had to see what happened to his face as he made him into a Squib, because Dumbledore deserved a witness to his agony, and Harry had chosen to be that witness. He felt the hand on his right shoulder clasp tight, and suspected that Draco was watching, as well, though perhaps more with vindictive glee than pity or anger or love.

Yes, love. I see now that I can’t just love everyone without distinction and expect it to work out. Snape told me, but I didn’t listen to him. Loving people so much that I hesitate to punish them can mean they escape to wreak harm on others that I love. How many people in the Ministry are suffering under Dumbledore’s spell right now? How many wouldn’t have had to suffer if I’d agreed to punishment for him long ago, when whatever happened to change his mind about Dark Arts hadn’t happened?

It was a regret, but Harry didn’t think he felt guilt. He saw, now. He saw what needed to happen, and he was prepared to do it.

At the same time, he saw what he was doing, what kind of step he was choosing, sacrificing one life for the good of others. His mouth tightened. It was no wonder that Vera, and Snape, and others, had said that he needed to see himself clearly. It wasn’t just so that he could be vates. It was so that he didn’t end up like Dumbledore. He had reacted violently against his own impulse to compel Connor at the trial, but that had been a conscious and aberrant thought. What would happen if he slipped into making other people do things unconsciously? He might never notice. And the people who loved and followed him might never notice, either. And if an enemy rose against him, would he treat him like Dumbledore had treated both Voldemort and Harry?

Not that Voldemort is right. But it’s not as simple as right and wrong. It never was. I told Lily once that neither Dumbledore nor Voldemort had learned that lesson, and Dumbledore really hasn’t. He must have thought that inflicting mental torture on the people around him was right, because he was the one doing it. He would never have done it just to rejoice in their pain.

So more compassion crept into his mind, but that didn’t mean that it crept into his method of dealing with Dumbledore. Harry kept draining him. He knew what it meant, where it was going, and he accepted it.

Draco’s hand tightened on his shoulder, and Harry leaned his head back towards him without glancing away from Dumbledore. “What is it, Draco?”

“I—aren’t you finished yet?” Draco whispered. “Surely you must have taken all his magic by now. He just looks like an old man.”

Harry nodded. He did. Dumbledore’s robes didn’t shine the way they had when he was Headmaster of Hogwarts, but hung limply on him. He no longer looked intimidating. His eyes wandered, and his breath came slow, and his hands were palsied. If Harry could have believed that Dumbledore would give up now that he had no more active magic, he would have stopped there.

But Dumbledore managed to look up and focus his eyes. Harry saw that steely spark of determination, that conviction of his own righteousness, and shook his head.

“What is it?” Draco asked, sounding confused. “Yes or no?”

“He still has passive magic,” Harry murmured, “the kind of thing that lets wizards live longer than most Muggles. He’ll find a way to use that, Draco, if I leave it to him. I can’t.”

“But if you take it—“ said Draco, and fell silent.
“Yes,” agreed Harry.

Draco looped his arms around his waist then, and Harry reached out.

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Albus could feel himself shaking. It both came and did not come from the fact that most of his magic was gone now. It came mostly from the doom that clanged in his mind like a knell.

He had felt the prophecy in the air, but dismissed it. Sybill could have made another prophecy while he was in prison, and of course he wouldn’t have heard of it. That was probably the prophecy that was coming true now. None of the other prophecies fit this particular situation.

And then he’d realized that Malfoy was standing at Harry’s right shoulder, and that Malfoy was older than Harry.

No.

That was the first tone of the bell in his mind, the first toll that indicated he might have been wrong. Albus wanted to step away, but his eyes were on Harry’s as the boy drained his magic, and he found that he couldn’t move unless Harry did. Wide and green and utterly merciless, those eyes looked at him, and they pinned him more effectively than any compulsion.

The prophecy surged and sang like foam on a shore as his magic drained away. The great force that guided the future was happy, as if Albus’s loss of his magic, his defeat, could actually help a Seer’s vision come true.

It does.

The second tone of doom, and Albus shuddered. He could hardly bear to think what this meant. He was not a Dark Lord. He could not be a Dark Lord. He had always served the Light, even when it took his magic. He’d never Declared for the Dark. How could he be what Tom was, enough that he’d taken his place in the prophecy?

But even more, how could the prophecy be wrong? Albus had based and built his actions for the last fifteen years around that version of the future. He’d known that they’d have to sacrifice Lily’s boys from the time they were born at the end of July. He’d accepted that it meant the sacrifice of Peter, and the suppression of Harry’s magic, and the absolute firm grip they’d gained—thought they’d gained—over the boy’s mind. Someone born as the seventh month died, the younger of two, having the power the Dark Lord knew not—

Then Albus felt his heart swell. No, this couldn’t be the prophecy coming true, could it? It couldn’t! He hadn’t given Connor his heart-shaped scar, and he hadn’t inflicted a curse scar on Harry like Tom had. Besides, he was stronger than Harry, not equal to him in power. There was no way the prophecy could be talking about him.

Yes, it could.

The third sound of the bell rang through him, and Albus shuddered, as he remembered that Tom was also stronger than Harry, and perhaps “marking him as his equal” didn’t mean what they’d all thought, and neither did “marking his heart.” There was the phoenix web Albus had cast. That had marked Harry’s mind, and he had certainly done it out of fear of Harry’s magic, out of fear of what Harry would do and become when he grew up, just the way that Tom had ended up marking Harry’s forehead out of fear of what the boy might do to oppose him when he grew up—

See how right this is? the bell of doom asked him.

Albus screamed. There seemed to be no air left in his lungs to make the sound, but he made it inside his head, and that was more than enough. The sound of his mistake was everywhere around him, ringing through his bones, making them crumble, making them tear and part and shred, his skin crumple and fall in on him, his heart labor and stop, as he realized that he’d been wrong, wrong—wrong! sang the bell—and created a waste and a mess in trying to fulfill a prophecy that had always been meant to claim him, that had descended on the one who had tried to save it like some great beast, that had recoiled on the hand that meant to wield it like an ungrateful whip, that was shredding the world into smaller and smaller pieces as he saw how unnecessary all the sacrifices had been.

It was almost a mercy when his heart stopped beating. It stopped the endless flight of the arrows of pain through him, the endless
Harry closed his eyes. It was done, and he didn’t need to witness any more. He had swallowed every bit of passive magic that Dumbledore had, including the magic that had kept his heart beating for a hundred and fifty years, when it would have stopped much earlier if he was a Muggle.

He had anticipated what would happen when he did—or, he thought he had. It had still been horrible to watch magically delayed time snap back and take its vengeance, finding a Muggle body that should have aged and been dead and buried long since. Dumbledore’s skin had fallen off, his organs had withered to dust, his eyesockets had turned empty, and his robes had become an elaborate shroud around a set of bones. Harry swallowed. Dumbledore was dead now, and it was done.

Well, almost done. Harry didn’t really know what to do with the trapped magic, part of him and yet not part of him, churning at the bottom of the icy pit. Dumbledore’s magic didn’t taste quite as vicious and tainted as the magic the Death Eaters and Voldemort used, but it was slimy and greasy, like the film of the spell that had covered Harry’s skin even in Hogwarts. He didn’t want to swallow the magic. He didn’t want it mixing with his own power, because it was mightier, and could overwhelm his like a greater quantity of poison overwhelming pure water.

Images flashed behind his eyes as he thought of a way to deal with it: the sea or the earth, which could swallow it, and the graveyard where Voldemort had told him about that particular power of earth, and the white light that had funneled from Augustus’s staff as he broke through Voldemort’s wards—

*That’s it.*

He opened his eyes and turned to Draco. “Can I borrow your tie?” he asked. “I didn’t put mine on before I went to the library.”

Draco blinked, as if he had forgotten that there was such a thing as Slytherin school ties, and then undid his and handed it to him. Harry took it up and turned it around. A simple thing, green and silver, and made of cloth that was ridiculously fragile. He murmured a few preservation spells and sent the magic funneling through his gripping fingers, to make it strong enough.

Then he took up Dumbledore’s captured magic and poured it into the tie.

The magic didn’t want to go. It fought and twisted and rebounded back on itself, warping and coming up with cunning ways to slip away from him. Harry had the advantage, though, since he had trapped the power already, and the visualization of ice he’d used to contain it didn’t have any holes or handholds to let it get out. In the end, it went where he told it to and poured into the tie.

When he opened his eyes, Draco’s tie was glowing like the sun. After a moment, though, the magic settled into its new home and lost the sentience that it had grown under pressure. Harry let out a soft breath and stuffed the tie into a pocket of his robe.

“What are you going to do with that?” Draco asked in a high voice.

“I’d like to wrap it around a rock and throw it into the Atlantic, but somehow I don’t think that would be safe enough,” Harry muttered, and then blinksked as he realized it wasn’t Draco who’d spoken. He turned around, and found that the corridor was crowded with those people who’d been under Dumbledore’s spell, silently staring at them. Harry flushed.

Merlin knows how long they’ve been awake, or how much they saw, or what they think about it all.

He lifted his chin and tried to get back some semblance of dignity. “I’ll have to talk to Minister Scrimgeour, of course,” he said as coolly as he could. “Is there someone who can direct me to his office from here?”

Several people volunteered at once to be guides, from a woman clad in the robes of an Auror trainee to a man with multiple quills behind his ear who appeared to work in the Department of Magical Games and Sports. Harry caught mostly sidelong glances from them all, their eyes round and wide to the point of looking as if they hurt. They might have been awed, or frightened, or dreaming of getting free drinks from this story for a month.

He shook his head. *I’ll be charged with murder, for all I know. I don’t think there are precedents for things like this.*

He was more occupied, though, with trying to figure out why the prophecy had happened now as their merry little band trudged towards the lifts. Did that mean it didn’t apply to the defeat of Voldemort after all? Then why in the world had so many other
things relating to Voldemort fit—the curse scar that he bore, for instance, and the fact that he and Connor had been born twins, appearing to fit the prophecy neatly?

Except that that wasn’t the only prophecy I’ve heard lately. Was it.

Harry had to half-close his eyes, but Acies’s whispering recital came back to him.

“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.”

Harry hadn’t wondered what “the old one” was, so caught up had he been in the implications of the second quatrain and its storms. Now, he wondered if this prophecy was referring to an older prophecy—such as the one Trelawney had made sixteen, maybe even seventeen, years ago.

Can prophecies come true more than once? I don’t know. It’s something to ask Acies.

A more urgent concern tackled him as their little group at last reached the level of Scrimgeour’s office.

If I’m right, that means it’ll come true twice more. Who, besides Voldemort, do we have to face?

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Chapter Sixty: Wake and Find It So

Rufus came back to himself suddenly. One moment he was learning a dozen new variations of Crucio under Lucius Malfoy’s wand—he hadn’t known the pain could be lifted and lowered like a flame, nor concentrated in one part of his body until he almost screamed for mercy—and the next he sprawled on the floor of his office, taking short, desperate breaths, the memory of phantom pain lifting like a miasma from his limbs. For long moments, he could only blink and touch his chest. His heart was laboring intensely, but it had not yet given up. Rufus would have hoped so. He would hate to think that a simple heart attack could kill him at any time in his life, especially now, when he was just hitting his stride as Minister.

Then he realized that it had been a spell, and it had ended, and that there were few wizards in the Ministry powerful enough to cast Capto Horrifer. On the other hand, that the spell had ended indicated that there might not be as much urgency in dealing with this as he had thought.

He sat up, deliberately not rushing, and headed over to Percy Weasley. The young man lay on his back, cheeks white as icing, and breathed frantically. Rufus yelled in his ear. That produced no results. Rufus nodded, and then slapped him hard across the face.

Percy started up with a gasp and a cry, narrowing missing hitting the Minister in the nose with his head. Then he leaned back and took deep gasps of air, and murmured, “What happened, sir?”

“Capto Horrifer.” At Percy’s blank look, Rufus rolled his eyes and elaborated. “A Dark spell that makes us relive the memories that terrified us most, but keeps on twisting and elaborating them until we don’t know what’s going to happen next. Some wizards go mad and commit suicide from the terror alone. It takes a lot of strength. Unless the wizard who cast this is right outside our door, the only ones who could have done this are You-Know-Who or Albus Dumbledore.” He stood up, slowly, and grimaced as he felt how his bad leg ached. That wasn’t a phantom pain. “I suggest, Weasley, that you brush up on your Dark spells as well as the laws and edicts.”

Percy blushed, restoring some of the living color to his face, and Rufus heard him mutter something that sounded like, “The rules are important.”

He’ll never be an Auror until he loses that attitude. Rufus concealed a sigh. “So is surviving the curse coming at you,” he snapped, and then stomped over and opened the office door.

Tonks leaned against the wall, her breath shallow but her eyes sane. She nodded at him. “Minister,” she said. That was when Rufus noted the other signs. She was white around the lips, and her hair was pure white, like a unicorn. He knew the truth before she spoke it. “I—Dawlish is dead, sir. I’ve been up and down the hallway a little, to see if I could help anyone or find out who did
Rufus grimaced. He wondered what memory a strong and self-assured Auror like Dawlish could have had to entice him to commit suicide, and then was glad he would never find out. “Thank you, Auror Tonks. Be on your guard, and pass the message to the others. I think, though, since the spell has stopped burning, that the crisis is past. Perhaps we’ll find that there’s been a successful Death Eater raid, or that the wizard who cast this is dead. That’s the most likely reason for a Capto Horrifer to end.” He entertained a pleasant fantasy, for a moment, of what would happen if You-Know-Who was dead, but then dismissed it. That was fantasy, and he had to live in reality.

Tonks nodded at him, and Rufus retreated to his office. He could trust Tonks to tell who needed to be told about the ending of the spell. In the meantime, the last thing the wizarding world needed its Minister to do was wander around the Ministry poking into every corner. If Rufus could be absolutely assured that the spell was at an end and his people were ready to see him, he’d do it, but he couldn’t, and there had been cases of those newly released from a Capto Horrifer spell casting curses at whoever moved. He’d wait until he knew the extent of the danger.

In the meantime, he used this period to pause and recover. He sat down behind his desk and began sternly asking himself the Five Questions that Aurors come back after a battle in which they’d encountered a mind-twisting spell were always asked. He could hear Weasley droning them to himself, too, and was mildly impressed that he’d reached that phase in his training.

How do you know that this world is real?

By the feel of solid objects under his hands. That had always been Rufus’s answer. He rapped his desk, and it gave back both a satisfying sound under his knuckles and a pressing bruise.

How do you know that what you saw was only a dream?

Rufus snorted wryly. Because I’m damn sure that Lucius Malfoy is working with Harry now. If he wasn’t, if he were still running around in a Death Eater cloak and mask, Rufus would be on the hunt already.

How do you know that you are ready to return to the field?

Stupid question, that one, really, since Rufus did spend most of his time behind a desk now, but it could be adapted. He was ready to continue the work of the Ministry because he’d come out of the spell prepared, having recognized its nature, and sane, which was more than could be said for some people. Needs must, and he could.

How will you learn to recover from this spell?

The same way he always did, of course: distracting himself with paperwork, and talking to Grandmother Leonora’s portrait about it. If there was a more sensible and rock-solid woman on the earth, Rufus didn’t know about it.

Are you sure that you do not need a healer from St. Mungo’s to aid you in your recovery?

After one disastrous experience that involved a powerful illusionist, two cats, and green goo, Rufus and the healers from St. Mungo’s had made an agreement: they would only treat him for purely physical wounds, and he wouldn’t hex them. The Five Questions had become Four Questions for him most of the time he was a field Auror. Rufus sighed and opened his eyes.

And then came the anger. Someone had cast the Capto Horrifer in the Ministry itself. If it was You-Know-Who, then Rufus was mostly angry at the ward-keepers who somehow hadn’t managed to stop him from Apparating in and doing that. One expected that kind of mind-twisting spell from him, after all.

If it was Albus Dumbledore…

Rufus wasn’t sure whom he was more angry at in that case, Dumbledore or himself. He had had indications that Hestia Jones had visited the man. He’d arranged for extra security on his cell in Tullianum, but obviously, he should have done more. Some other Order of the Phoenix member had probably found and freed him.

Of course, would Dumbledore cast a spell like this? Rufus found himself doubting that. Yes, the man was a child abuser, but it wasn’t his kind of method. Even when he had his freedom and the means to choose any spell he liked, he’d still chosen a subtle compulsion spell that wouldn’t automatically implicate him, that would have, if things had worked out in his favor, not even been
noticeable as a spell. Capto Horrifer seemed too crude for him, and too direct.

He could only wait for news from below, he supposed.

Then Tonks flung open the door, took one excited step forward, somehow tripped on her robe, spun around twice, and slammed into his desk. Rufus leaped forward, first to catch her, and then, since he couldn’t, to catch his inkwell before it could spill all over his paperwork. He shook his head when Tonks popped up immediately, not seeming fazed over her mishap.

“Sir! Sir, they said it was Dumbledore, and that he’s dead, and that Harry Pot—I mean, Harry is on his way up!” Tonks was beaming, her hands working together. “They’re saying that Harry killed him, sir!”

Rufus blinked, once, twice. Strong as Harry was, he’d known that Dumbledore was stronger, and he found himself wondering how Harry had managed this. Obviously, certain things had happened that he didn’t know about yet.

“Send him in when he comes,” he said, and then sat behind his desk and tried to look composed.

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Draco noticed, even if Harry didn’t. Harry was prone to ignoring things like that, and right now his green eyes looked shuttered, gazing inward. He was probably dealing with matters of life and death and morality and how this had happened and whether he had done the right thing in killing the former Headmaster, Draco knew.

Whereas Draco spent their journey to Scrimgeour’s office noticing the things that were truly important. The deference in the glances that their escorts gave Harry, for example. The idiot would probably think it was fear, if he bothered to look at them at all, but these people had been in the hallway where Harry—and Draco, too—destroyed Dumbledore. They had seen what he was doing, seen the expression on his face, seen that he wasn’t some Dark Lord exulting in the task but an executioner mourning the necessity while never letting the necessity turn him away. Harry hadn’t turned these people, at least, into creeping, cringing toads the way he might have thought he had. He had inspired them. They knew what their freedom and sanity had cost, and they were grateful for it. Harry had the core of more allies here, or friends, or sycophants, depending on how he played his cards.

Of course, the git wouldn’t play his cards. He’d assume they were afraid, or he would refuse to acknowledge thanks as something he deserved. Draco decided that he couldn’t let that happen, not when Harry had put down such beautiful and fertile soil.

He dropped behind Harry a little, until he walked next to the young woman in the robes of an Auror trainee. She studied him thoughtfully. Draco realized that she’d probably recognized his features—if not as those of a Malfoy, certainly a pureblood—and he inclined his head in a suitably regal nod.

“You know what he did?” he whispered, nodding forward to Harry.

The woman nodded back, her bright eyes implying that she enjoyed the game, and knew why he was whispering.

“He had some help, of course,” said Draco, anxious to establish that. “I came and rescued him. But once I freed him from the spell, he did what he did on his own. He defeated the man who’d imprisoned and mentally tortured everyone in the Ministry. And he won’t see it that way. He’ll see it as a killing. Could you help insure that that doesn’t become the general cast of thought in the Ministry?”

The young woman nodded. “I could. It would fulfill the debt I owe him. I was about to kill myself when the spell split. And then I watched everything that happened. I know what he did. It’s best not to confront him with it if he’d balk, perhaps, but just to have people ready and waiting if he does need them, hmmm?”

Draco nodded at her, impressed. “You’re quick. I like that.”

The woman smiled. “I was at his parents’ trial. I’ve admired him since then. And now this, to owe him a debt personally, and to do something besides the endless drills they put us through in Auror training—it’s heartening. I’ll move slowly at first, because I mostly have connections and not outright power right now, but I’ll do what I can to build him some allies here.”

Draco beamed at her, and then drew in a few other people who had noticed they were talking. The rest continued staring worshipfully at Harry. That was all right, Draco thought. Those would be the dancers who did anything Harry wanted. There had to be some. He was setting the music to a dance that would benefit Harry, but with its participants knowing that sometimes their
leader was self-deluded, and other times didn’t even expect other people to acknowledge what he’d done.

It’s not going behind his back, Draco defended himself against the slight sting of his conscience. It’s being practical about the politics. That’s what Harry has to learn: that you actually have to ask people to do things, not just assume they’ll see what you believe in and fall into line. I’ll teach him whenever he asks, and to do that, I need to have some examples ready.

And if he had the beginnings of his own dance, it wouldn’t hurt, Draco had to admit. He was growing increasingly frustrated with the tone of his father’s letters, and increasingly wary of the confrontation he knew was coming with Lucius. Having people who looked at him with admiration could help him practically, and help him with his self-confidence when he at last had no choice but to face the old dragon in his den.

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Harry let out a grunt he hadn’t known he was capable of when he stepped into the Minister’s office and saw both Scrimgeour and Percy alive and well. Certainly, if Scrimgeour had died under Dumbledore’s spell, then they would have heard the message before they got this far, but there was nothing like seeing it with his own eyes.

“Sir,” he said, nodding to the Minister.

“Harry,” said Scrimgeour. “Malfoy.” His voice on Draco’s last name had a distinctly cool tone, but he nodded to him, and pointed his wand, murmuring a modified Summoning Charm. Two chairs skidded out from the wall and into the center of the office. “Have a seat.” He eyed the crowd of people who had followed them like ducklings and added, “The rest of you will have to wait outside.”

Amid much grumbling, and pokes from Tonks’s wand, they did so. Harry was glad when the office door shut and he was alone with only two people who stared at him avidly. The gazes on their way upstairs had been bad enough. Harry had met a few of them, and didn’t know what they wanted. He was puzzled by the lack of horror behind their eyes, too. Dumbledore had died in a stomach-turning way. Didn’t that matter to them? To any of them?

“Tell me what happened,” said Scrimgeour.

Harry took a deep breath and began describing the incident from the time he’d first noticed the burning of Dark magic to the south. When he reached the falling of Hogwarts’s wards, he interrupted himself to exclaim, “Sir! Shouldn’t we reach the Headmistress, and ask her—”

“She contacted me, actually, a few minutes ago,” said Scrimgeour with a faint smile, nodding to the fireplace in a corner of his office. “She said that she’d stabilized the wards for now. It rather looks as if they’ll have to be renewed each morning—there’s a structural weakness in them that she and the Deputy Headmaster can’t pinpoint yet—but she can manage that.”

Harry nodded, not reassured. Renewed each morning? Does that mean they’ll weaken during the night? That is not good news.

“I told them about you,” Scrimgeour added. “I’d received word from Tonks by then about what you’d done, though I want to hear the full story from you, of course. I think Professor Snape might have come through the flames to find you, but the Headmistress said she needed his help with the wards yet.”

Harry sighed with relief. That’s one confrontation postponed.

“You were about to tell me the rest of it?” Scrimgeour prompted.

Harry nodded, and took up his recitation again, scrimping on detail from the graveyard memory. He had to hand the narration over to Draco at that point, though, since he had no idea what had happened outside his head between the time he’d been caught and the time he’d awakened.

Draco lifted his head, all sleek pride and Slytherin cunning. “I have a bracelet that lets me know when Harry’s in danger, sir,” he said, displaying it. “I also have a family heirloom that let me make a wish to be transported to Harry’s side. When I arrived, I found that, thanks to the heirloom’s effects, I was immune to the Capto Horrifer spell.” Scrimgeour looked as if he would have very much liked to interrupt, but Draco went on, irresistible as the sweep of Professor Snape’s robes. “I entered Dumbledore’s mind and possessed his body.”
Harry blinked. He hadn’t expected Draco to reveal that gift, not when they’d worked so hard to keep it secret, and Draco had refused, in the wake of Midwinter, to tell even his parents.

“You can do that?” Scrimgeour’s voice was flat.

Draco inclined his head.

“And you did not let anyone know?”

“It’s an important advantage in battle, sir.” Draco raised his eyebrows. Harry had never heard his voice so perfectly composed. “I would not want word of it reaching Harry’s enemies too soon. And since I intend to be at his side for each and every one of his battles, I’ll be wielding it against those enemies. I trust you will understand the importance of that, and keep mum on the subject when we have left your office.” Harry choked; Draco had just managed to compliment the Minister’s discretion and insult his intelligence in the same sentence. “Should I have come to you the moment I learned about it and proclaimed it to the wizarding world? No, I think not. Harry has been training me. He trusts me to control his body.” Draco gave Harry a look that Harry was rather embarrassed to let Scrimgeour see. “And if he trusts me, to do that and to stand at his back, I rather think you should.”

Scrimgeour was silent for a long moment. Harry could see warring impulses in his face. One might have gone by the name of admiration for a good verbal duelist, and one looked as if it would prompt Scrimgeour to say damn Malfoys.

Instead, Scrimgeour just nodded, and then said, “I will not tell anyone now. If I find that it has been used to commit crimes, Mr. Malfoy, or interfere in the Ministry, you will find Aurors arresting you so fast your head will spin. Continue with your story.”

Draco nodded. “I possessed Dumbledore, but he is—was—a Legilimens, and he knew how to fight back and defend his own mind. He struck at me, but I felt the attack coming. I possessed the magic that he was using to attack me.”

“Is that even possible?” Harry asked in wonder. All their experiments so far had been with embodied possession. Harry had thought that Draco was strictly confined to the use of limbs, and, once freed from them, as he was in the passage between his mind and another person’s, he would be disoriented.

“It is,” said Draco. “Because I did it.”

Harry looked at him, sitting polished and proud on the chair beside him, and had to sit on his own sudden impulse. One did not snog one’s boyfriend in front of the Minister, no matter how tempting he was.

“All right,” he said. “Go on.”

“I imagined that Dumbledore’s magic was a wand, and I was the magic passing through the core,” Draco said casually. “A visualization that my father taught me.” Scrimgeour frowned, and Harry realized that Draco had been watching for that, and had mentioned his father on purpose. Draco seemed satisfied with whatever he’d got out of the Minister, and went on. “Then I did the same thing to myself, and created a spell that would wake Harry up.”

Harry had to interrupt again. “On the fly.”

Draco looked at him, a faint half-smile playing around the corners of his mouth. “Yes.”

“With nothing but will and need and magic.”


Harry shook his head, half-helpless with admiration. Draco bowed and extended his hand, his way of giving the story back to Harry. Harry finished with what he’d done to Dumbledore, still sneaking glances at Draco every now and then. But he turned sober again when he had to face Scrimgeour and ask, “Does that mean I’m charged with murder, sir?”

Scrimgeour snorted. “Of course not.”

Harry blinked. “But, sir—“
“You destroyed a wizard who was mentally torturing my people,” Scrimgeour interrupted, “including, no doubt, members of the Wizengamot who were in the building. He killed some of them. I don’t know the full casualty list yet, but it includes at least one distinguished Auror.” Pain darted across Scrimgeour’s face like a flash of lightning. “On top of this, he’d already been arrested for child abuse charges, and he would have had the charges added for the compulsion spell he used when he was tried, and he’d wronged your friend Peter Pettigrew, and from the way you describe the battle, he was doing his best to kill you then. We could convene the Wizengamot, I suppose, Harry, but you can tell me what verdict they would reach, and they would most likely regard it as a waste of their time.”

“But I killed someone else,” Harry said. “There has to be some recompense for that, doesn’t there?”

“If you want to think of it that way,” said Scrimgeour, “then Dumbledore’s death was the recompense for the people he killed and sacrificed.”

Harry nodded slowly. He could adapt to the idea, he supposed. It still felt odd, unnatural, a tight constriction on his skin, and he no more liked what he’d done to Dumbledore than he liked what he’d done to Greyback. But maybe, as long as he could do what was necessary and still keep his humanity, he wouldn’t walk down the path Dumbledore had trod, justifying each death and pain as for the good of others.

I hope.

“Now,” Scrimgeour said, drawing his attention again, “I’ll pass the relevant aspects of the story onto my people.” He gave Draco a glance. “I’ll do it in such a way, Mr. Malfoy, that you are a hero and yet your possession abilities are not touched on. I’m sure that’s the way you wanted it.”

Sarcasm choked Scrimgeour’s voice like ivy, but Draco merely bowed his head. “Thank you, sir,” he said. “You’ve phrased it wonderfully.”

Scrimgeour shook his head. “I’ll also take care of arranging for the mental healing of my people,” he said, turning back to Harry. “I’ve handled Capto Horrifer victims before, and been through the spell myself. It’ll take some of them a while to heal, and some never will, and others, like Tonks, are already back to normal. I don’t need your help here, Harry.”

Harry blinked. “I—this feels rather as if you’re shoving me away, sir,” he said.

Scrimgeour laughed. “That’s because I am, Harry. I want you to go home. You don’t have to worry about murder charges. You’ve done your part in ending Dumbledore’s magic, and the spell with it. You don’t have to worry about the mental healing of all the people in the Ministry. You wouldn’t be good at it, anyway, because you’d have to devote a lot of hours to just one person, and you’d also worry and fret over all the other people who were going unhealed in the meantime. It isn’t your responsibility to get them back to normal. Go home.”

Harry nodded, slowly, and stood up. Draco came to his side at once, and took his arm. “Tired?” he asked.

“A bit,” Harry muttered, and then sighed. “Can we use your fireplace, sir?”

“Be my guests.” Scrimgeour sat back in interest and watched as they cast the Floo powder into the flames and called for the Headmistress’s office. Just before they stepped through the green fire, however, Scrimgeour called, “And Harry?”

Harry glanced over his shoulder. He was startled to see Scrimgeour completing a sweeping bow, the kind of gesture that pureblood wizards used to offer to the graves of fallen friends.


Harry nodded, throat tight in a new way, and stepped into the flames. He whirled through the Floo Network faster than he could remember going before—or maybe that was just his mingled anticipation and dread of their return—and barely stepped out of the way in time as Draco came surging through behind him. Draco snatched him around the waist again, not seeming to mind at all.

McGonagall rose from behind her desk to welcome them. Harry stared when he realized that two shadowy figures stood at her side, one a wizard and one a witch. The wizard smiled at them. The witch frowned, and fingered the silver clasp that held her long dark hair in place as if she were considering whether or not they still belonged in Hogwarts.
“Harry, Draco Malfoy,” said McGonagall, stumbling just a little on Harry’s lack of a last name, “may I introduce Godric Gryffindor and Rowena Ravenclaw? Or the specters of them, at least. They are bound to anchor-stones in Hogwarts, assisting the current Headmistress or Headmaster with her or his decisions. Currently, that’s maintaining the wards.” She grimaced. “I assume that Albus had something to do with them falling? It is like him.”

Harry nodded, caught between bowing to the two Founders and answering the Headmistress’s questions. He wound up making the gesture first, and then saying, “Yes, Madam. Dumbledore dropped the wards to keep you here and distract you, I think. He was attacking the Ministry with *Capto Horrifer.*” McGonagall’s face turned pale. “And—I’m sorry, Madam, but he’s dead. Dumbledore, I mean. I drained his magic completely and killed him.”

“Ah,” said the shade of Rowena Ravenclaw. She had a voice as sharp as the beak of her House’s eagle, and Harry winced, imagining what it must have been like for her students. Her dark eyes pierced him. “You are an *absorbere,* then. Interesting. I have not met a magic-swallower for some time.”

“I am,” said Harry. “I didn’t know there was a name for it, though.”

“There is a name for *everything*—” Rowena began, in the tones of someone who’d had to explain this before.

“Leave the boy be, Rowena.” Godric laid a restraining hand on her arm, his eyes bright as he gazed at Harry. “He’s been through a lot. Is what you said true, Harry? Is Albus really dead?”

“Yes. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Godric sighed. “He should have died a long time ago, really, when he first started going bad. It’s better to perish while one is still noble, because then the death means more.” He sounded as if he were quoting. “And he wound the wards around himself,” he added, in a completely different tone, one of disgust. “I can’t believe he would do that. No Headmaster has ever been so careless with the school’s safety.”

“No Headmaster has ever believed he was right as implacably as that one,” Rowena snapped back, wrapping her waterfall of dark hair around her hands. “I told you that when we first met him.”

“And then you trusted him, Rowena. All three of us did.” Godric grinned. “Besides, I think one Headmistress did think she was as right as he did.” He shot Rowena a sly glance and waited.

The Ravenclaw Founder began to splutter. McGonagall interrupted to say, “I’ll thank you for the full tale later, Harry, but for now the wards are secure and you look like you’re about to collapse. Take care of him, Mr. Malfoy.”

“I will, Headmistress.”

Harry wondered in outrage when he’d acquired so many caretakers, but it was true that all his expended effort was rushing on him at last, and he wobbled as they stood on the moving staircase. Draco wrapped an arm around him. Harry yawned. “I think I’ll be all right with a bit of sleep,” he said.

Snape was waiting for them at the bottom of the stairs. Harry stared hard into his eyes, and encountered nothing there of the anger he’d expected.

“I believe that you would not have left under your own power, Harry,” he said. “We’ve had discussions about that.”

Harry swallowed. “That’s true,” he said.

Snape turned, glittering-eyed, on Draco. “Mr. Malfoy, on the other hand, has no excuse for not informing me of his whereabouts.”

Draco gulped. Harry leaned on the wall, and grinned, and prepared to enjoy someone else getting scolded for adventures for once.

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Odd. *Very* odd.

Falco perched on the roof of the Owlery, still in his sea eagle form, to contemplate all he’d learned. He preened his feathers,
always a good mindless activity, while his mind made its lists.

He’d arrived at the Ministry quickly, of course, and felt the pressure of both Albus’s magic and another’s. That would be the Harry Potter Albus had told him about, Falco guessed; he was dimly aware that the shard of himself he’d left floating on the surface of his mind, a sentry against disasters, had received and answered letters from Albus a few times in the last few years. Most recently, it had given him advice on spreading his compulsion like a mist and ensnaring this Harry he was so worried about.

But Albus hadn’t said the boy was anything like this.

Falco had watched, his eyes grown sharp enough to pierce stone when he wanted them to, as Harry fought Albus. He’d drained his magic with control and precision, something that made Falco think well of him. He hadn’t hesitated when he went for the kill, which was also a good trait, in moderation. He appeared to ponder on the morality of his actions, if the pensive expression on his face was any indication. Also good, at least when one was young and not enough above the false moralities of the world to see them all for what they were.

Falco was not yet sure what to do about him. This Harry seemed to be a Lord-level wizard he and magic could live with, on the surface. He hadn’t Declared for Dark or Light, and he seemed to have no intention of doing so.

But.

Now that the sentry shard of his mind was reunited with the rest, Falco recalled what Albus had said about this Harry being vates. That was simply impossible. Falco himself had tried and failed to walk the vates path when he was younger, multiple times. And if he could not do it, not even when he was four hundred years old and had the necessary wisdom and experience if anyone did, then how could a child do so? No, he was probably breaking webs and freeing magical creatures without a thought of the consequences more than one or two decades in the future. He had to think longer than that, though. Many magical creatures lived for centuries, and some were immortal, and wizards themselves lived longer than Muggles.

Besides, Falco understood something about being vates that no other wizard or witch who had tried to walk that thorny path did. The vates must achieve what he did without violating even his own will. That was impossible, for when the vates grew impatient and wanted to achieve his goals at the expense of others, and held himself back from doing so, he would frustrate his will. The moment Falco had understood that, he had turned away from that impossible task and never looked back. It was enough work, Merlin knew, trying to balance magic and insure that it was safe from its own inherent self-destructive tendencies.

So. This Harry was a careless child, who just happened to be an absorbere, and sometimes capable of balance, and sometimes swinging wildly like an errant compass needle. Falco would continue to watch him, and judge him, and judge the efforts of the man who called himself Voldemort, and see where and when his own efforts to preserve the balance should fall. At the moment, he rather thought he would have to work against both sides, frustrating Voldemort’s efforts at world domination and Harry’s careless snapping of bonds that existed for a reason.

No one else understands as much about balance as I do, Falco thought in resignation, spreading his wings so that he could detour to the north and look at Voldemort’s camp. And sometimes it grows lonely.

Intermission: Ring the Changes

There should only be two blossoms on that branch.

Indigena paused to wipe sweat out of her eyes. She was in her largest greenhouse at Thornhall, her home for the past thirty years, which she hadn’t seen in two months with the way her Lord kept her at his beck and call. The house elves had done well in tending the plants, but her absence had somehow made Indigena forget both the profusion of greenery and the heat inside the place.

She hadn’t forgotten the way the plants should look, though, and Grandmother Tourmaline’s bell-bush was a matter of special importance. Tourmaline Yaxley had invented the plant as a kind of early warning system. The center of the bush was a mass of hybrid branches, each of them carefully cultivated from a native tree or shrub of every place in the world that had a wizarding community; it had taken most of Tourmaline’s life, and a lot of letter-writing, to get hold of them all. Bred together, they created a
bundle of distinctive branches, one for each community. But the flowers were all the same, small and delicate bells with a clapper-shaped center that never stopped moving, even without the wind, and created delicate ringing sounds audible throughout most of the greenhouse.

The blossoms showed the presence of Lord-level wizards, and thus of Lords or Ladies, in each wizarding community. In Tourmaline’s lifetime, the blossoms had been black for Dark Lords and white for Light Lords. Indigena had found that boring, so she’d changed it to deep green for Dark and gold for Light. Those were ancient and symbolic colors, too; Indigena still remembered reading about the Wars of Green and Gold, somewhere back in the dim mists of European wizarding history just after Merlin, when a Dark Lady and a Light Lady wearing those respective colors had contended against each other. And they made the bell-bush more pleasing to look at.

The bush was not thickly clustered; there were currently thirty-three Lord-level wizards in the whole of the world. Most of the blossoms were golden. Dark wizards might predominate in many other wizarding communities, but they weren’t stupid. Light Lords were more likely to retreat into their dreams, while Dark Lords were more likely to blow up their houses. Thus they kept a rather stricter watch on Lord-level wizards than Britain tended to, and nipped the problems in the bud. The Australian branch was unusual in bearing two blossoms right now, one dark green and one golden, but those were two Lords so evenly matched in power and in hatred that they quarreled only with each other—no one else was a worthy competitor—and left the rest of the world alone.

The British branch had had a dark green blossom and a golden one for forty years. Then, fourteen years ago, another blossom had appeared and insisted, to Indigena’s annoyance, on slowly becoming dark green stained with gold, like summer leaves in sunlight. She’d searched, to justify her curiosity, but had heard no rumors of another Lord-level wizard. Then the flower had withered into a blackened nub three years after it appeared, and Indigena had begun to suspect that Grandmother Tourmaline’s breeding wasn’t so flawless after that.

Well, of course she had been in the wrong, and the bush had been in the right, as she’d figured out when the green-gold bell had burst back into bloom overnight in the early summer nearly three years ago. Rumors had reached her, then, of a Lord-level child suddenly emerged into his power. Indigena had confirmed that Harry Potter’s parents had been hiding him away—the reason she couldn’t find him in the first place—and a bit more poking revealed the news about his bound magic, confirmed by the trial. His flower had died because he hadn’t had the magic to act like a Lord, for a while. Mystery solved, Indigena had happily accepted her answers and gone about her gardening. She hadn’t imagined then that it would ever be a matter of more than intellectual curiosity to her.

Now, it was rather more than a matter of intellectual curiosity to her, to note that the British branch had one dark green flower—Lord Voldemort’s—Harry’s green-gold one, and a new blossom, which was apparently attempting to be neither gold nor green and wound up looking rather sick, instead. The golden one had withered.

Indigena bit her lip thoughtfully and stepped forward. Her Lord would want to know about this. He knew about the loss of Dumbledore’s magic, but a new Lord or Lady come into play would be entirely unexpected, and very much unwelcome. Indigena’s hand hovered over the new flower.

There was a test she could perform to determine the new Lord’s name and nature, but it would involve plucking his flower, and thus losing the ability to determine if his allegiance changed. Once picked, the blossom would never grow again. The bell-bush, and not just Harry’s flower, was temperamental that way.

Indigena decided the loss of the future information was worth it. They needed information now. She plucked the blossom, and carried it back inside Thornhall, so that she could work with it.

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Indigena sat beside the fire in her study and lifted a glass of mulled wine to herself. She thought she deserved it. She’d been clever and loyal, and, in being clever and loyal, secured a task that suited her very well.

Casting the flower into a bowl of pure water and speaking the incantation that Grandmother Tourmaline had recorded in her private journals over it had given her a name and a face. Falco Parkinson, the name was, and he had a long fall of silver hair and intense green eyes. Indigena had searched for information on him, and been surprised to find several books that recorded his deaths—his different deaths. The authors all claimed that the others were lying, of course, or hadn’t done their research correctly, but Indigena was thinking now that this could be the work of a Lord-level illusionist, who’d withdrawn from the world for a while. He’d been able to fool Grandmother Tourmaline’s bush, too.
He must have taken an active interest in the wizarding world again. That was the report Indigena had given her Dark Lord that night.

And Lord Voldemort had been alarmed, and assigned her at once to the task of obstructing Falco’s purposes and making his life as difficult and dangerous as possible, without actually helping Harry.

Indigena had thought a moment, and proposed a way to do that. Her Lord took some convincing to agree. After all, while it fulfilled his conditions, it put Indigena’s own spin on them, and Lord Voldemort had a hatred for others’ creativity tainting his fine plans.

But, in the end, he had agreed.

Indigena knew it would take some time. But it would use the skills she considered most important, her cleverness and her ability to breed plants, and it kept her from having to participate in torture and killing, which frankly bored her. Well, there would be that one boring but necessary outing in the middle of February; Indigena had to agree that her Lord would need her on that one.

She’d wished, at first, that the Dark Lord had sent her to Durmstrang instead of Bellatrix. She would have enjoyed the challenge of keeping all the students as hostages and keeping anyone from getting into the school, as well as the rest from the blood and the gore. But now she was glad it hadn’t happened.

She was already imagining the look on both Falco’s face and Harry’s when her schemes finally played out.

Indigena drank her wine and laughed out loud. I love it when I can show off my intelligence.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Sixty-One: Follow Me Into Night

Harry opened his eyes and sighed. Well, that was anticlimactic.

He had finally managed to separate the parts of his own mind from Draco’s over the mental connection they shared, more than a week after the death of Dumbledore. He’d felt his own palms sweating as he lay down and swished through the grass of the Occlumency connection in the direction of Voldemort’s mind. Then he’d waited to dream. When he’d gone hunting Voldemort earlier in the year, he’d leaped directly into the middle of the tunnel, and the Dark Lord had been able to control their battle. This time, Harry thought, if he just sat still, the vision would probably snatch him up as it had in the past when he was already sleeping.

And he’d fallen asleep, and dreamt of Voldemort and Indigena Yaxley in a large house, but they had discussed nothing interesting. The movement of supplies to Bellatrix in Durmstrang, the bribery of high-placed Ministry officials—conveniently omitting names—the last names of a few minor Dark pureblood families who might be swayed into becoming Voldemort’s adherents. Nothing new, nothing exciting, nothing daring. Harry knew that was probably only coincidence, because Voldemort would have attacked him if he had known he was there, but still—

I hoped it would go better, my first night back.

Harry waited to go back to sleep, and waited, and waited. Every sound seemed to jostle and press him out of the slumber he drifted towards. Draco’s snores, light though they were, made his eyes snap open. Blaise muttered and shifted in his bed, and it startled Harry as much as a knife suddenly pressed to his ribs. He curled closer to Argutus, who slept in a warm ball on his pillow, but the snake made a little hissing sound of complaint, and that went home like a curse.

Harry shook his head and sat up, then listened for some noise of Draco or Blaise stirring. Neither did. Harry relaxed and slipped carefully out of his bed and towards the door. Fawkes wasn’t here—he had to catch his breath for a moment as sorrow swept over him—and so there was neither light nor song to alert the other boys. Harry padded out of the room and slipped the door shut behind him.

The Slytherin common room was empty except for one sixth-year boy who always seemed to fall asleep there and never woke unless someone shook his shoulder like wind shaking the Whomping Willow. Harry could sit on one of the couches and gaze into the fire and not be troubled.
He found that he couldn’t, though. The sixth-year snored lustily. Harry felt his teeth set further and further on edge, and he sighed, shifting restlessly. Finally, after one snore that included a snort on the end, Harry stood and made his way to the door of the common room. Perhaps a touch of cold dungeon air was just what he needed to clear his head. It was too late for Snape to still be awake, almost midnight, or Harry would have gone to his private rooms and asked to sleep there.

He paused an inch from the door. *Something is wrong.*

He tried to dismiss it as the product of an overactive imagination; he couldn’t sleep, and he was tired and cranky and ready to seek a magical explanation for it when he was just too much awake. But then the idea pressed insistently against his brain, and Harry realized that he could feel a large gathering of magic off to one side of the school. It felt like *Cremo,* or one of the other great fire spells. There were some that burned hot enough to melt stone, and if this one had come this far, then the wards weren’t taking care of it.

*The wards weaken at night,* Harry remembered.

Harry flung the door to the common room open, thinking that he should find Headmistress McGonagall, assuming she didn’t already know, and trying distractedly to feel where the spell was burning. The opposite side of the school, he thought, one of the Towers. He would go and help to quench the fire—

Then the darkness unfolded itself in front of him, and Evan Rosier dropped his Disillusionment Charm and stepped forward.

“If there were dreams to sell,” he murmured, “what would you buy? Some cost a passing bell, some a light sigh.” He aimed his wand at Harry’s throat. “If there were dreams to sell, merry and sad to tell, and the crier rang the bell, what would you buy?”

“I don’t have time for this right now,” said Harry, moving forward a step so that the door to the Slytherin common room shut behind him. He was grateful that Snape had personally strengthened the wards on the dungeons. Unless Rosier had hung about long enough to hear the password, he was unlikely to be able to enter. “There’s a fire.”

Rosier smiled at him. “I know. I set it.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “Why?”

“I’ve come to sell you a dream, Harry,” said Rosier. “But you were staying in that snug common room, and even the Insomnia Charm I used just for you wasn’t working.” He pouted at Harry. “So, the fire. It gets people busy so that they aren’t looking for you, and I knew it would bring you out.”

“I wouldn’t trust you to sell me a treacle tart, Rosier.” Harry fixed his eyes on the passageway beyond him. He could use a blast of magic that would spin Rosier into the wall, knock him out, and bind him. He started to build it. “And I’m going to help with the fire now, thank you.”

“Don’t you like that?” said Rosier. “Some people are simply too ungrateful, even when all they’ve ever wanted is about to come true.” He reached behind him, into the corner where he’d been standing, and tugged something else under a Disillusionment Charm to his side. “So I brought someone else to talk to you about buying your dream.”

He dropped the Charm with a flourish. Hermione, pale and silent, stood in front of him, shivering when Rosier moved his hand to touch the silver collar around her neck. Harry froze, recognizing it.

“Isn’t this a pretty thing for the naughty girl I caught sneaking down to visit her boyfriend?” Rosier crooned. He nodded seriously at Harry. “And of course you know what this pretty thing can do, since you used one of them to kill Mulciber last year. I’ve modified it a bit, you know. It’ll explode on my command. A nonverbal spell, just a twitch of a thought. Or it’ll explode in an hour from the time I first offered you your dream. And you’ve already used two minutes of that.” He smiled at Harry. “Will you buy your dream now?”

Harry did his best not to remember Mulciber’s death, the shards of silver that had sliced open his throat. If the same thing happened to Hermione, he could not live with his guilt. He kept his eyes fixed on Rosier’s face. “You haven’t said what this marvelous thing is that you’re offering me.”

Rosier applauded silently above Hermione’s head. “You *do* pay attention when you want to,” he said. “Excellent. ‘Marvelous thing’ is an excellent description for this dream, Harry. You should have been a poet yourself. You would have ended more
happily than the poet selling dreams did, you know. Tried to cut off his own leg and then finally poisoned himself. Poor, miserable man. He really couldn’t stand being a Squib.”

“Tell me what it is, Rosier,” Harry said, seeing the way Hermione’s eyes widened, knowing another minute had passed, and now trying not to think about her in Rosier’s hands for an hour or more.

“A way into Durmstrang,” said Rosier.

Harry stared at him.

“You saved my life in the graveyard,” said the older wizard, with a sigh, as if Harry were rather dim. “I don’t like it, but there you are. And I still have some friends among the Death Eaters. I’ve told you that before. I’ve acquired a Portkey that will take us inside the school with disturbing the lightning ward. There, I rather think we should be able to kill Bella, and even have some fun with her before we do. Wouldn’t you like to do that, Harry? I know that you’re a saint sometimes, but you’re human, too. You must want revenge on her for what she did to your hand. A dream come true, like I said.”

Harry laughed in desperation. The sound bubbled out of his throat in a way that made Hermione’s eyes widen, and he forced himself to stop. *Four minutes wasted. At least.*

He took a deep breath and shook his head. “Why in the world should I trust you, Rosier?” he asked. “For all I know, that Portkey might take me anywhere, and I’ve never thought you would be someone to honor a life debt. This isn’t a dream.”

“Thus my naughty little girl here.” Rosier began stroking his fingers through Hermione’s hair. He’d put his wand away in his pocket at some point, which Harry didn’t remember passing. “To make sure that you do. If you don’t follow me, then I kill her, Harry. Not to mention that all those children in Durmstrang keep suffering under Bella. I’ve heard that she’s ordering them to fuck each other now. Do you really want to be responsible for that?”

Harry hesitated, shivering. Rosier swept all of Hermione’s hair away from her neck and bent to place a kiss on the silver collar, crooning, “Sweet and sweet is their poisoned note, the little snakes of silver throat, in mossy skulls that nest and lie, ever singing, ‘Die, oh! die.’”

It was the way Hermione stood very still as Rosier’s lips passed near her skin that decided Harry. He burst out, “Fine! I’ll come with you to Durmstrang. Just leave her alone.”

Rosier smiled at him and let Hermione go with a shove at him, so that Harry had to catch her. He did, and spent a long moment looking into her eyes, trying to smile in reassurance. Hermione did her best to smile back, but her eyes shut, and she huddled against Harry as if trying to erase the memory of what Rosier had done to her.

“It’ll be all right,” Harry whispered to her. “I promise, it’ll be all right.”

“So long as we’re back in fifty minutes,” said Rosier brightly. Harry looked up to see him holding a smooth, flat white stone that was probably the Portkey. “And be a good girl, Hermione, and don’t tell anyone what that collar around your neck does. I can feel it vibrating if you speak.”

Hermione nodded, her eyes still tightly shut, her face as pale as parchment.

“Good girl,” said Rosier tenderly, and then motioned to Harry.

Harry took a few steps forward and reached out to grasp the stone, knowing as he did so that he was betraying other people. Snape had trusted him not to leave without permission, and now he was doing that. McGonagall could use his help to contain Rosier’s fire, and now he wouldn’t be here to help. Charles and Thomas and his other allies had assumed he would leave the Durmstrang problem up to those who had the time and leisure to do the research. Draco would be infuriated that Harry had left the common room at all when the wards were weak.

But he looked again at Hermione in the moment before his hand closed on the pebble, and he knew that he would do the same thing again—for any of his friends or allies caught in the same predicament, really. No one deserved what Hermione must have lived through in the past hour, what she was still suffering with the delicate touch of the silver collar around her throat.

His hand closed on the stone. Rosier cried out, “*Portus!*”
The world around Harry dissolved into patches of green and black and white as the Portkey sprang to life. He felt a moment’s wonder that it actually was a Portkey and not some magical weapon designed to kill him, and then he had to wonder, of course, if they would actually get where Rosier claimed they were going.

They did, or they appeared to. The Portkey deposited them into a small stone room that looked like a closet to Harry, from the brooms and mops in the corners. And it was cold. He shivered as the ice seemed to cut through him, and wind, though of course they were shut off from the open air. He looked at Rosier. “Is it all right to cast a Warming Charm?” he whispered.

Rosier, who was looking out the door of the closet, shrugged. “So long as you make it wandless. Bella would feel any magic cast with a wand right now.”

Harry cast the charm, and immediately felt better. “You don’t look cold,” he observed, as he came up beside Rosier, for the lack of something better to say.

He could only see half Rosier’s profile, since the man was busy peering up and down the hall, but he made out the smile. “When you’ve hung on thorns intent on eating your heart for two months,” said Rosier softly, “cold doesn’t seem to really matter anymore, and neither does hunger, and neither does sorrow. Poetry does,” he added, as if he thought he should clarify that for Harry. “But poetry always matters.”

Harry shuddered. In other words, Yaxley’s torture made him even more insane. Well, Harry would have been surprised if it hadn’t been so.

“This direction,” Rosier said abruptly, and wrenched the closet door open. Harry jumped at the sound, but walked briskly behind him as they headed towards a great space of light and warmth. How long did Hermione have? Forty-five minutes? If they were lucky, Harry thought.

They halted in the shadows just outside what Harry knew must be Durmstrang’s Great Hall, and Rosier gripped his shoulder, holding him still. Harry fought not to just tear the hand off him; it would make too much noise. “There,” Rosier whispered. “There she is. I don’t know what object she’ll have attached Ariadne’s Web to, but it won’t be too far away.”

“Object?” Harry whispered, wondering, once again, if this had been wise. Perhaps Rosier really only had brought him here to fuck with his mind. But, once again, what could he have done?

Rosier nodded at him. “Ariadne’s Web can’t be broken from the inside,” he murmured. “And she can cause death or pain to anyone in it with the twitch of a thought. From the inside, it really does look just like a single, smooth, seamless web, the way a spider’s web appears to a fly trapped inside it. But from the outside, you can see that it’s attached to some object in the caster’s possession. We have to find out what that is and destroy it. Otherwise, you can shred the web, but she’ll just reestablish it by linking the threads back to the object, like a spider using the same chair leg to weave its web as before.”

“Would killing her work?” Harry asked quietly.

Rosier nodded. “It would, but we still have to identify the object. That’s the weak point, the one where you begin shredding it.”

Anyone else, Harry thought, would have told me that in reverse order to the way Rosier did. But given everything else he had to be irritated or frightened about, this was a very minor complaint. He took a deep breath, and turned his gaze fully into the Great Hall, which he hadn’t dared do before.

It didn’t resemble Hogwarts’s Great Hall. The ceiling was lower, and not enchanted. The walls held carvings in the stone instead of banners, showing what Harry assumed was a series of battles; he couldn’t tell that much about them from his angle, which was low on the wall, around a corner, and in the southwestern portion of the hall. A pile of cloth in the corner said that tapestries might once have hung here, but Bellatrix had removed them. A single large, round wooden table stood in the center of the room, with children sitting stiffly around it.

On a dais at the head of the hall was Bellatrix, sitting on a dark throne, wrapped in furs, and laughing. “Go on,” she said to two people on the floor in front of the dais, gesturing with her right hand. “Go on.”

Harry looked at the people she was talking to. They looked tall, sixth-year or seventh-year students probably, but from this distance Harry couldn’t tell if they were boys or girls; the bundled furs they wore made it hard to be sure. They moved towards
each other and tentatively kissed, shivering in a way that had nothing to do with cold, while Bellatrix laughed and laughed.

Harry closed his eyes tightly. He had thought that Rosier’s words about Bellatrix making the students fuck was exaggeration on his part, but it seemed they weren’t.

“Forty minutes until Hermione dies,” said Rosier helpfully.

Harry nodded, and wasn’t sure whom he was nodding to. “She won’t sense wandless magic?” he whispered. “Are you absolutely sure of that?”

Rosier nodded. “She didn’t sense your charm, did she?”

Harry smiled. It felt grim even to him, and whatever it looked like to Rosier, it appeared to delight him. “Then I’ll get up on the dais and look for whatever object she’s hooked the web to. _Extabesco plene_,” he added, and the spell he’d invented for completely hiding from people arose and enwrapped him. It still felt a bit odd to stride into the middle of the hall with it, but no one glanced at him.

As he got closer, he could see better. The two students Bellatrix was forcing to kiss were a tall girl with an unhappy, pale face, and Charles’s son Owen. Harry swallowed a breath of protest and moved forward again, staring intently at the dais. It could be the throne of black rock Bellatrix sat in, or one of the furs wound richly about her, but he didn’t think so. Neither vibrated with magic. It was probably some object hidden under the thick white and sable furs, instead.

“Now,” Bellatrix announced, “take your clothes off.”

Harry felt his shoulders jerk as if someone had pulled on a string attached to them. Owen turned and looked up at Bellatrix, never making a sound. A moment later, though, he did, as he fell down. His right leg was obviously broken, with no more than the slightest twitch from Bellatrix.

“I promise,” Bella said, when she had finished laughing at Owen’s pain, “you won’t feel the cold when you get going. Since it appears that you’ll have to lie down on top of him, just do it now.” She nodded briskly to the girl who’d been kissing Owen. The girl knelt at once, though Harry could see the tremors racing in her limbs and knew how badly she must want to defy the older witch.

Harry imagined days on days of this, trapped in the school with a madwoman, knowing she could cause you pain or death with the slightest whim, never knowing if rescue was coming, having hope die day by day—

He shook his head and stepped forward, mounting the last step of the dais. Bellatrix looked straight through him, of course. Harry looked hard at her, trying to see any faint strands of a web that might connect to her, trying desperately not to let the sounds from behind influence him.

Nothing, nothing, nothing. The furs wrapped close around Bellatrix’s feet and legs, not leaving much room for an object to sit on the floor underneath them. Perhaps something rested in the chair next to her, but Harry couldn’t see it, if so; both throne and furs lapped her to the point of making her look like one of the fat queens from centuries ago. Harry stepped up right behind her, reminding himself that no one could sense him, and stared down at Bellatrix’s lap, wondering if the object rested there.

No. Not with her. _On_ her.

Harry saw the faint blue lines racing to and away from her right hand, the hand that had once been his before Bellatrix transformed it, and nodded once. That was it, then. Bellatrix had insured that no one could steal the object from her easily, or Voldemort had insured it. Of course they had. They were quite clever, in their own mad, limited way.

He took a deep breath. He would need to drop his hiding spell before he could use the spell he intended to use, since all his magic was currently trapped under the shield with him. And that meant he would appear right next to Bellatrix for at least a moment, and Merlin knew what she might do.

He told himself to be quick, to get on with it. _One, two, three—_

“Why, hello, Bella.”
Harry froze as Rosier strolled into the hall and stood on the far side of the wooden table, smiling disarmingly up at the dais. Bellatrix looked up from Owen and the girl, and her eyes shone like marble. Then she cackled.

“Evan,” she purred. “Come home to the flock, did you? Or did you only come to watch my little games?”

“Oh, don’t bore me with your poets, Evan,” Bellatrix snapped, and wriggled her thumb. Harry saw a girl at the table lurch upright, choking. “You know I don’t like them. And don’t get any closer to me, or you’ll be the cause of at least one girl’s death.” She nodded to the child she was choking.

Rosier laughed. “Do you think I care, Bella?” he asked, drawing his wand. “Who insured that the children were alive as they hung outside Ottery St. Catchpole, after all, and that it took so long to get them down?”

Harry shook his head. The information that Rosier had been responsible for the Children’s Massacre in the First War was indeed startling, but he couldn’t let Rosier control his actions. A girl was choking. Owen lay on the floor with a broken leg. Regardless of what Rosier had in mind, or didn’t, Harry knew he had to strike now.

He dropped his Complete Vanishing spell. Bellatrix sensed the rush of magic, or perhaps only the sudden presence of someone beside her where no one had been before, and turned her head to stare at him.

Harry didn’t wait. “Sectumsempra!”

And as if it had been a year before, as if she didn’t know what she was doing, Bellatrix lurched backward from the curse with a scream, and lifted her right arm to defend her chest and face, and the spell neatly sliced her right hand off at the wrist. The hand soared across the dais, spinning and sending blood up and down in obscene pinwheels, but Harry had been waiting for that.

“Accio hand!” he called, and the grotesque thing turned and flew straight back to him.

He held it close for a moment, looking at it. There was no sign that it had once been his hand, and sat on the end of his left wrist. Bellatrix had changed not only the direction of the fingers, but the complexion of the skin and its size, so that it fit on her own arm. Harry found that he didn’t feel much as he held it. Resentment, of course, but far more resentment of the way she had treated the children in Durmstrang. He shook his head and began to gather his magic.

“You’ll never destroy it, Potter!”

Harry looked up. Bellatrix, covered in blood, bits of bone sticking out of her right wrist, handless now—and, Harry could also clearly see now that the furs had fallen away, with her breasts gone—was laughing at him like a maddened werewolf. She shook her head, back and forth, back and forth.

“It was yours! You’ll want to retain it, keep it, charm it around and put it back on your wrist!” She leaned forward, as if conveying a great secret. “You could, you know,” she whispered. “It would be easier than finding out what curses I used on your arm and removing them all. There are curses under curses, Potter, traps under traps.”

It took Harry a moment to realize what she was saying, and then he stared. Had that really been why Voldemort and Bellatrix chose to link the Ariadne’s Web to her right hand? Because it had been his, and they thought he could never bring himself to destroy it?

“You don’t know me at all,” Harry whispered, and spoke the spell aloud, just because he could, not because he had to. “Concremo!”

The fire burst from his right hand, augmented by a blue tinge that Harry thought came from the phoenix fire he still hadn’t learned to control, spreading up and down his palm and fringing it in flames. They ate Bellatrix’s hand from the inside, turning the fingers to blackened bones and then to ashes, boiling the blood, withering the skin and then eating it entirely. The blue lines of Ariadne’s Web leading from it puffed into nonexistence. Harry stepped back, casting a Levitation Charm, and the hand hovered in midair, burning, so that everyone could see it. Bellatrix watched with a gaping mouth. Most of the children were either uncomprehending or taking large breaths as they seemed to realize the web that had held them was being destroyed. Rosier laughed aloud.

When the fire finished, then Bellatrix began to scream, hysterical, mindless cries that made Harry wrinkle his nose. The very last
of her sanity was gone now, he knew. He thought about capturing her and taking her along. He could give her to the Ministry. Under Veritaserum, she could tell them much about Voldemort’s plans. And with the object she’d linked the web to destroyed, she wasn’t about to reestablish it.

Rosier cast the Severing Curse. Harry swung around, ready to deflect it if it was aimed at him or one of the children, but it struck past him and laid Bellatrix open from breastbone to ankles. The way she screamed then was something Harry knew he would hear in his nightmares for the rest of his life, and the furs lost their black and white color under the flood of gore from her body.

“Finish her, Harry!” Rosier called out, his voice high and tight with excitement.

Harry swallowed his revulsion. He had no choice; Rosier might strike at one of the Durmstrang children if he didn’t, and Bellatrix was otherwise condemned to a slow death. He could use the Killing Curse, but he had no wish to use the Unforgivable in front of a castle of children who had already experienced enough.

He locked his eyes with Bellatrix’s and willed her dead, pressing against the parts of her brain that kept her alive with Legilimency. Bellatrix wavered for a moment—using Legilimency on someone insane was incredibly hard, as Snape had taught him—but then her eyes closed, and she sighed, and the screaming stopped. Harry had to turn away. He was afraid he would be ill if he kept staring at her body.

“Well done, Harry!”

Harry glanced at the middle of the Great Hall to see Rosier leaping up and down excitedly and clapping his hands together. The children just stared from around him, their eyes tired and dead and unable to believe they were free.

Harry swallowed. “It’s going to be all right,” he said, and the same reassurance he had given Hermione rang hollow, even to him. “I—” He shook his head. None of the lies he could speak to them now were at all inspiring. He turned and glanced at Owen, who was fighting his way back to his feet. “Can you cast that communication spell and tell your father that Durmstrang is free now?” He reached out to the lightning ward that surrounded the school and pulled powerfully at it. It shredded easily; they were simple to take down from the inside, as many books had said unhelpfully, maddeningly, to him.

“I can,” said Owen steadily. Another boy who looked almost exactly like him came up behind him and supported his head and shoulders; Harry knew it must be his twin brother Michael. A word over Owen’s broken leg, and the pain in his face eased. Harry glanced along the table, and found the girl Bellatrix had choked being stroked and soothed by other students.

“Good,” said Harry, and turned back to Rosier. “We have to go back to Hogwarts. I want to make sure that you free Hermione.”

“Would I do something else?” Rosier asked, and then he laughed and bowed. “Forgive me, Harry. Of course I would. And since you killed Bellatrix so sweetly, doing what I asked of you like an aimed weapon, then of course I will free Hermione.” He held up the white stone, and Harry strode forward and gripped it.

They started to whirl out just as other people Apparated into the hall. Harry caught a glimpse of Charles’s startled face, and could only shrug before the Portkey took him. Charles, with other parents, must have been watching for the moment the lightning ward fell. At least they were here now, and could comfort their children.

He and Rosier landed roughly in the hall outside the Slytherin common room, and Harry found Hermione standing utterly still, the silver collar still in place around her neck. Rosier strode forward and stood stroking it for a moment.

“Take it off,” Harry said. “Now.”

Rosier clucked his tongue at him. “I hardly think that you’re in any position to be so impatient, Harry. I could still destroy her with a thought.” But he drew the silver collar slowly off Hermione’s neck, his fingers lingering on her skin. Hermione turned her face away and trembled, then swallowed several times. Rosier laughed.

“The next time I see you,” Harry said to his back, “I’m going to kill you.”

Rosier glanced at him over his shoulder, eyes tranquil. “I know,” he said. “But that’s all right. My life debt is fulfilled. I won’t ever come near you with as little protection again. Oh, and Harry?”

Harry stood still, wondering if it wouldn’t be the best course to kill Rosier now, and ready to do so if he made the least motion
“Tell Henrietta Bulstrode to watch her back.” Rosier smiled at him, and Apparated out, proving once and for all to Harry how weak a state the Hogwarts wards were in. The moment he was gone, Hermione swayed as if she might collapse.

Harry moved forward to gather her in his arms, closing his eyes. He felt helpless. The mental scars Rosier had given Hermione tonight, and the ones that the Durmstrang children had suffered, were beyond his ability to heal or even soothe. Hermione held fast to him and cried frantically, and Harry could be her support, but he wanted to do so much more, and he didn’t think he could.

“Mr.—Harry.”

Harry looked up wearily. Professor McGonagall stood in front of him, her lips thinned to a precise line, and behind her was Snape, voice gone in his rage. Harry looked down. The fire must be under control, or they would never have left it to come looking for me.

He knew he would face more than scolding; he would face anger and bitter disappointment, especially once they knew whom he had gone with. But that would have to happen. Tonight had been poisonous, full of no easy decisions except in the moment that he had shredded Ariadne’s Web. Now Harry had to set himself and face the purging of the poison, which promised to be no less painful.

“Yes, Madam?” he asked.

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Chapter Sixty-Two: Everybody Yells At Harry

Harry followed obediently enough behind McGonagall and Snape until he realized that they were going to the Headmistress’s office. Then he slowed until they looked at him, and nodded at Hermione, still wrapped in the circle of his arms.

“I don’t think she should have to hear what you say to me,” he said softly. “Can you find someone to escort her back to Gryffindor Tower?”

“I hardly think—“ Snape began.

“But I did not, either, and I have to admit, Miss Granger needs attention,” said McGonagall, in a much softer voice than she’d used on Harry. “Miss Granger, if you would like me to call Mr. Weasley and Mr. Potter? They are both awake, as the fire started burning on the outside of Gryffindor Tower.”

Hermione said a word that might have been “please.” McGonagall took it that way, at least, and turned away, red wards manifesting around her as she moved. She touched one of them, and a small creature that looked like a lion made of fire leaped away from her, vanishing but trailing a small comet-tail behind it. McGonagall caught Harry’s gaze, and explained, “Since I set the wards in Gryffindor Tower when I was still Head of House, I can summon my students who live in that House.”

Harry nodded. “Have you figured out the structural weakness in the wards yet, Madam?” he asked.

Whether because of the subject or for Hermione’s sake, McGonagall was at least willing to discuss this without yelling at him. Snape looked as if he became more angry with each moment the scolding was delayed, but McGonagall ignored his tight noise of disapproval. “Not yet, Mr.—Harry.” She sighed. “The Founders know that the weakness is somewhere in the tunnels of Hogwarts, but the Founders have access to all those tunnels. They know everything that is in them. It is much easier to survey them from an anchor-stone than it is walking through them on foot. And they have searched them all, and reported no holes to me. It is rather as if the wards are water we pour into soil, and they soak into the soil and vanish.” McGonagall gestured to the red wards glowing around her. “These are strong because I renewed them when I was up in the Tower, but they will start fading again in a few hours’ time. We don’t know what happened, and if Albus was still here, I think I would strangle him before I could get answers out of him.”

Harry smiled in spite of himself. A moment later, footsteps pounded down the corridor, and Connor and Ron appeared in front of them. Their hair was wild—Connor’s almost as wild as Harry’s own—and their faces were covered with soot in which tear tracks of sweat had appeared.
“Hermione!”

“Harry!”

They spoke so nearly in unison that Harry found it difficult to tell who had said what. McGonagall nodded as if both words made sense. “Miss Granger was captured by the wizard who set the fire,” she said. “Please take her back to Gryffindor Tower and make her as comfortable as possible.”

Ron reached out, and Hermione shook herself free of Harry and went to him, burying her face in his neck with a little sob. Harry could understand why. She’d been in Rosier’s company for however long it took the Insomnia Charm to wake Harry up and Rosier to decide to set the fire instead. She needed the soothing of close friends now, and he wasn’t one of them, no matter how he wished to be.

Connor, though he looked at Hermione with an anxious expression, turned back to watching Harry in a moment. “Are you all right?” he whispered.

Harry shrugged. “It’s a snakebite,” he said, which he knew confused Connor, but expressed his feelings on the matter as eloquently as possible. “I’ll recover.”

In a moment, he regretted the metaphor as he found Snape’s fingers gripping his arm and turning it. “Where were you bitten?” Snape asked, in a voice that anyone else might have found emotionless. Harry could hear the pounded-down emotions within it, flat flakes of worry and concern and rage.

“I didn’t mean it literally,” said Harry softly, drawing his arm free. “Just that Rosier’s poisoned the whole night with his presence.”

“Rosier?” Connor exclaimed. Hermione gave a muffled moan at the sound of his name, and Ron began moving back towards the Tower.

Harry managed a fleeting smile at his brother. “Don’t worry. The next time I see him, I’m going to kill him. I told him that.”

“You should have done it this time!” Snape all but barked. When Harry looked at him, he could see his face darkening with the onrush of rage.

“Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, please escort Miss Granger to the Tower now,” said McGonagall quickly. Connor looked disappointed, but he put his arm around Hermione’s free shoulder and started moving with her towards the stairs. McGonagall turned fiercely on Snape in the next moment. “We are not doing this in the hallway, Severus. I agree that we need to talk to Harry, but we’ll do it in the privacy of my office. Mr. Malfoy is already waiting there, in any case,” she added, with a sidelong glance at Harry.

Harry bowed his head. He could imagine how frantic Draco would be, particularly if he woke from a random dream and found Harry gone.

But underneath the penitence was a growing seed of frustration. What else could he have done? Rosier would have killed Hermione with a thought before Harry could strike him, likely, especially given that Harry didn’t have any magic ready or a spell on his lips when he met them. And Hermione’s death would have distracted Harry further, perhaps even giving Rosier time to get away.

It was a situation that could only have ended badly for everyone. In another world, Harry supposed, he might have cared little enough about Hermione to risk her death, but in this one he hadn’t. He had made a poisoned decision, but all decisions this night were poisoned. He had thought that the yelling he knew McGonagall and Snape and Draco would do would prove cathartic, at least for them. Now he wondered if anything could purge the venom gathering under his skin.

Snape kept silent, with an obviously supreme effort, until they were riding the moving staircase up to McGonagall’s office. Then he said, “I trusted you to tell me before you considered leaving the school, Harry. It seems I was wrong to trust you, at least on that score.”

Harry let his eyes unfocus as he tried to count stones in the wall. He had thought it would be easy to submit to this scolding; he’d had so many of them before. But now he found sarcasm burning on his tongue, sharp as the Many’s poison. The little snake
stirred in his pocket as he thought of her, and Harry knew she would spit in Snape’s eyes and blind him if he merely asked. He shook his head. The vision wasn’t tempting. He wanted to spit his own words instead.

Snape saw the headshake, and his voice sharpened. “Is this your way of telling me that I should not trust you at all, Harry? Perhaps my first instincts, the ones I had last year, were right, then, and I do need to cast monitoring spells on you. Or perhaps I should use the potions that let parents know the emotional state of their infants at once, as you seem prone to following yours rather than coming and getting an adult, or someone who stands outside the situation and can see rationally.”

Harry swallowed, and swallowed again. They didn’t know everything yet. They knew about the fire, and that he had gone, and that Hermione had been hurt. Perhaps when they heard every detail, they would understand that rational thought was less than useless in this particular venture.

“Will you tell us what happened, Harry?”

McGonagall was the one who said that, and Harry turned to her gratefully. “Yes,” he said softly. “When we get into your office, Headmistress. I think Draco should hear this, too.”

She nodded, and then they arrived at the top of the staircase and she opened the door. Harry saw several conjured chairs in the moment before Draco flung himself out of one and threw his arms around Harry.

“I didn’t even know,” he breathed. “I didn’t know where you were. The bracelet said that you were alive and healthy, so Professor Snape convinced me not to use it to go after you.”

“He was right,” said Harry softly, stepping out of the embrace, glad that Draco was apparently more reasonable than Harry had thought he would be. “I went to Durmstrang.”

Draco’s face turned the color of ashes. “You what?” he said, and now Harry could see the anger building in him. “But you promised, Harry. You said that you would leave the research on Durmstrang to wizards and witches who could handle it because they were the parents of children there. You took the first chance to free the school that came along, didn’t you?”

“I wouldn’t call Evan Rosier much of a chance,” Harry said. “Certainly not the one I would have chosen.”

“Rosier was here?” Draco stared at him as if he were mad.

Harry nodded, and then, seeing a way to deflect anger from him for a while, glanced at McGonagall. “Is the school safe to stay open, Headmistress?” he asked. “If the wards are going to drain every night, I mean.”

McGonagall sat down behind her desk, looking very tired. “Yes,” she said quietly. “I’ve described the problem to several ward-builders at the Ministry, and they said it sounds familiar. They’re coming tomorrow to strengthen the wards and prevent them from draining. If they couldn’t have done anything, then I would have sincerely considered closing Hogwarts, or asking you to construct a lightning ward that included both the school and Hogsmeade.”

Harry nodded. “That’s how Rosier got in,” he said. “Apparating, because the wards are so weak. He set the fire and seized Hermione when he found her in the halls. He put a collar on her like the one Mulciber wore last year, the one that I exploded when I killed him. He said that hers would trigger at a thought, to kill her.”

“And you believed him?”

Harry turned to stare at Snape as his guardian took one of the chairs. “What do you mean?”

“I investigated those collars last year after Mulciber’s death,” said Snape in a glacial voice. “They are clever, but an inherently inflexible design, one that can only be altered in a number of select ways. They can control thoughts, and block them from outside influences. They will also hurt the victim if removed by force. But only someone with as much magic as you could make one burst, Harry. At most, Rosier might have used that collar to compel Miss Granger to do what he wanted her to do, or encouraged you to free and thus hurt her. And that is all.”

Harry bit his lip. “I didn’t think he was bluffing,” he said. “This was Evan Rosier. He plays riddles and tricks and games, but he doesn’t bluff.” And running a bluff like that would add to the thrill of the game for him, added the darker part of his mind, the one that came closer to understanding Rosier than he would have liked.
“You don’t know that!” Snape roared, and leaned forward. “You didn’t even consider the possibility, though you know he is a liar! You believed him without question! That is what must stop, Harry! This senseless risking of your life on the word of your enemies, as if you trust your enemies more than your friends—”

“Enough, Severus,” McGonagall interrupted. Harry turned to see that she was sitting behind her desk. “I, for one, would like to hear the whole story without interruption. And I suspect that there will be time for scolding later.” She smiled at Harry, but with steel behind the sympathy. “Please sit down, Harry.”

Harry sat down, took a deep breath, and resumed the story. “Rosier said that he’d used an Insomnia Charm to get me out of the common room, but that didn’t work fast enough for his tastes, so he set the fire. Sure enough, I came rushing out, and he had Hermione with her collar. He claimed that he wanted to pay a life debt he’d incurred when I set him free of Yaxley’s thorns in the graveyard and healed him. If I refused, he’d make the collar explode and Hermione die.” Harry shuddered convulsively as he remembered the look in Hermione’s eyes when Rosier pulled her forward. “I don’t know what he’d already done to her. You’ll want to talk to her, Headmistress.” McGonagall nodded, lips thin.

“He had a Portkey that he’d ‘obtained’ from loyal Death Eaters; he still has contacts among them. He said it would take us to Durmstrang, behind the lightning ward. And if we took too long, Hermione would also die, because the collar would explode an hour from the moment he offered me the Portkey.”

“Even though it could not have,” said Snape, contempt in every note of his voice. “Even though you were taking a foolish and suicidal risk in grasping the Portkey of a known madman.”

“I agree,” said Draco.

“Please, gentlemen,” said McGonagall. “Let Harry finish his story.”

Harry breathed deeply for a long moment, so that what came out would be the words of that story and not his rage. Then he said, “I thought I had no choice. I agreed, and we did indeed go to Durmstrang.”

“Coincidence,” Snape muttered. “Not a sign that you could trust him.”

Harry found that his fingers hurt, and looked down. He was vaguely surprised to see them gripping the side of his chair so hard the knuckles had turned white. He swallowed and continued. “Bellatrix had an object that Ariadne’s Web linked to. It turned out to be her right hand. I was going to cut it off, but Rosier revealed himself and taunted Bellatrix into injuring a girl before I could. So I had to reveal myself and cut it off then. Bellatrix thought I wouldn’t destroy it because it had been my hand.” He saw Draco pale from the corner of his eye. “I did burn it, though, and the web was gone. Then Rosier used a Severing Curse on Bellatrix, and I killed her; she was mad and in pain. I couldn’t stay long to reassure the children at Durmstrang. I was afraid Hermione’s collar would explode any moment and kill her. We came back here, and Rosier kept his word to remove the collar and leave.” Harry stirred uneasily, remembering his last words. “He also made a threat against Henrietta Bulstrode.”

“Mrs. Bulstrode should prove tougher prey than he thinks,” McGonagall murmured. Harry nodded, remembering the way McGonagall had watched Henrietta at their meetings in the Room of Requirement.

“But I still want to warn her,” he added.

“That can come later.” Snape had got control of his voice now, and it was only furiously quiet instead of furiously loud. It sounded more like a whip that way, though, and Harry flinched as he listened. “First, Harry, I want you to explain what you thought you were doing.”

“Saving Hermione’s life,” said Harry, as distinctly as he could amid the conflicting impulses to lower his eyes and just listen, and the one to defend himself.

“Even though the collar was fake,” Snape said.

“Yes.”

“And would you have given your life for any student like that?” Snape sneered. “I had thought that your circle of senseless sacrifices had grown smaller, so that we only had to worry about the safety of a certain number of people as connected to you. Or
am I wrong? Would you sacrifice your life to save an Augurey chick hatched yesterday?"

Harry took a deep breath. “No one deserves to suffer at Evan Rosier’s hands,” he said. “And what he asked for wasn’t a hostage exchange, or to kill me instead of her. He wanted something within my power. So, yes, I did it.”

“You did not answer my question.” Snape’s face was now white to the lips. “Any student? The Augurey chick?”

“The Augurey chick, I don’t know,” said Harry softly. “Any student?” He considered his response. Snape wasn’t going to like it. On the other hand, Snape was also staring into his eyes and would know if he lied. “Yes.”

Snape leaned forward like a viper. Harry found himself shrinking back in his chair. He hadn’t known Snape could move so fast. “That is what we must heal,” Snape snarled. “That is what you must give up. You know what importance your life holds to those around you, Harry. And if you will not think of that—if you cannot think of that when your enemies are threatening other students with nonexistent magic—then think of your importance to the war effort and the prophecy. You told me that you believe the way you and Draco defeated Dumbledore was only the first iteration of the prophecy, that two more are to come. And who do you think will stand before those Dark Lords if you are dead?”

“He didn’t want to kill me, I said,” Harry forced out between his teeth, clamping down on the urge to say something unforgivable. “I had an excellent chance of surviving the evening.”

“You didn’t know that.” Snape’s voice only got lower and more intense. “He could have taken you to Voldemort with that Portkey, or dropped you down a bottomless pit. You had no way of knowing, and still you gripped that Portkey. You do seem to trust your enemies better than your friends.”

Harry closed his eyes, mostly to keep Snape from seeing his anger. “It has nothing to do with that, sir, and everything to do with making the best decision I could under impossible circumstances,” he said quietly.

“And why did you not simply kill Rosier?” Snape asked. “You could have done that, Harry, the moment you saw him. Then you would have spared Miss Granger’s life and secured your own safety.”

“And forfeited the chance to save the children at Durmstrang.”

“You can’t use that as an argument, Harry,” Draco said from his other side. “You admitted that you didn’t know what Rosier was going to do with that Portkey, and you had no way to be sure that he was telling the truth. So you can’t say that the way it turned out was for the best. You didn’t know how it would turn out then.”

Harry had to admit that. “All right,” he said. “But you know very well why I didn’t kill him. I don’t just—I don’t just kill people.”

“And that is an attitude you will need to lose around Rosier,” said Snape.

“I did say that I would kill him the next time I met him,” Harry protested.

“But you didn’t kill him before he Apparated away,” Draco said. “He’s alive to make trouble for you in the future.”

Harry ran his hand through his hair, and suppressed the impulse to spring up and pace, mostly because he was sure McGonagall wouldn’t like it. He looked at the Headmistress, whose face was hard in that way that made it impossible to guess what kind of homework or detentions she would assign next. “What do you think of this, Madam?” he asked her.

McGonagall nodded a little, as if she’d been waiting for someone to ask her her opinion. “I think that you did the best you could under very hard circumstances, Harry,” she said. “But you need to think of the future. And you need to take precautions that will satisfy your guardian and your—” She shook her head as if all the words she could use to describe Draco’s relationship with him were too undignified for her to utter. “I’m not sure what those will be. But I encourage you to take them.” She stood. “And if I’m not mistaken, more visitors are arriving now, perhaps to see that you are back, or perhaps because they know that Durmstrang is free.”

She stepped forward and opened the door to her office before anyone could knock. Narcissa Malfoy looked startled for half a second, before she gave a stiff nod to McGonagall. McGonagall nodded back even more stiffly, as if the fate of the world depended on the way she bent her neck. Harry knew the two women didn’t like each other, but he’d rarely seen it so clearly expressed.
Narcissa swept into the room, and focused on Harry. Harry was gratified to see an expression of relief cross her face for a moment, as if she hadn’t been sure she would find Harry alive and well until she saw him. But then her features cooled, and she swept forward and held her left arm out to Harry.

“Do you know what this is, Harry?”

He looked down in dread, expecting to see some cousin to the Dark Mark, but found only three parallel lines. Two of them looked as if they were already healing. The third was still open and bleeding. Harry leaned back, staring at her face, and shook his head.

“They are the marks of my oath of vengeance,” said Narcissa in a casual voice, “the one I took to make Bellatrix suffer three times over. I had inflicted two of those penalties on her, with the taking of her left hand and the cutting off of her breasts. Now I find that it is impossible for me to fulfill my oath, because someone else has killed her.” She leaned forward until she was staring at Harry from an inch away. “I swore that knowing there was a chance that I would not fulfill it,” she said quietly, “that someone else would slay Bella in battle before I had the chance to make her suffer again. But I never thought, Harry, that it would be you, someone who knew about my oath and has had first-hand experience with how vicious vows can be.”

Harry winced. “What happens now?” he asked, because everyone, from Narcissa herself to Lucius, standing motionless in the door, seemed to expect it.

“I don’t know,” said Narcissa, drawing away. “It’s been centuries since someone dared to swear and then violate that oath. But it will almost certainly wait in my future, fanged, trying to trap me into the greatest misfortune it can. It was Dark magic I invoked. And Dark magic is more unforgiving than the Light magic you favor, Harry, or the reckless magic of heroism.” She shook her head and stepped away from him. “When Charles contacted us to tell us about Durmstrang, and that you’d killed Bellatrix, I felt as if I were falling.”

Harry looked away, but in doing that, he caught Lucius’s eyes, which said he should have done anything rather than kill Bellatrix and damn Narcissa. He looked at his hand, shame winning out over his anger again.

“So your reckless act has had consequences for people beyond yourself and Miss Granger, Harry,” said Snape, his voice deep with some emotion Harry didn’t want to examine too closely. “What have you to say now? Will you think twice about risking your life in the future, or will the desire to be a hero overcome you and make you dash off again?”

He paused, telling Harry it wasn’t a rhetorical question. He swallowed. “It wasn’t like that,” he whispered. “I didn’t do it out of desire to be a hero.”

“But you were thinking less about your own life and more about the lives of others,” Draco said. “Is that a fair summary, Harry?”

“Yes, but—“

“You are only making excuses, now,” said Snape. “You know that what you did was reckless, and there is no reason but the greatest good luck for it to have turned out as well as it did. You are acting like a child, Harry, after some time of making progress. And if you will not agree to some restrictions of your own free will, you will drive us to measures you hate, simply to ease our fears.”

“I didn’t mean to do that,” said Harry, thinking of Hermione’s lack of expression, thinking of the way that the pain in Owen’s face had eased when his brother healed him. It hadn’t just been the pain of his broken leg. “I didn’t—there were other concerns at stake—“

“Not as important as your life,” said Draco, and settled a possessive arm around his waist. “Nothing is as important as your life.”

“I just—there are times when—“

“You should have thought,” said Snape, and his voice had a smugness that sank claws into Harry’s temper. “You should have remembered that your enemy was a known liar and a Death Eater who would stop at nothing to hurt you. You were foolish to trust whatever honor he pretended to observe with the life debt. Foolishness, childishness, and perhaps lack of thought? Do those complete the list of your mistakes? No, they do not—“

“Stop it!”
Harry hadn’t known he would shout before he lifted his voice to do it. It appeared to startle most of the other people in the room, too. Narcissa took a step away from him, and Snape shut up, and Draco’s arm fell limply from his waist. The look in Lucius’s eyes grew colder. McGonagall blinked.

“I did the best I could with what I thought I knew at the time and the circumstances I had,” said Harry. He realized he’d stood up, too. He didn’t remember doing that. He stared at Snape’s face, trying to make him see reason. “I didn’t know that about the silver collars, sir, because you never told me. And I did believe he would kill Hermione. And once I was at Durmstrang, I did what I thought I had to do. If I hadn’t killed her, Mrs. Malfoy, then Rosier would have. I’m sorry about the oath, but it was going to be broken no matter what happened tonight.” As he spoke, he grew calmer, but he could feel the leashed beast of his temper straining under the surface. If they just accepted this, as he hoped they would, then he wouldn’t have to shout any more.

Snape, of course, didn’t accept it.

“The main problem, Harry, is that you did not think,” he said. “You claim to have changed, but you still follow your instincts in such situations, and not your thoughts. If I were in your place, I would have—”

“Shut up,” said Harry, with such ugly force in his voice that Snape did. “If you were in my place, you would have done wonderfully. Of course you say that. But you weren’t in it, were you? And it’s very easy to judge from the outside, isn’t it, the way you judge the failure of your students in Potions? And you judge, you snipe, you snap, instead of for just once trying something else—” He struggled, and managed to restrain the words that wanted to burst forth. They were too personal to say in front of other people. He was not a pathetic child wanting something more than that judgment from Snape. He wasn’t.

“If someone outside your situation could see what needed to be done so clearly—” Snape began.

“You weren’t there!” Harry screamed at him. “None of you ever are! That’s why I have to make decisions on my own, because I’m the only one who’s bloody there, and my enemies aren’t the kind to wait around politely while I debate morality in my head! And yes, sometimes, I think a missed night of sleep is more than enough recompense for my endangering my life, which happens all the time anyway! At least this time I got something out of it!”

“But that’s what you say every time,” Draco protested.

Harry turned on him. “No, most of the time I just accept your scolding as deserved, Draco,” he snarled. “I might argue a little, but then I give in and promise that I won’t do it again. And we both know those promises are false, because Voldemort—stop flinching, Merlin damn you!—won’t stop using those techniques. Because they work. It’s useless for me to promise that I won’t go away without consulting you, because then I’ll end up betraying something deeper.”

“Like what?” Draco had risen to his feet in turn, and though his face was pale, he spoke challengingly.

“Everything I am, for a start,” Harry said. “And the same thing will happen when I start killing in cold blood without asking questions, or when I start dithering and sacrificing lives in a situation that calls for direct action. Sometimes, all I can do is survive. Tell me something, show me a way, that lets me do something else, and I’ll do that. But I’m not going to become the kind of hardened soldier you think I should be. I escaped from that. That’s the way Lily trained me to be, a silent soldier who accepts sacrifices as sad but necessary. I won’t go back to that. I’ve fought too hard. So, sorry, Draco, but I won’t place myself above other people just because I’m important to you, or because I’m important to the war effort.”

“You have to,” Draco said, and his face had turned paler. “Sometimes, Harry, you have to. If Voldemort is going to kill a dozen children in front of you, and says that he’ll spare their lives if you just come down to him, would you really give up your life?”

“I’d do what I could,” said Harry. “And then, yes, Draco, I would suffer for it, and question whether I couldn’t have made a better decision. I’ll fight this war my own way. It’ll always be my own way. I’m not Dumbledore, and I’m not Voldemort, and I’m not a Malfoy. And I’m not just in love with you, though it’s an important part of who I am.” He glanced sideways at Snape. “And I’m not just your ward, either, and you don’t seem to understand that. I’m not going to submit to the kind of restrictions you want, because they’re stupid restrictions, and they would interfere with my life more than Rosier wants to. I want more than other people want for me. Sometimes,” he added, choking on the bitterness that bubbled up his throat, “I don’t know whether you’ve really accepted that I’ve started healing, even though you encouraged me to do it. I’m healing into a person who wants more than just what the two of you think I should want. And sometimes I think that you don’t know that any more than Lily did.”

The silence in the wake of that was boulder-heavy. Snape’s face had assumed an expression Harry had no name for. Draco had
put out a hand towards Harry, but he retracted it towards his side now, snapping it into a fist. His face had turned the color of whey.

“I’m tired,” Harry finished. “And I survived, and I did the best I thought I could under the circumstances.” He nodded to Narcissa, who watched him as if he were someone she had never seen before. “And, Mrs. Malfoy, I’m sorry about your oath, but I won’t be responsible for the breaking of it. You knew the risk when you made it. You’re an adult. If I allow that to you, will you allow my mistakes to me?”

Narcissa shook her head, but Harry wasn’t sure what part of his declaration she was answering. Harry moved towards the door.

Lucius stood in his way.

Harry met his eyes and waited. Lucius inclined his head an infinitesimal amount and stood aside.

Harry went down the moving staircase more rapidly than it wanted to go, springing from step to step, and made his way as quickly as he could to a window. He didn’t want to go outside, not when the wards were this weak, though he wished he could spring on a broom and fly. He leaned out the window, though, and panted in the cool air, which made his throat burn with something other than the anger that had flayed it so far. Harry leaned his head on his hand and stared up at the sky, which showed only stars.

Light pierced the darkness near him. He blinked at the sky, and then the hall, and then his hand. Phoenix fire was surging in it again, responding, Harry supposed, to his emotions. He could sing, too, if he wanted.

Harry closed his eyes and swallowed the song, and willed the fire to lie down. He was something more than what Fawkes had given him, something more than Draco’s boyfriend, something more than Snape’s ward, something more than the war leader of the alliance and Voldemort’s enemy. If he wasn’t going to let the label “abused child” define him, then why should he let others close on him like chains? He wouldn’t, and perhaps he’d been wrong and that wasn’t what other people wanted to do to him, but it was what he felt they’d done to him, and he shivered with pain and anger and fear of being caged, and that was all right. No need to go crawling back to Snape and Draco and ask their forgiveness at once, not if what they’d taught him was true. No need to go talk to Vera, because these emotions weren’t unnatural or the product of his training. He was feeling, thinking, as himself, and it was all right.

He opened his eyes slowly, and looked at the stars again. His breathing had slowed, and the emotions felt less bitter and poisonous than they had before, as if he didn’t need to tear himself apart just because he’d felt them.

*Perhaps this was a purging, after all.*

And then, since he was tired, he stood and turned back towards the dungeons, so that he could get some sleep.

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

Chapter Sixty-Three: Cousin Arcturus Had a Sense of Humor

January 22nd, 1995

Dear Harry:

*I am writing to thank you for freeing my children from Durmstrang and the control of that madwoman. Thank you seems inadequate to express my true gratitude, but unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately, considering the use to which they would sometimes be put—English does not contain other words that approach what I mean, either. I have had the tale from Owen and Michael both, how you appeared, how you severed Bellatrix’s hand, and how you destroyed it. Owen was close enough to hear what she whispered to you, and I can only say that destroying your own flesh when the Dark Lord’s minions had already cut it from your body may be accounted another sacrifice. They know you could not stay and why. Thank you for pulling down the lightning ward as well; it served as a signal to us that something had changed inside the school, and not something Bellatrix would have wanted. I was part of a shift of parents watching that night. We Apparated in immediately, of course.*

*I am writing this letter because I understand, from speaking with Mr. Malfoy, that some people view your actions very differently than I do. A spoken communication to you may not be believed. A written letter, you may show to whomsoever you like, and they will then see that one of your allies stands behind you whatever may come from now on, snow or lightning or*
Harry folded the letter carefully, and slid it into his pocket. The eagle-owl that carried it had found him at the top of the Owlery, where he’d come to visit Hedwig. Harry supposed it was meant to find him at the school table, where no one could miss that someone was pleased enough with Harry to send such a magnificent bird, but this was just as well. Harry had the choice now of concealing that he’d received post, if he wanted.

Hedwig made a jealous sound as Harry fed the eagle-owl a treat. The eagle-owl gave her a look of glacial contempt which Hedwig returned. Then she turned back to Harry and ran a strand of hair through her beak, nibbling at it.

“Yes, you’re still my favorite,” Harry reassured her, turning around so that he could pet her. Sometimes it was a pain having no hand on the opposite side.

Hedwig hooted proudly at the eagle-owl, but it had already lost interest in them and launched itself towards the Owlery window. Harry shook his head as he watched it fly away. The sky beyond the window was a clear pearly-gray, already shedding opportunistic flakes of snow. Harry knew it would only get more bitterly cold as the week wore on. He wasn’t looking forward to playing against Ravenclaw this weekend, though Warming Charms and thick robes would protect them when they flew.

“Harry?”

Surprised, he turned his head, and then blinked. Connor stood in the Owlery entrance behind him, sticking his hands into his robe pockets as the chill penetrated his skin. Harry had spoken with him yesterday and told him the story of the fight with Draco and Snape—the first of whom had tried to talk about what had happened with him in such a way that showed he wasn’t ready to admit the rightness of anything Harry said, and whom he’d walked away from—but he hadn’t expected Connor to find him this morning.

“I thought you might like some company when you walk down to breakfast,” said Connor quietly. “I know it’s usually with Malfoy, and, well…” He shrugged as if he were embarrassed to be bringing it up now, and scratched the back of his neck.

“That’s welcome, Connor, actually. Thank you.” Harry let Hedwig go with one final scratch to her breast feathers, and then reached up and drew Argutus gently out of his sleeve. “You said to let you know when we were leaving the cold place,” he told the snake, who refused to trust Warming Charms to actually keep him warm.

“Now we are? Good.” Argutus lifted his head out and tested the air with his tongue, seeming ready to hide again until Harry and Connor actually walked through the door and down the steps. “It is beyond me why you wish to come to the cold places. You should stay in the warm places and sleep when you feel bad. In fact, you should stay in the warm places and sleep even when you do not feel bad. It keeps you healthy.”

Harry smiled and shook his head. Argutus understood little of the terms of the argument that Harry, Draco, and Snape had had, so he conceived it to mean that Harry “felt bad,” and should therefore spend a lot of time in bed with his faithful snake coiled around him. He’d been disappointed when Harry got up yesterday and insisted on studying and eating and moving around.

“There’s one thing I still don’t understand.”

Harry glanced back at Connor to make sure that he would speak English. “What’s that?”

“I mean—you did the best you could,” said Connor. “Just like the trial, and lots of other situations they’ve seen you do the best you could in.”

Harry nodded, and then had to stop and pick Argutus up as he misjudged his ability to coil around the very edge of Harry’s severed left wrist and fell on the floor. Argutus slid back up his sleeve in embarrassment.

“So why is this so different?” Connor asked.

“I don’t know,” Harry mused. “Perhaps the timing of it. Lots of things have happened in a few months—” Connor smothered a laugh. Harry glared at him. “Well, they have. Maybe they got tired of it. Or maybe they’ve been so worried for so long that it
erupted like this. Or maybe they really did think that I never answered back because I agreed with them, instead of just thinking they might be right, and not wanting to say things I’d regret.”

“Well, either way, it’s stupid,” said Connor.

“I quite agree.”

They ran into several Gryffindors coming from the Tower on their way down, including the Weasley twins, Hermione, and Edith Bulstrode, who had quickly become fast friends with at least one girl in her year. Harry divided his observation between them. Hermione wasn’t nearly as pale as she had been the night Rosier kidnapped her, but she still gave every shadow they passed a nervous glance; Harry thought Rosier might have grabbed her in a shadowy corner. Edith never spoke very loudly, and blushed when someone looked at her too long, but she was healing slowly, Harry thought. Her mother had stepped hard on her, but she hadn’t managed to pound or crush everything good out of her. Edith still had deep roots and even a bright blossom, if she could be persuaded to raise her head.

She saw him looking and flushed again, but she smiled. Harry smiled back at her, and then had his attention insistently caught by the twin he thought was George.

“Did you say that—“

“Professor Snape argued with you?” Fred finished. “That was the rumor yesterday, at any rate.”

Harry snorted. “Yes, but it’s not about anything to do with Potions,” he said. “Thanks for asking, though.”

The twins exchanged a sly glance, and Harry could feel his eyes narrow. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“Doing?” Fred asked, a wildly innocent expression on his face. “Why must we be—“

“Doing something all the time?” George asked. “We’re pure, Harry! Clean as the driven snow!”

Harry thought of the snow that blew across his face during winter Quidditch practice, and the slush it usually collected and melted into when lots of people had been stepping on it. “I can believe that,” he said.

The twins snickered in unison, and put their heads together. Harry sped up a little. If they actually planned on pranking Snape, then he didn’t want to know about it.

They entered the Great Hall together, much more noisily than Harry usually entered it; Gryffindors would talk about anything, it seemed, and at the top of their lungs, and at a point in the day when most of the people at the other House tables were still half-asleep. Harry caught many drowsy glares directed their way, but as he broke from them and turned towards the Slytherin table, only two remained fixed on him specifically. One from the head table and one from Slytherin, of course, beside a seat what had remained empty.

Harry didn’t take it; this early, there were plenty of other places on the bench. He sat down beside Millicent, who nodded as if she understood every nuance of their argument, though Harry doubted she did. He and Draco had argued in an empty corridor rather than the Slytherin common room yesterday. He reached for the plate of pancakes, responding absently to the questions a fourth-year was asking him about Divination. Conversation about that subject didn’t need much attention at the worst of times.

“I just wanted to tell you something.”

Harry looked up, again surprised; he hadn’t noticed Connor following him to the Slytherin table. Connor stood in front of Draco, who turned his head slowly to give him the full force of a haughty Malfoy glare. Connor didn’t seem intimidated. He’d seemed much less intimidated altogether since he’d become the Potter heir, Harry had noticed.

“What?” Draco asked at last, in a voice that could cut ice.

Connor leaned forward until he was nose to nose with Draco. “You’re being stupid,” he said, and then turned and strode towards the Gryffindor table, leaving Draco blinking at his back.

Harry looked down at his plate, pretending he hadn’t been paying attention when Draco glanced at him, and hid his smile in his
breakfast.

When he finished, of course, and stood to make his way to Double Potions, Draco’s hand was insistent on his shoulder. Harry looked into his face and sighed. “I’ll be along in a minute,” he told Blaise, who’d lingered to wait for him.

“Why wait?” Draco said, his voice steady. “After all, we have the class together. We’ll walk together.”

Harry bit his tongue. If Draco wanted to fight in front of an audience, then that was what would happen. He turned and began walking towards the entrance of the Great Hall, fast enough to force Draco and Blaise to scramble after him. Draco was flushed from more than exertion when he came up beside Harry, and he grabbed his shoulder again. Harry shook himself free with a movement he’d learned in his training with Lily.

“Stop this,” said Draco, as if that had been his breaking point, his voice sharp as frozen crystal.

“No,” said Harry in the same tone.

“You know that we have a point, Harry—“

“About calling me a foolish child who’ll never learn? About expecting that I should just submit to monitoring spells like a baby? About saying that I should have considered my life before anyone else’s?” Harry snorted. “Forgive me if I think none of that’s worthy of a serious response, Draco.”

“But you have to—“

“No,” said Harry. “I don’t have to.”

“But I’ve been reading history,” Draco insisted. “I’ve read about war leaders, Harry. And Lords, even though I know you hate the term. They all had to harden their hearts to survive war. And when they did something foolish, like trying to go out and rescue a doomed group of soldiers, then their companions had to do the right thing, and sit on them.”

“You’re a bit too slow, then,” Harry sniped at him. “You’re always trying to sit on me when the doomed soldiers are already safely back in the camp.”

“If you wouldn’t get into these situations in the first place, then we wouldn’t have the urge to do this!” Harry didn’t look at Draco, but he knew his face would be turning pink.

“Oh, yes, Draco, I get into these situations on purpose,” Harry snarled. “I walk around with food in my outstretched hand, calling to Voldemort—and I think you’re a child for flinching at his name, by the way—to please come bite it off at the wrist! I lure Rosier to me with a trail of bread crumbs, and beg him to kidnap Hermione so that I’ll have something heroic to do! And I just can’t go a week without killing someone. I long for it. I pant for it. I yearn for it. That’s why you’re always having to sit on me when the danger’s past, not because Voldemort hates me and Rosier’s a bloody madman!”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” said Draco.

“You never do,” Harry said, distantly, and strode ahead of him, Blaise at his side. Draco willingly dropped behind. Harry didn’t know what he was thinking. He’d almost think that his words had to be making an impression on that thick skull, but, on the other hand, Draco seemed incapable of giving in; he wanted Harry to admit that he was absolutely right, rather than saying that sometimes he could be wrong. Harry could have compromised if it had been understood that he wouldn’t be a good little boy and always tell Snape and Draco where he was going, because that was impossible. Both Draco and Snape seemed to think that he could be a good little boy with just a little more effort.

“Wow,” said Blaise at last.

Harry grinned sideways at him. “A bit more explosive than our usual arguments,” he agreed, proud of himself for his calm tone. He wasn’t flaying himself with guilt for arguing at all, because this time, he was right. He wasn’t trembling in anxiety for the day when he could reconcile with Draco and Snape, though Merlin knew he wanted it. It felt wonderful to have honest anger supporting him. “Now, did you read about the potion we’re doing today? It’s tricky. The potion will congeal if you don’t add a counterclockwise stir at the end of every nine clockwise stirs, even though most of the books don’t say that…”
Snape noticed signs of trouble the moment he entered Double Potions that morning. Harry was sitting on the other side of the room from Draco, with Blaise. Draco sat by himself, sulking, though Padma Patil, the only one in the room who didn’t have a partner so far, had planted herself tentatively at his shoulder.

Snape concealed a snarl. *Harry doing that simply to hurt Draco is unworthy of him.*

The bitterness that had choked him for the past day rose up again. Harry had nearly died, and still he had the gall to act as if nothing had happened! He could not even make allowances for words that Snape would not have spoken if anger and guilt—at missing Harry’s descent into danger, again—and relief had not seized him in a maelstrom. He had to hold a grudge now, of all times, when at others, he had understood why Draco and Snape were worried. Snape wondered what was so different, this time of all times.

*That he had to compare us to Lily Potter!* 

That had stung so violently that Snape hadn’t even attempted to speak to Harry yesterday. He had known he would shout about that remark, and Harry would defend himself, and everything would crash further down the pit than it had already fallen. He had stayed in his rooms, brooding and marking essays, and contended himself with the knowledge that Harry couldn’t really have meant it, that by the next day, things would be different.

It had been a nasty shock to come into breakfast that morning and see Draco sitting alone. And now this. Snape shook his head and drew his wand. It would be a day when he cast Potions instructions on the board and ignored the students for half the class, so that he could keep his temper when he walked among them later and tested the quality of their brewing.

He turned to the board and flicked his wand, envisioning the instructions for the Mind-Calming Potion.

A series of bright red bubbles rose out of his wand, followed by a confused kitten, who dropped to the floor and began to mew.

Snape stared. This was definitely his wand. What in Merlin’s name—

He heard a helpless giggle from behind him, but when he whipped around, the students were all sitting with definitely shut mouths. Harry was looking at Blaise, as if he thought his face would turn red if he looked at Snape.

Snape turned back, this time whispering the incantation aloud under his breath. It wasn’t common, but sometimes, when the caster of a nonverbal spell was sufficiently distracted, the effect would be something very different than what he’d intended without the words to shape and guide it.

This time, a second kitten joined the first, amid a series of pink bubbles. The kittens sniffed each other and began to crawl around the floor, toddling earnestly in the direction of the students. The giggles were louder now, and multiple.

Snape felt the muscles in his neck tighten. He was a few inches from snapping. That this had to happen now!

He spoke *Lumos* under his breath, and made the gesture with the wand perfectly; this was a spell he’d known long before he came to school, thanks to the patient instruction of his mother.

A blue pixie appeared on the tip of his wand, considered him for a moment, and flew away. Snape heard a snicker. It sounded like Harry’s.

That was all it took to snap his calm, especially when it sounded as if the pixie had got into his ingredients stores.

“*Out!*” he screamed, whipping around. The students were already fleeing if they were Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw. Connor Potter lingered a moment, looking fascinated, and Harry was rising to his feet with an infuriating lack of concern. Snape stared directly at him. Harry looked back with no sign of guilt, but plenty of amusement. Snape snarled at him, and Harry rolled his eyes and turned his back, picking up his Potions book at a perfectly normal pace.

Snape was certain he could hear laughter out in the corridor.
He used wandless magic to slam and lock the door, and then settled down to examine his wand. It was, demonstrably, still his wand. His first thought had been that someone had switched it for one of the fake wands the Weasley twins had invented, but it was too familiar in his hand.

Then he cast Nox, and felt it. A tingle of magic ran through the wand just at the moment he voiced the spell, getting there barely ahead of his own incantation. It switched out his wand core and replaced it with a different one, one that caused a pink snake with hearts on its sides to land on his desk. The moment he stopped trying to cast, his old wand core reappeared.

Snape might have appreciated the sophistication of the trick at any other time; it took near-genius to devise a spell that would switch his core with something else without damaging the wand, and the person or persons who had done it had accomplished it without ever stealing his wand from his possession. But Snape didn’t care, this day of all days. And he knew it had been the Weasley twins. He had no proof, but that had never stopped him from assigning detention.

He rose and turned towards the door, intending to find the twins, wherever they were now, and take points from them and assign detention in front of their professor and entire class. That ought to be enough for the beginning of his vengeance.

He fell, sprawling. When he looked down, he found that the pixie had tied his robes together.

The pixie, the kittens, and the pink snake all got caught up in a rush of violent wandless magic in the next few minutes.

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Harry shook his head as he headed back to the Slytherin common room after dinner. Draco had tried another variation of the argument, this time saying that of course, since he loved Harry so much, he was entitled to be a little unreasonable. Harry had said, “Not that unreasonable,” and it had all gone downhill from there. This time, Draco hadn’t taken even the relative privacy of a corridor, instead screaming at him in the Great Hall. Harry wondered if he had thought that would encourage Harry to back down and admit he was right sooner. It hadn’t. It just made Harry more and more stubborn. He could accept compromise; he could admit that the remark comparing Snape and Draco to Lily would have hurt, for example. But he wasn’t just going to say that they were right, and that seemed to be what they wanted.

“Oy, Harry!”

Harry turned in startlement, then smiled. Regulus stood behind him, propped against a wall of the entrance hall in a deliberately devil-may-care position, his head cocked to one side and his arms folded. “What are you doing here?” Harry asked, even as he went to him and hugged him. He hadn’t seen Regulus since Christmas, though he assumed he knew of what was happening. The papers had certainly trumpeted Dumbledore’s death loudly enough, and now the Daily Prophet was having a field day tracking down known supporters of Dumbledore and asking them if their views had changed. They tended to stammer in their interviews, and most of the pureblood Light students in the school made a point of stating loudly that they didn’t think anyone could support Dumbledore now that it was known he’d been a Dark Lord.

“I heard about your fight with Draco and Severus,” Regulus said. “Severus ranted at me for several hours yesterday about what you’d done.”

Harry sighed and stepped away from Regulus. “If you came to plead for him, then—“

“No,” Regulus interrupted. “I thought about telling him he was being stupid, at first, but that just entrenches Severus further into his position, as if he thinks that he has a right to be stupid when someone else notices. So I came to cheer you up instead. How would you like to visit Wayhouse?”

Harry hesitated. The truth was that he didn’t have very much homework, and he’d only seen the house once, when he and Narcissa were searching for Regulus’s body, and then not for very long. “Have you spoken to the Headmistress about taking me off school grounds?”

Regulus grinned at him. “So proper, Harry,” he teased.

“I really try not to get into trouble,” Harry said, all his defensiveness returning in a rush. “I do, you know. But when I do, then I don’t see why I should have to think of what other people would do before what I have to do—“

“Hush,” said Regulus, and his hand fell to caress Harry’s hair. He seemed to know the trick of ruffling it without messing it up
further, which Harry had thought once that only Lily did. “I know. I don’t think it was fair, either. Just because I kept silent under Severus’s tirade yesterday doesn’t mean I didn’t pick a side.” He winked at Harry. “And it’s the side my heir’s on.”

“I’m not going to be the Black heir,” said Harry, exasperation of one kind turning into exasperation of another. “Really, Regulus.”

“Oh, I haven’t been trying to bribe or trick you into accepting the inheritance,” said Regulus, his face exactly as innocent as the Weasley twins had been that morning. “I just think you might like to see beautiful things that won’t endanger you, sometimes. And this time, you’re right.”

Harry wavered for a moment, but the only thing that really bothered him was a half-done Charms essay, and he didn’t have Charms until after lunch tomorrow; he could easily get it done. “All right,” he agreed, and followed Regulus towards the school entrance.

“I did speak to the Headmistress, as it happens,” Regulus tossed back to him over his shoulder. “She seemed to think it was a good idea.”

Harry nodded. It was becoming increasingly obvious that McGonagall had changed her mind about his needing to listen to Draco and Snape, perhaps because of how unreasonable they’d been. She’d taught their Transfiguration class today, and given Harry several smiles that she didn’t have to.

Regulus pulled out a Portkey the moment they were out of the school, and Harry blinked. “Wouldn’t it be better to just walk down the Hogsmeade road and Apparate?” he asked.

Regulus shook his head. “Wayhouse is temperamental,” he said. “Currently, it’s decided that no one should Apparate to it. I can’t remove the wards that would let me do that, because Cousin Arcturus built that house and essentially gave it free will. So when it doesn’t want me to do something, I can’t. It obeys me in the big things, but the little things are all its own.”

Harry smiled at that—the house sounded like the Many—and reached out, gripping the Portkey, which looked like a sweet wrapper, with his hand. Argutus watched in interest from his left wrist as they whirled around and the world changed positions. The little snake liked to travel by Portkey lately, though Harry didn’t understand why.

They landed in a room that Harry only vaguely remembered, one of those he’d searched with Narcissa. He straightened up, glanced around, and nodded. Yes, this was Wayhouse. Its walls were built of silvery wood, and molded and dipped in odd shapes, as if he stood inside a hollow tree. And the magic sang around him. Not even Malfoy Manor or Lux Aeterna showed their power so obviously; Harry guessed both Dark and Light purebloods usually thought some modicum of decorum necessary. Not Wayhouse. Harry could feel the multiple spells humming on the staircases, and the room they stood in, which might once have been a nursery, had small spells fastened to the walls, apparently just because.

There was something odd about the place, though, beyond its general oddness. Harry shifted and glanced over his shoulder. He felt as though someone were watching him, even though no portrait hung in the room.

“Regulus?” he asked.

“Hmmm?” Regulus had worked his way over to the other side of the room, and a large mosaic made entirely of polished blue shells. “Watch this, Harry.” He stroked the shells, and they went into motion, bending and rising to mimic waves of the sea. Harry stepped closer, and smiled to see merfolk rising from the waves, mostly to stick their tongues out at the watchers and then dive back again.

“Do you feel like someone’s watching you? Is it normal?”

Regulus blinked at him, puzzled. “Well, no. I mean, Cousin Arcturus does sometimes leave his portrait and wander around the house, but I can feel him right now, and he’s asleep. Is something the matter?”

“Someone is watching me,” said Harry, as the instinct, sharpened through years of training, grew more and more insistent. “I don’t know why. It’s annoying,” he added, raising his voice, just in case the eyes belonged to something that could hear him and be persuaded to stop.

The thing watching did seem to hear him, but the sensation of eyes just sharpened instead. The next thing Harry knew, teeth closed on his ankle. He hopped backward, swearing, even as he remembered one room he had seen when he was here with
Narcissa, where small creatures darted out from the bed to bite his ankles.

When he looked down, he suspected that he was in rather more trouble. A long tendril of silver-green extended from the wall, resembling a thin snake. It tugged him insistently nearer to the wall, and Harry had to hop with the pull. It felt as though the teeth were hooked under his skin.

Regulus, behind him, didn’t sound alarmed. “It’s all right, Harry. I didn’t know this would happen, but it’s normal.” His voice had an undertone of excitement that didn’t really reassure Harry. “Just go to the wall. The house wants to taste you.”

“Taste me?” Harry shook his head, but kept hopping, giving in to the snake’s impatient tugs, until he stood next to the silvery wood wall it sprouted out of. Immediately, an enormous blue tongue formed and licked his face, then moved down and licked a shoulder through his robes, then swiped each arm and leg.

Harry shuddered. The tongue was cold and wet. He could imagine that Arcturus Black had probably thought this a hugely funny joke to wake his guests in the night with, but he wished he could have heard about it instead of experienced it.

The tongue let him go. Harry realized the snake had, too, and backed away from the wall, watching it warily. The tongue slid over a pair of enormous lips, and then retracted into the wood with a satisfied purr.

Harry felt a new presence in his mind at the same moment. It bedded down behind his thoughts, and purred.

“What in Merlin’s name—” he said, a feeble exclamation, because he thought his voice would start shaking if he tried anything else.

“I told you Wayhouse had its own free will,” said Regulus, sounding so exultant that Harry turned to him rather warily. Regulus was grinning wildly. “It’s decided that it would like to bond to you. Now it’ll listen to you rather than me.”

“That’s ridiculous,” said Harry flatly. “You’re still the one who owns the house.”

Regulus snorted. “That’s true for Silver-Mirror and Cibley-by-the-Sea and Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, Harry, but not Wayhouse, not anymore. Go on. Tell it to do something.”

“And if it does nothing?” Harry retorted. “You said that it could do anything it wanted. I still think you’re joking.”

“Tell it to do something,” Regulus repeated insistently. “It just chose you. I think it wants to show off for you.”

Harry rolled his eyes, but murmured, “Would you move the mural from the left side of the room to the right one?”

The mural of blue shells vanished at once, melting into the wall like the water it resembled, and then reappeared just to the side of Regulus, who whooped and then collapsed into the chair behind him, laughing. The chair shuffled backwards, and Regulus sat down with a thump, but that didn’t stop his laughter.

“Why do you think this is so funny?” Harry was staring at the mural, disconcerted. He couldn’t really feel his bond to the house anymore, but he knew it must be there. And he had not the slightest idea in the world why it had chosen him. Maybe Wayhouse’s motives really were unfathomable.

Regulus looked up, grinning. “This would have happened anyway, Harry, if you’d agreed to become my heir; Wayhouse would have transferred the bond to you on my death, unless it decided to be temperamental and find someone it liked better. Then you’d have to share the Black legacy with that person, whoever it was. That’s a change that my grandfather worked into the legacy. The Black fortune and lands and houses are only supposed to have one heir, but he knew he couldn’t control Wayhouse after Cousin Arcturus built it, so there’s a single exception for it, just in case this ever happened. Now it’s decided to transfer to you while I’m still alive. Don’t you think it’d make more sense for you to become my heir now? I’d have to share the fortune with you anyway. Legal rules, you see, and Grandfather’s.” Regulus all but batted his eyes at him.

“You knew this would happen!” Harry accused him.

“I didn’t,” Regulus denied promptly. “Not at all. Wayhouse had plenty of chances with other heirs, you know. My cousins used to visit it all the time. And it’s not like it had to choose you. I certainly couldn’t force it. It does whatever it wants, Harry.”
“You don’t have to make me your heir,” said Harry. “You could just ignore the rules. You do all the time anyway,” he added. “No one else has to know this happened.”

“Grandfather thought of that, too,” said Regulus happily. “There’s already been a change on the official records in the Ministry. And now you have access to the Black vaults, and all the treasures of Wayhouse are officially yours. Come on, Harry.” Regulus reached into his robe pocket, pulled out a sheaf of parchments, and waved it coaxingly at Harry. “I have all the papers signed, **finally**, so that I can take an heir who’s neither related to me by blood—well, you are, but so distantly that trying to take you as a blood heir wouldn’t stand up against the claims of my cousins—or in sympathy with my magic. You’re practically half heir already. It would make me peaceful to know that I don’t have to find someone else to leave the rest of the fortune and houses to.”

“Draco would—”

“Draco is a Malfoy, not a Black, and has **plenty** of things to inherit,” said Regulus firmly. “Besides, I don’t like him all the time. And Narcissa the same. She ought to have known better than to swear that stupid oath. So. Harry. What do you say?”

Harry sighed and looked around Wayhouse. He tried to frame a question in his mind about the house taking another heir, not sure it would hear him.

*Can’t*, came the immediate response. *Won’t. Shan’t!*

Harry sighed again and looked back at Regulus. “I have access to the vaults anyway, you said.”

Regulus nodded. “Like I said, it would otherwise have been the heir’s undivided, but now that Wayhouse is bonded to you, it would be shared—assuming the heir is anyone else.”

Harry bit his lip. He could think of things he could accomplish with the Black money, and having Wayhouse as a sanctuary to retreat to would ease his life; that wasn’t the problem. He was still unsure if he could accept it, though.

*Is it too selfish, to accept the money? Is Regulus only not offering it to Draco and Narcissa because he’s irritated at them right now?*

“You’re sure you won’t change your mind?” he asked Regulus, testing.

Regulus’s face softened. “I never will,” he said. “I promise, Harry. Even if I met a child in sympathy with my magic, that doesn’t mean I’d like him or her as a person. Lots of families adopt a child like that just because they’re desperate. I never will be that desperate. And assuming I did marry and have children, I know that I could rely on you to help take care of them. You’d never refuse to give them a home if I died, or throw them out without a Knut to their names. So, yes. I can’t imagine finding a better heir. I know you, and I know you’re more than good enough to be my heir.” He held Harry’s gaze.

Harry took a deep breath. “I accept, then.”

Regulus crowed softly, and shook the papers. “You have to sign in a few places,” he said. “Well, more than a few,” he amended as parchment tumbled to the floor in a merry rain. “But it’s just signing. Your signature carries your magic, and binds you to the properties and fortune.” He paused for a moment, then added, “You could take the name of Black, if you wanted to.”

“No,” said Harry sharply. “At least, not yet.”

Regulus only grinned as if he’d expected nothing less, and held out the parchments to Harry again. Harry had to smile back as he looked around for a table to sign his name on, and found Wayhouse mushrooming one at him immediately. The way he signed was only half-reluctant.

It was silly arguing against a transfer of power that it seemed had already happened. And money, at least, and political power were tools Harry could imagine wielding without as much anxiety as he felt about his magic.

*I already know the first two things I’m going to do*, he thought, as he finished the final signature with a flourish. In his head, Wayhouse hummed in what felt like happy agreement.

*_*_*_*_*_
Chapter Sixty-Four: Stalked

Harry opened his eyes slowly and rolled over. His mind leaped immediately into motion, making plans for today. He smiled. Regulus had told him that the papers in the Ministry had changed immediately when he finished signing the ones in Wayhouse, marking him as the Black heir, but it had been so late in the evening by the time he finished that Harry had decided to wait and start making the changes he wanted to make tomorrow.

Not even yet another odd, mist-shrouded dream of a corridor lined with locked doors, leading to one he was unable to open, and Voldemort’s frustration that left a burning pain in his scar could dampen his good mood.

Seeing the strange bird with the teeth and clawed wings sitting in his bed and staring at him did. Harry sat up quickly, his magic coiling once around him and lashing at the bird.

It passed through it without any effect, except for starting a slight fire in his bed-curtains. Harry put it out, watching the bird all the while. It preened itself, cracking feathers in its jaws before it looked back at him, and that voice spoke in his head again, rather like dropping words into the past than speaking full-out in the present.

You have not learned. You will not learn until it is too late. Unlike the other times, the bird sounded almost cheerful about their mysterious binding this time, or at least smug. Then we shall have to live with each other. I suppose you are not so bad. Entertaining in your stupidity, at least, to still think you can hurt me. I can be wherever you are, Harry.

“Why can you hurt me, if I can’t hurt you?” Harry whispered challengingly. Unlike the time he had seen the bird right before his parents’ trial, he found himself more angry than worried. No laws of magic that he knew explained the bird. None explained its ability to pass in and out of Hogwarts’ wards, either. He thought he had a right to be angry.

That is part of the bond. The bird stretched its wings and hopped a little nearer to him. Harry pulled his arms back. The bird laughed at him, a snorting, chuckling, vicious sound, and then hopped into the air and flew at him. Harry ducked, but it was too late. Those freezing claws passed across the lightning bolt scar on his forehead, the blood that it drew mingling with the blood from his nightmare.

To see you later, said the bird, and spread its wings, and rose, and vanished.

Harry sat where he was, panting for a moment and gingerly feeling the depth of the cuts. They felt like the last ones he’d got, and those had healed without leaving anything but scabs that fell off eventually. Still, it would be harder to hide them or explain them away as the result of stumbles than the last ones had been. Harry rose to go to the loo. It was practically time to get up for class anyway.

He drew his curtains back, and found Draco standing there, staring at him.

Harry stared back. His anger at the bird mingled with a rush of the older, harder anger he felt at Draco and Snape right now, and made it easy. Draco was the one who looked away first, though his voice showed no sign that he was no longer meeting Harry’s eyes.

“What happened to your forehead?”

“A magical bird showed up and cut it,” said Harry, which was nothing less than the truth, and made to push past Draco.

Draco caught his arm and turned him around. Harry went with it only because he didn’t—yet—want to start a physical fight. He would if he had to. He stared into Draco’s eyes again, and again it was Draco who looked away.

“I felt an odd sensation last night,” he said. “I didn’t understand what it was at first, but then Mother contacted me. She said you’re Black heir, and what we felt was the magic of our bloodline readjusting to accept someone who isn’t related directly by blood.”

“That’s right,” said Harry. “Regulus told me certain truths last night that made me decide it was best to accept the legacy.”

“So is he your family now?”
Harry took in Draco’s tension, and remembered how upset Draco had been when Harry told him he didn’t really consider the Malfoys his family. “Not in the way you mean,” Harry said. “I haven’t taken his last name, and he’s only adopted me as an heir, the way that you could do with someone else in a normal will. I don’t consider him a father. More like a brother, if anything,” he added, with a slight frown. Come to think of it, perhaps it was better if Regulus waited for a while before he married and had children. Harry didn’t think he’d be a good father right now.

“But you still share something with him that you don’t share with me.”

Harry didn’t know why that declaration broke his will to stand here and have this strange sort of half-argument with Draco. He tugged his arm, and Draco, surprised, let go of it.

“I share lots of things with other people that I don’t share with you, Draco,” Harry snapped. “Honestly. I would have said, before we had this fight, that you understood that. I share danger with my enemies, and memories of childhood with my brother—”

“You were never a child,” Draco interrupted.

“So now you think that,” said Harry. “But I mean it, Draco. I shared plenty of games and adventures with him that children have and play. And I share bonds with my allies that you don’t understand in detail, and friendships with people like Hermione—“ he was watching, and saw the way Draco wrinkled his nose, his prejudice towards Muggleborns apparently unconquered “—and life debts, and, Merlin, everything with someone else.”

Draco’s eyes widened. “So you could find someone to fill my place in your life?” he asked.

“Argh,” said Harry, knowing he was not being eloquent. “Don’t be an idiot, Draco. No. I love you. But it doesn’t mean I share everything with you. It doesn’t mean I never think you’re wrong. It doesn’t mean that we’re going to always avoid fighting.”

“But I thought we were,” said Draco quietly. “You asked me what I wanted from you, Harry. I told you. To be the most important person in your life, among other things.” His face was flushing. “I don’t think that’s too much to ask, with how much support I’ve given you and the gifts you hand everyone else every day.”

Harry stared hard at Draco, ignoring Argutus’s suggestion that everything would become clearer if they just curled back up into bed together and let a small snake sleep in the warmth of their cradled bodies. Draco showed no signs of backing down this time, or of looking away. Harry supposed they had arrived at the core and heart of the argument. Draco resented being left out of Harry’s dangerous escapades not just because Harry might get hurt, but because he wanted to share them with Harry. To share everything, really.

“I can’t share everything with you,” said Harry. “Not everything.”

“And I said—“

“It’s impossible, Draco.” Harry could hear his voice soaring and knew from Blaise’s sleepy grumble that they’d woken him up. He ignored that, too. “There will always be situations that I get into where I can’t go for you, or where you’re somewhere else entirely, and then I have to fight or rescue someone else or make plans or whatever and you’re not there to advise or consult. I can tell you about them later, but that’s not the same thing, is it?” he finished, thinking of the way that Draco had always resented being left out of the confrontation Harry and Connor had had with Sirius in the Shrieking Shack, even though Harry had told him all about it later and he’d seen the memories. “You always want to be there.”

“I don’t think it’s so unreasonable,” Draco said, voice like flashfire.

“Tell me,” said Harry, “would you let me watch a ceremony that’s special to the Malfoys? How your father confirms you as magical heir, for instance? I know that’s private for most of the pureblood families. Oh, you announce it afterwards and have festivities to honor it, but the actual ceremony is private.”

“Of course it is,” said Draco, whose face was slowly flushing. “Our enemies could get too good an idea of how to hurt us if we held them in public, or even with anyone but those who are Malfoy by blood attending.”

“So, you see,” said Harry, folding his arms. “There’s one example where you can’t share something with me. So why should I be able to share the whole of my life with you?”
“But you don’t—” Draco began, and then stopped. His flush altered.

“Oh, do finish that sentence,” said Harry, taking a step forward. “I’d like to hear what you have to say about it.”

“I—"

“Say it, Draco. Say exactly what you meant to say,” Harry goaded him.

“I don’t want—"

“Since we’re supposed to be able to share everything, after all.”

“All right!” Draco burst out, not seeming to hear the moan that came from Blaise. “You don’t have a family, Harry! You don’t have ceremonies like that, since you chose to renounce your surname! You’re not pureblood! It’s not comparable!”

The silence that followed that reminded Harry of the moment after he’d compared Draco and Snape to Lily, except that that previous meeting didn’t have Blaise whimpering about lost sleep in the corner. Draco looked similarly horror-stricken. Harry had the same feeling of having jumped an obstacle they hadn’t known was that high, and landing safely on the other side. He swallowed, and nodded, and met Draco’s gaze.

“So, you see,” he said, proud of how steady his voice was, “there are some differences between us, Draco. I would never insist that you be lesser than I am. If you think something is deficient in my behavior towards you, I rely on you to tell me, not sulk around and hide what you really feel behind other things. I can’t fix my mistakes if I don’t know what they are. Similarly, I won’t accuse you of hurting me without explaining the accusations. And we are both going to make mistakes, and we are both going to have parts of our lives that we don’t share with each other, Draco. We are different people. Sometimes I think you know that, and sometimes I think you always envisioned that I would become just like you as I shed my training. That’s not true. You’re right. I’ll never be pureblood. I’ll never have the blood, and I’ll never have the prejudices.” He took a step closer to Draco, though his every instinct was screaming at him to retreat and, if nothing else, have the last bit of this argument in private. It was too late, though. If he moved, he would lose his momentum, and he might never gain back this kind of silence with which Draco was listening to him now, quiet, rapt. “We are both different people, Draco. I’m becoming who I am. I think you have to become who you are, too. And maybe it’s good that we’re fighting now, and can’t forgive each other these words just yet. Maybe that will give you time to figure out who you are, not just who you want me to be.”

He turned away and strode towards the loo, hoping his shaking muscles weren’t visible. Then he doubted it mattered. Draco would be entirely involved in his own thoughts right now, as he should be.

A part of Harry’s anger shifted and melted into compassion. Draco had ideas about who he was, but they tended to drift in a cloud long after they should have solidified. Maybe this would give him the push he needed to turn them into ice, or stone. 

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Draco lay on his back and stared up at the ceiling of his four-poster. Blaise had drawn back the curtains and asked if he was going down to breakfast, but after one look at his face, had quietly shut them again. Draco was glad. He knew he would get in trouble for skiving off Arithmancy, but he didn’t care.

In fact, the gladness and the indifference were both smaller ice floes drifting around in a larger, widening sea of cold shock. He shivered now and then, as if he could actually feel a wind on his skin, despite the thick pyjamas he wore.

He…

What did he want?

Oh, he knew what he wanted. That wasn’t really the problem. The problem was that he’d always assumed he knew how to achieve what he wanted, too, and now Harry had asked him, and Draco found himself standing amid the wrecks of ideas and plans and dreams that were supposed to have given him wings, and found himself severely embarrassed.

What was he supposed to do?

He didn’t know.
He had the ideas—be rich and famous and respected, keep Harry at his side and in his life, invent new spells, avoid actually working for a living. But he realized now that he didn’t know how he would achieve any fame and respect on his own that didn’t come reflected from Harry or his father, or hold a place in *Harry’s* life if Harry grew this profoundly irritated with him all the time, or keep going with spells when he seemed to invent them and then not pay any more attention to them, or avoid just lounging around on the Malfoy fortune.

He kept asking himself the question, and he kept not having an answer.

Well, then, perhaps he should ask himself what answers would definitely not do.

He couldn’t be what his father had been. Draco enjoyed playing politics, but he couldn’t hold himself as distant from his machinations as his father had always done—he did things out of rage and hatred as well as for advantage—and he couldn’t do them for the same ideals. Draco had to admit that he still thought Muggleborns weren’t as powerful or magically talented or skilled as purebloods, but the thought of killing, say, Granger left him physically sick. If purebloods really wanted their children to grow up desiring to kill Muggleborns, he thought, then they shouldn’t make them go to school with them. (Not for the first time, he wondered if a motive like that was behind his mother’s insistence on sending him to Hogwarts and not Durmstrang). No, he wasn’t a Death Eater, and he couldn’t follow even the more limited versions of that path that might be left after Voldemort was gone.

He couldn’t expect to gain fame from his spells if he just invented them and then never did anything with them. He would have to introduce them to the public if he wanted credit. Draco bit his lip, and wondered if insisting that people pay money to use or learn his spells was too much like working for a living.

He couldn’t give up Harry. The mere thought of doing so caused a bottomless pit to open in his stomach. No, he had to have Harry in his life.

But it looked like he would have to have him differently. He wasn’t an obedient little pet on a leash—and neither was Harry.

*Did I do what he says I did? Did I really expect him to adopt the pureblood ideas about Muggleborns someday?*

Draco could feel heat stinging his cheeks. Yes, he had. It was always unpleasant, and dangerous, to turn a corner in one’s mind and come face to face with something he’d never known he believed. What *would* his father say?

Yes. I thought he’d be more like me. Why not? He’s a Slytherin, and he’d been so badly abused by his family that I thought he wouldn’t love what they did. I thought he’d become more ambitious, more willing to play politics, Darker, more willing to see that Muggleborns don’t fit well into wizarding culture, more willing to—Merlin, did I really think that he’d come to agree that house elves needed to be servants, because we can’t get along without them?

*Merlin, he was right. I did really think he would betray everything he was.*

Draco rolled over and buried his head in his pillow. The coolness of the cloth helped muffle the heat of embarrassment in his face. He lay there for a moment longer, until he took a great, gasping breath and sat up.

*All right. I know a few things I can do, after all. I was putting off doing them, and I shouldn’t have.*

But the best of those plans, the most likely to succeed, would also put Draco directly in the path of an enemy as formidable as Harry when he was angry, so Draco determined to wait and see if it was necessary.

*And how am I going to do that?*

See what Harry was doing today, of course—have an idea of what he was like when Draco wasn’t with him. After all, those actions might suggest a plan on their own, and if Draco learned that his other, risky plan wouldn’t help after all, there was no need to pursue it.

*Coward,* his conscience accused him, in a voice that sounded much like Harry’s.

*Slytherin,* Draco argued back as he cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself. *Not Gryffindor. Survivor.*
His conscience sneered at him, as if it didn't buy his excuses. Draco, still reeling from the revelation that he really had expected Harry to accept most wizards' need of house elves, didn't have much of a defense.

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Draco watched as Harry determinedly approached the Weasley twins at lunch. So far, he hadn't done anything remarkable, just attended classes, but Draco had the feeling that he was about to do something now.

Watching Harry this way was both intrusive—Harry gave no sign of suspecting he was there, so Draco did feel a bit like a voyeur, or an enemy—and enlightening. Draco saw all sorts of little shards of expression on his face that he'd never noticed before. He'd realized that Harry and Pansy had somewhat made up their argument from earlier in the year, and even talked softly as they walked from one class to another. He'd seen the rapt expression on his face in Defense Against the Dark Arts, and realized with a start that Harry really did enjoy the theory behind the class that Professor Merryweather explained to them, while Draco would have preferred more spells. He'd noticed that Harry resolutely ignored the Ravenclaws he passed in the halls, except for Loony, Chang, Padma Patil, and Isabell Neelda. His greetings to them were incredibly warm.

_He does have a life apart from me, even when we're together. And I never noticed._

So far, though, nothing he'd seen had made him sure that he had to pursue his risky plan. Draco gnawed his lip as he stepped between the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables, far enough back from the benches that no one should bump him accidentally, but close enough to hear what Harry was saying to the Weasleys. Perhaps he should do something else, after all.

“Fred,” Harry said, “and George.”

The twin on the right, addressed as George, lifted his eyes and laughed. “Poor ickle Harry-kins,” he said. “I’m—“

“Fred,” said the other. “And I’m George. Or perhaps it’s the other way around. You’d never—“

“Know, would you?” the other said, and both of them grinned, reminding Draco of just how much he loathed Weasleys. That was another thing he and Harry didn't have in common, by the way Harry grinned back.

“I wanted to ask you something,” said Harry. “Bear in mind that this is purely hypothetical. I wouldn’t want you to think it was real.” He braced his hand on the Gryffindor table and leaned towards them. “Would you want to open up a shop to distribute your jokes someday?”

Two identical Weasley mouths fell open. Draco took another step closer, mouth full of his beating heart. _He can't actually be doing what I think he's doing, right? Please let him not be doing what I think he's doing._

“Yes!” said the one who'd claimed to be Fred, at last. “It's only our—“

“Lifelong dream, Harry,” the other finished. “We tried to distribute order forms last summer, but Mum—“

“Got in the way and made us get rid of them,” said maybe-Fred, gloomily. “The main problem is that we just don’t have enough money, mate. We’d need enough to establish the shop, to distribute the order forms, to advertise in the _Prophet_, to buy ingredients for the test products.”

Harry was nodding along in sympathy. People watched him witlessly all along the Gryffindor table, except for his brother, who was grinning maniacally. “I know,” he said. “It’s hard, it really is, for young entrepreneurs to make their way in the world today. How much do you think you’d need? You know, tops?”

“A thousand Galleons,” said maybe-George.

“That’d make us comfortable,” said his twin. “And cover the expenses for the first year and a half, at least.” He shook off his gloom with an obvious physical effort and straightened, clasping his hand to his heart. “But tell me, O Great and Glorious Defeater of Dumbledore, where we can get a thousand Galleons, and I promise that we’ll be your slaves for life.”

Harry grinned, and looked over his shoulder. Three enormous birds came through the Hall windows in the next moment; Draco thought they were gyrfalcons. They labored along under the weight of a trunk with the Gringotts seal on it. Draco recognized that kind of dark wooden trunk; his father had had one during a year when he’d done a lot of intense bribery in the Ministry. It would
open a hole to the appropriate vault in Gringotts, and money would flow from the vault into the trunk, until its owner had the required amount and said to stop.

*How can he do this? It’s not like he has the Potter vault any more—*

And then it hit Draco. The Black vaults, of course. Harry would have access to them now.

And Regulus Black was such a joker that he’d probably approved this.

Draco fumed under his breath as he watched the gyrfalcons land in front of the astonished twins. Harry laughed as he threw open the lid, and Galleons shimmered in the light of the Great Hall. It was obvious that he’d planned this to happen at lunch so he’d have the largest audience possible. Draco studied the unfeigned pleasure gleaming in Harry’s eyes, the sly smile on his face as he watched people watching him, and shook his head. *Harry—this is the kind of thing Harry uses money for. To make other people happy.*

*Doesn’t he know that there are better things to do with it?!*

“A thousand Galleons,” Harry told the trunk, and it shuddered a little and appeared to grow. Some of the coins spilled over the rim. Harry nodded to the still-astonished Fred and George. *Finite Incantatem.* There you are. The hole in the bottom’s closed now, so it’s just an ordinary trunk.” And, indeed, Draco could see the Gringotts seal on the trunk’s tilted-back lid fading. “And all yours, to establish a joke shop with. We’ll skip the part about your being my slaves for life, since, after all, I think it’s much more entertaining to watch you sit here with your mouths hanging open. Now I can tell you apart by how many teeth you each have.”

The twins slammed their mouths shut. One of them hovered over the trunk as if to guard it from reaching Gryffindor hands—their brother and sister would probably try to take the money to buy new dress robes, Draco thought spitefully—while the other leaped across the table and prostrated himself at Harry’s feet.

“A thousand, thousand thanks is not enough for your generosity, grand sir!” he declaimed. Harry laughed. Draco regretted that he was facing away at the moment, so that Draco couldn’t see the way his eyes shone, the way they always shone, when he laughed. “The first of the Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes shall be named after our patron Harry, yea, indeed they shall, and verily, he shall receive free jokes and gifts whenever he wishes them, and the right to inspect our shop at any hour of the day or night, forsooth, and the first of our children shall bear his name, but this is not enough to do him honor!”

Harry was by now laughing so hard he almost couldn’t stand. Then he straightened, and announced to the people who were gaping at him, “Oh, by the way, I became Black heir last night.” Then he turned to face the head table, where all the teachers were staring at him in absolute astonishment—but apparently, except for Snape, enjoying the performance too much to put a stop to it.

That meant he wasn’t watching the faces of the other students. But Draco was, and he saw the effect Harry’s casual bit of information had on them. Their faces rippled like water in a pond, and so did their emotions. But then they settled, and except for envy, the most prominent emotion was—

*Desire. Longing.*

Draco didn’t understand it, until he realized that not only had the other students just heard Harry announce that he was fabulously wealthy and the heir to an ancient pureblood name, but they’d seen him *laughing*, and seen how beautiful he was when he laughed. Pureblood students from all the Houses whom Draco knew had only looked at Harry when he had his name in the *Prophet* for something were staring at him with steady looks of appreciation now. The little Weasley tart had her eyebrows raised. Draco heard a seventh-year Hufflepuff girl breathe, “Well. Not much I couldn’t get used to with that, even the missing hand,” and saw her companion nod fervent agreement.

They could talk to Harry until their faces turned blue, Draco thought spitefully, and he’d probably never notice. He was oblivious to things like that.

*Yes, oblivious. And oblivious to most of the pureblood marriage and courtship rituals, too. Someone could court him under the guise of helping him politically, and the git would never know, never realize, the true motive. There had been a few cases in the past of prominent leaders being tricked into marriage or joining that way, especially if they’d been raised in isolation from the rest of the wizarding world and were told that completing a certain ritual was the only way to achieve their goals.*

*And as Harry got more involved in politics, now that he was Black heir and had the money and extra political clout to do so, it*
wasn’t just the other students at Hogwarts who would have the chance to see him laughing.

A vision rose in Draco’s mind, of a future in which Harry swore an oath or completed a ritual he didn’t understand and found himself joined or married to another family. Harry might even accept it, especially since for so long, he’d thought of his future life only in terms of duty and war. And if by that time he and Draco had parted ways over this argument or some other stupid fight—

It was a horrible vision. It made Draco physically sick. He rejected it, and watched intently as Harry nodded to, of all people, Remus Lupin. The werewolf looked surprised, but nodded back.

“There should be a bird coming for you,” said Harry. “Right about—ah, now.”

An owl, this time, circled through the window, and bore straight for Lupin. Lupin gave Harry a quizzical look, but opened the letter the owl carried. The next moment, his face paled, and he looked up and shook his head at Harry.

“I can’t accept this,” he said.

“Yes, you can,” Harry said calmly.

“It’s against the law,” Lupin said, frowning. “Werewolves aren’t supposed to have accounts with Gringotts.”

Harry tilted his head and winked. “And there aren’t supposed to be loopholes in the laws that will let the heir to a sufficiently ancient pureblood line establish one for anyone he likes, but there you are,” he said. “And do you know, not one goblin at Gringotts ever raised any objections? I’m not sure why that is.” He was radiating innocence. Draco, who remembered the ritual last year in which they’d freed the Gringotts goblins, was very sure. “I checked and triple-checked the laws with Regulus Black last night. There’s no way that anyone can take that account away from you, Professor Lupin. The Ministry tries, and they run into a thousand years of iron-clad tradition and laws piled on top of laws—and goblin law, as well as wizard law, holding things in place.”

Lupin still looked gobsmacked, but he nodded, slowly. “Thank you, Harry,” he said. “I—thank you.”

“I’m not quite done yet,” said Harry, and pulled a knife from his pocket. Draco saw some students gasp and flinch away, but those were mostly the Muggleborns. The purebloods leaned forward. They knew an oath-taking knife when they saw one. The distinctive diamond edges against the steel shone in the January sunlight.

“I hereby swear,” said Harry, “by the blood that runs in my veins and by the blood I have inherited to, that I will fight for the rights of werewolves until I have changed the laws concerning them to the same laws that protect other wizards.” The oath-taking knife flashed and cut deep down the center of Harry’s left arm.

Draco felt the magic take hold. Harry’s blood rose into the air as a mist of light, both red and stained with silver as it formed the crest of the Most Noble and Ancient House of Black above his head. Harry looked up at this with a calm expression, as if it were nothing very noteworthy. The red blood, now turned entirely silver, foamed along beneath the crest into lettering: _Toujours pur_, always pure, the motto of the Blacks.

_Not now, Draco thought, a bit hysterical. Now it’s something better than pure._

The crest and the lettering lost their form after ten heartbeats—the traditional pause, to let everyone present witness it—and fell back on Harry like molten rain. Silver melted into his hair, his arms, his shoulders, his face. Harry stood still under the rain, as he had to.

That would insure he kept the oath, Draco knew. If he broke it, the ancient magic would turn the blood in his veins to molten silver.

Harry bowed to Lupin, then turned and walked back to the Slytherin table as if nothing had happened. He left behind a terribly changed and charged atmosphere, of course, and Draco didn’t have to look at Lupin’s shocked, stunned, slightly teary face to know that. He’d just flung a declaration of war in the direction of those who opposed giving werewolves equal rights to wizards, and, for those slightly more alert, in the direction of those who valued some pureblood families less than others because of their lack of money.

And Draco could see other people _accepting_ that. There was little most wizards wouldn’t accept, even opposing politics, or ones
that challenged ancient prejudices, for the chance to work with or otherwise secure someone like Harry to the family. Magical power was one thing, but there were people who wouldn’t follow Voldemort just because he was powerful. Now Harry had shown he had wealth, and the obvious willingness to follow the most ancient pureblood traditions in at least some matters, and determination like a hurricane, and adaptability, the quality that so often made the difference in wizarding duels and on battlefields, the quickness to roll from one spell to the next and become what one needed to become to survive. Harry had shown that in the way he used an ancient oath to swear something quite new.

And beauty. Can’t forget the beauty.

Combine that with the fact that Harry had announced he was Black heir, but not that he’d taken the Black name, and there were even more people who would see him as—not vulnerable, exactly, but free for the taking, if they could just coax or persuade him into joining their cause.

And Draco knew his risky plan was necessary, after all. It was absolutely intolerable, the idea that someone else would win Harry. He had to be free to make Harry an offer, and, if Harry would accept it, to show everyone else that he was committed to Harry beyond tearing away. Only the deepest and most sacred of the courting rituals would do, the one that took three years to complete, and involved twelve rituals, four for each year, and took and gave equally from and to both beloved and lover.

And the one that only a magical heir of the family could offer.

Lucius had so far refused to actually confirm Draco as the Malfoy magical heir, for many reasons, starting with his disobedience in attending Walpurgis Night last year and continuing from there. His latest letters were filled with hints that he didn’t approve of the way Draco and Harry’s relationship was going. He wouldn’t confirm Draco as magical heir, and doubly so, if he knew the reason Draco wanted the confirmation.

But Draco was now determined that there was nothing he would not do to have Harry, including adapting his beliefs and expectations, and facing the old dragon in his den.

He would have to go have a little talk with Lucius Malfoy.

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Chapter Sixty-Five: Lucius and Draco

Lucius permitted himself a single cold smile as he folded the letter. Yes, it made sense that the family of the Death Eater who’d hurt his wife had hidden themselves thoroughly the moment tidings of the battle on the equinox came to them. They would have known that, even dead, their son had made the rest of them targets of an angry Malfoy. That was why it had taken his people so long to find them. But they’d been located now, huddling in a tiny house in Finland, and Lucius had only to contact someone who could study the house thoroughly, then create a Portkey for it and send it to him at the Manor.

Of course, he hadn’t yet decided on which of several spells he wanted to use on that family. He had pulled books from the shelves, but as time passed and the prey proved harder and harder to locate, Lucius’s estimate of how much they needed to pay for hurting his wife had risen. The first three tomes he had looked through were not painful enough. He reached for a book that had no title, but which every Malfoy worth his blood had looked through by the time he was fourteen or so. Lucius had done that, and so had his father.

Draco did not.

Lucius felt his mouth tighten, and shook his head. It was unworthy of him to let thoughts of his son disturb his pleasure in vengeance. Abraxas, his father, would have put the thoughts aside in a moment, opened the book, and learned the spells. Then he would have turned his attention to writing a letter to make sure his son obeyed him.

Of course, Abraxas had never had the same problems with Lucius that Lucius did with Draco. Lucius had been trained in the dances, and how to be a worthy heir, from the time he was three years old. With Draco, Lucius hadn’t begun training him properly until he was seven. Part of that was at Narcissa’s insistence—she claimed they had to wait and be sure that Draco was psychologically normal, that he hadn’t inherited the Black madness—but Lucius knew some of it was his own fault, too, his own leniency.

And he had a son who was weak because of it, far too inclined to share his emotions with the world, and involved in choosing a
partner that he actually seemed to need, rather than, as Lucius and Narcissa had done, making the choice because each one of them wanted the other.

*Enough. I said that I would not think about him now.*

He flicked the titleless book open to a page he knew well, but which nevertheless changed every time he read it. The writing had powerful spells covering the description of other spells, so that Lucius, depending on his mood, would find more painful Dark Arts written there when he wanted to cause pain, more complicated incantations when he wanted a challenge.

He’d just started to read the description of a spell that promised to split the victim’s body in half and then heal it again without killing them when he heard a short trill of phoenix song. Lucius turned his head inch by inch, eyes narrowed. That *bloody* communication spell that Rosier-Henlin had invented was a nuisance, and were it not for the fact that it had great advantages in battle, Lucius would have refused to let it be cast on him.

“Father,” said Draco’s voice a moment later from his wrist. “I need to speak to you. May I Floo home in half an hour?”

Lucius felt his eyebrows rise. It was Tuesday, and Draco should have been in class. “Speak to me on what matter, Draco?” he asked.

There was a pause, and then his son’s voice spoke, not trembling, though Lucius thought it would. “I think it’s a matter that both of us need to hear me speak of face-to-face,” he said. “If that is well with you, Father.”

Lucius bared his teeth. *So it comes to this. Well.* He had thought that his disapproving letters would sting Draco into a confrontation at some point. He had simply expected it to come in the form of a whiny, sulky letter, at which point he could chide Draco for exposing their family’s private affairs to the posts. For Draco to risk facing him like this was unusual, but not so unpredictable. It only meant he would crash into the floor much harder than he would by letter. Lucius knew his son, and he knew that Draco was not his equal, and he knew that Draco *thought* he was. “Come ahead, Draco,” he said smoothly. “I will be in my library when you arrive.”

“Thank you, Father.”

His voice died, and Lucius knew the communication spell had ended. He put the book down and strode briskly from the library, finding Narcissa in the small blue antechamber she favored on the second floor of the Manor. She put down the letter she’d been writing and raised her eyebrows at him.

Lucius bent, kissed her once, and then said, “Draco is coming home to face me. I request and require that you stay out of this, my love. Draco has some hard lessons to learn.”

As he expected, Narcissa’s face went pale—she *had* been hoping that Draco would grow for a few more years before he tried this, Lucius knew; she understood their son’s weaknesses as well as he did, though she termed them strengths—but she nodded. She knew that Draco was more Malfoy than Black, and besides, he bore Lucius’s name and was heir to Lucius’s fortune and house and land. If he had been a Black, then he would have had to face her at some point. “Very well, Lucius,” she whispered. “I will remove to the third floor.” She picked up her parchment and quill. Lucius observed indulgently that her hands shook. Well, she was a fond mother, and Draco was her only child, and this was the first time he had decided on facing his father. When the second time came—as the second time would have to come, because Lucius would defeat his son in this one—she would be composed and calm.

As she was about to step out of the room, he caught a glimpse of the letter she was writing, and frowned inquiringly at her. Narcissa nodded to him. “No book in the libraries portrays the consequences of a broken threefold oath clearly,” she said. “I am writing to the healers at St. Mungo’s, from behind my Gillyflower persona, to ask what they know of it.”

Lucius felt his mouth tighten again. He could hardly think of Harry without contempt, either, lately. Narcissa had told him that Harry had become heir to the Black fortune last night, and before that, he had caused the oath to recoil upon Narcissa by killing Bellatrix. The boy meant well, but he was too young for the kind of power he wielded. Lucius had started thinking he was strong enough to bear it after their battle for Woodhouse, and again after the death of his phoenix at Midwinter, but his opinion was declining again.

“Good luck to you in finding the truth,” he told Narcissa, knowing that the fact he bothered to say the words at all would tell his wife how sincerely he meant them.
Narcissa held his eyes, the strong woman he loved again, and not the mother who had just learned that her son was coming home to face his father. “I will do more than find the truth,” she said. “I will confront it.”

Lucius nodded approvingly, and moved aside so she could go upstairs. Then he returned to his own library, glancing at the clock above the fireplace. It was twenty minutes until Draco would arrive home.

He could think of his son without resentment now, even with a little pride. Draco was following a family tradition, one that relatively few purebloods still preserved; it was kept so private that the Malfoy confrontations were the only unbroken line Lucius knew of in the last hundred years. (It was possible that it might have happened in the Black family as well, but Lucius didn’t know if he could count Sirius Black’s confrontation with his parents at sixteen, which had resulted in the absolute breaking of both his parents and Sirius’s running away and disowning, as one or not). It had been far more common in the old days when most pureblood patriarchs or matriarchs still controlled their families almost completely, when it had been common to weave spells around the cradles to make a child’s disobedience impossible for the first ten years of his or her life. At a certain point, the spells, placed when the heir was so young, would weaken, and the family head would see how long it took the child to notice and come to face them. It might take multiple confrontations, but ultimately the child would win and prove himself or herself worthy—or be rejected, and another child chosen or adopted as heir. In the very oldest traditions, the child had killed the family head, and so power had passed, or been killed in the rejection.

Lucius wrinkled his nose. That was a barbaric practice, the way Light purebloods thought of Dark inheritance practices in general. In the centuries when wizarding families still had children regularly dying before they reached ten years old, poisoned by powerful Dark artifacts or by their enemies, killing one’s potential heir was a waste. The Malfoys had been one of the first families to adopt a different sort of confrontation, to see if the heir could make the family head respect him and declare him worthy.

Lucius had won his first confrontation with his father at sixteen—a good thing, because Abraxas had died of dragon pox the next year. Lucius had been ready, calmly, to take control of the family at the same time as he was initiated as a Death Eater.

And now Draco, callow and even younger than Lucius had been, not trained in the same way and far too emotional, imagined that he could face his father and win.

It was almost...charming, really.

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Narcissa tried, but she couldn’t write. She put down the quill and looked out the window at the sky. She felt nerveless, but no tears would come. She was not quite so abandoned to propriety as to weep, especially when the confrontation hadn’t even begun yet and she didn’t know what the consequences to her son would be.

She hoped it would not come to spells. Lucius was more than Draco’s equal there, and he would not hesitate to use spells that affected Draco quite severely—perhaps ones that would change his memories, or even deage him a year. Narcissa knew Lucius’s father had been prepared to use such a spell on him. Lucius loved Draco, but it was a fierce love, not a comfortable one. In the name of making his heir stronger, he would do something that might make Draco incredibly angry when he learned of it, so that Draco’s fury would give him a better chance of winning his second confrontation with Lucius, and ultimately strengthening the Malfoy family.

Narcissa wondered when she had stopped believing that the survival of the family was more important than the survival of any one specific individual. Perhaps when one of her sisters turned out to have inherited the Black madness and the other ran away to marry Ted Tonks, she thought. Or perhaps the night that Sirius rose against his parents in revolt, and Narcissa had gone to Number Twelve Grimmauld Place see Aunt Capella screaming in mute, helpless pain, her brain wracked by contrasting compulsions that she could neither obey nor disobey. That wouldn’t have happened had his parents not tried to make Sirius into the perfect model of the Black heir—had they not been so horribly afraid of his compulsion gift, so much stronger than their own. For that matter, Narcissa wondered what would have happened had her own mother done something besides simply accept that Bella’s madness was incurable, or that Andromeda was irredeemable because she had first resisted the pureblood dances when she was eight—done something besides pin all her hopes on Narcissa to carry her family’s future.

If you believed that in truth, her conscience whispered at her, you would go down there and stop this confrontation.

But she could not. If she had married someone with the last name of Black, she would have the right to interfere. But both Lucius
and Draco were Malfoy by blood, not just name, and Narcissa could no more step into this testing than she could observe the ritual that would mark Draco as the Malfoy magical heir—if Lucius ever performed it.

So perhaps she did believe that family was more important than one specific individual, after all.

Or perhaps she simply mistrusted her judgment sharply, after realizing how much her broken oath could cost her and how much of the cost would be her own fault, and knew that neither her husband nor her son would thank her for the interference.

Restlessly, she put aside the letter to St. Mungo’s, and began working on one to Harry instead. She still blamed him somewhat, but she didn’t blame him as much as she had before, and she wanted to say that, and the mixed emotions suited her mood at the moment.

She felt the flare of the Floo downstairs a few moments later. Draco had arrived.

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Draco stepped out into the antechamber and handed his formal cloak to the house elves. In reality, he hadn’t had much reason to wear a formal cloak, but he’d known that things had to be done properly, and so he’d changed into the kind of simple, elegant clothes his father would have expected to see him wearing if he’d just come home from a long journey.

He hesitated a moment, drawing up his courage and breathing it in great, rolling puffs of freezing air through himself. For a Gryffindor, maybe, courage was symbolized by fire and a hot temper. Not for a Malfoy. A Malfoy’s courage was ice, the deep ice of the south, which never melted and never cracked no matter what the pressure of the sun. When Draco stepped forward again, he was calm, and cold, and as ready as he would ever be.

He moved through the house in a surreal state. It wasn’t far from the fireplace he’d come through to his father’s library, but it seemed to take hours to walk the distance. The walls bent and warped around him. Draco could feel his own fear struggling beneath the ice of his composure like a trapped seal.

And I think that Father is unbalancing me on purpose.

Draco narrowed his eyes. He touched his wand, resting in his robe pocket, and whispered, “Finite Incantatem,” under his breath. The odd stretching sensation vanished, and the walls went back to their normal places. Draco snorted lightly, and wondered if this was a spell that Lucius had cast to test him, or one in place on the Manor walls, prepared to spring into motion when any heir came to face the head of his or her family. Draco wouldn’t have put it past his father, who had said much in his recent letters about how Draco was too weak, and too disobedient.

Does he think that obeying him will make me strong?

But Draco knew the channels his father’s thinking ran in, like deep, icy rivers. An heir was supposed to gather strength in silence, in quiet, obeying faultlessly until the moment he was ready for the challenge of asserting his own will. Draco had not shown, at least to his father, that he had the necessary strength, and he had disobeyed him in several matters, large and small, since Walpurgis Night.

Lucius’s latest letter had contained the sentence: I find myself wondering if you are a true Malfoy, Draco, given how you have done many things that are unworthy of us.

Draco knew he wasn’t accusing Narcissa of infidelity. But Lucius could doubt Draco’s fitness all he liked, and would, until Draco proved himself worthy. Lucius loved him, Draco knew, but it was love as high and cold and lofty as an eagle’s love for the air—love like an iron fist. And he had done the best he could, and Draco had still turned out—the way he turned out.

I’m half Black, too. And the Blacks have—not weakness, but a different kind of strength.

Draco halted outside the door of his father’s library. He envisioned to himself why he was doing this. For a moment, he had thought of only speaking the reasons his father would want to hear, but no, that was false, to both himself and his purposes. He was going to win this confrontation with what he was, not an icy mask. Besides, Lucius would be perfectly within his rights to disinherit Draco if he found out later that his son had won through a trick, or lied about his purposes in demanding to be made Malfoy magical heir; he had told Draco often enough about what happened to heirs who used compulsion or subtle spells to cheat their parents into giving them their legacy.
This is probably one of the few points in his life where my father values honesty, Draco reflected, as he gathered all his strength. He’s opaque the rest of the time. But today, I get to see the real Lucius Malfoy, as much as he gets to see the real Draco.

The idea made a frisson of excitement run through him. He reached out and rapped firmly on the library door.

His father’s voice answered, absolutely calm and absolutely level. “Come in, my son.”

Draco opened the door and stepped into the confrontation.

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Lucius turned and regarded Draco. He noted with distant approval that Draco wore the fine shirt and trousers of a well-traveled heir returning from a journey, not his school uniform. He would not have put it past Draco to come in like that, despite all his own training, and Narcissa’s.

“Close the door, and sit down,” he said, the first of many tests. Whether Draco obeyed or not, that would tell Lucius something about what he was here for.

Draco shut the door, but did not sit down. “I would rather face you on my feet, Father,” he said.

Lucius nodded. This confrontation would likely be short. Draco was too raw, too open, and didn’t trust himself enough to sit down while Lucius remained standing, as of course he would. There were cracks in his composure already. “Of course, Draco. Tell me why you came.” Those words would have begun the ancient ritual among the old wizarding families, the one where only one wizard or witch would leave that room alive. Abraxas had used the same words to him, though they had not designed to kill each other. And Lucius had given the proper ritual response. He hoped Draco would.

“I want you to make me Malfoy magical heir,” said Draco bluntly.

Lucius concealed a sigh. Well, there will be other times. When he faces me again, perhaps he will use the words. “I will not do that,” he said. “And you know why not. I have my purposes answered in you remaining as you are. You are not strong enough or worthy enough of the title.”

Draco lifted his head as if hearing a distant horn call. Lucius didn’t know what to call the expression that came over his face next, except weakness. He was not closed enough. “I have inherited a magical gift from Julia Malfoy,” he said. “I went through the ritual to summon her, and she gave me her gift of empathy. You know that. You watched the scene in the Pensieve this past summer.”

Lucius nodded again. “And again I say, you are not strong enough or worthy enough of the title,” he murmured. “The gift of empathy will prevent you from ever Declaring for Dark, Draco. It has made you weak, made you show your emotions more frequently and more often. And while it might be considered a technical inheritance from the Malfoy family, since you did receive it directly from a Malfoy ancestor, that does not mean I need make you my magical heir.”

“I’m not your magical heir,” said Draco steadily. “I know I’m not. Your soul and mine don’t resonate, Father.”

“With as weak as you are, I would be worried if they did,” Lucius shot back, and waited to see if that would break his son.

Draco’s lip curled. A most peculiar look came into his eyes. “How old were you the first time you cast the Killing Curse, Father?”

“Seventeen,” said Lucius. “During my initiation into the Dark Lord’s ranks. You know this, Draco.”

“Seventeen,” said Lucius. “During my initiation into the Dark Lord’s ranks. You know this, Draco.”

“I was fifteen.” Draco took a step forward. “I cast it on that werewolf, Greyback’s mate, in the Woodhouse battle. I did it a full two years younger than you, Father. I found and summoned the hatred and the strength to do so, and survive. Will you still say that I am weak, Lucius?”

Not bad, Lucius thought. Draco was testing him now, calling him by his name, and bringing up a comparison in which Lucius might suffer, if not for other, contrasting circumstances. But he was still going to lose.

“Yes, I will,” said Lucius. “For this reason. I completed my initiation and accepted it as the Dark Lord purposed that I should do.
You needed comfort, Draco. I saw your face afterwards. You did not accept the Killing Curse as something justified, a spell that you always knew you would need to cast. You collapsed into your boyfriend’s arms as soon as we were away from Hogwarts, I trust?” He kept his tone coolly inquiring.

Draco laughed, a sound like lightning. “Lucius, do you still think that bowing to Voldemort made you strong?”

Lucius stiffened. Of all the topics he had thought Draco might bring up in this confrontation, he had not realized he would dare to touch on Lucius’s days as a Death Eater.

“Careful, my son,” he said, feeling freezing anger spread over him, and self-resentment that he had shown even that faint sign of his shock in the rigidity of his muscles. “Oh, be careful. I accepted the role of lieutenant to the most powerful Dark Lord the world has seen in generations. He was stronger than Grindelwald, and more successful. The Malfoys have followed Dark Lords when they appeared, save for those times when a Lord-level wizard appeared among their own family. I held a position that did me honor. You will not dare to cast aspersions on it.”

“Oh, but I can, and I will,” said Draco, moving a step forward. “If it did you such honor, Lucius, why not hold to your loyalty to him, the way that Aunt Bella did, and go to Azkaban for his sake? Instead, you pretended that you’d been under the Imperius Curse the entire time. You told me that as I grew up, too, and it took Harry persuading me that you’d been a willing Death Eater to make me see sense. So, you see, I never believed that you were an honorable follower of the Dark Lord. First I thought you were a victim, and now I’m just disgusted at the contradiction.”

Lucius found it hard to breathe for a moment. Then he snapped his teeth, and said, “Malfoys have always adapted, always survived. I did what I had to do to remain alive and free. The lesser wizards are jealous of us, Draco. I would have been Kissed by Dementors, not merely sent to Azkaban, if they had believed I was a willing Death Eater.”

“And you could have told me that story, and I would have accepted it,” said Draco. “Why did you tell me that you were a victim, though, Lucius? Why did you want your son to believe that?” He tilted his head to the side, a gesture that Lucius knew he’d inherited, or copied, from Narcissa. “Could it be that you didn’t want me to know that you’d tortured children? Killed a family that included a baby, instead of just taking out the one Bones wizard dangerous to you? Could it be that you were ashamed?”

“You would have betrayed the secret,” Lucius said between gritted teeth. And when had that happened? He forced his jaw to relax. “Children will chatter. I wished to keep the story consistent.”

“I never chattered, and you know that very well,” Draco said.

“You were a spoiled, indulged child, Draco, and you would have told someone else the secret to make you seem more important than you were,” Lucius snapped. “And yes, I do affix a large portion of the blame to myself for making you that way.”

Draco chuckled at him, and Lucius was reminded of his father’s laugh. He narrowed his eyes. He had seen little of Abraxas in Draco before. Where had this piece come from?

Of course. He’s been keeping some of his strength hidden.

But that clashed with what Lucius knew of Draco—that he was too open, too vulnerable, too weak, to inherit as Malfoy magical heir, though Lucius had no other choice for a blood heir. This strength was a contradiction to everything Draco had shown so far.

Which means that this is the mask. I need only strike back strongly enough, and it will shatter.

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Draco was surprised at how easy it was to drive his father in circles. Did Lucius really think he’d learned nothing from him? Draco had been Sorted into Slytherin for a reason. Just because he’d never said these things didn’t mean he’d never thought them. He had, and sometimes he had felt a festering discontent when he looked at his father, but love and pragmatism both had kept him quiet.

He watched his father’s face, though, and saw determination there, as if Lucius was settling back on his haunches. He decided that Lucius had had a chance to get used to this tactic, and was getting ready to strike back.

Draco braced himself in turn, and called up every bit of determination, every reason he was doing this, and put them all together
into a great wall, solid as a mountain, that his father would not destroy no matter how hard he tried.

And he did try.

“You are a spoiled child, Draco,” said Lucius, his tone as fatherly as it ever got. “You are too young for such a responsibility as you demand from me. Even your means of asking shows it. Tell me, Draco: why are you doing this?”

Draco held his eyes. “Because I want to,” he said. “Because my gift of empathy has changed, and it’s now the ability to possess people.” He paused to watch and enjoy as shock flooded Lucius’s face, however briefly. “That means that I can Declare Dark if I wish. And I know that possession also has flourished in the Malfoy line, once or twice, so I am still the inheritor of the magic of my family.”

“You have not inherited the magic of your ancestors directly,” said Lucius. “And you are still not my magical heir.”

Draco sneered at him. “And I know that that doesn’t matter, Lucius,” he said. “There are rituals that will allow a wizard to transfer his powers to another wizard on his death, if he really wishes to. It happens automatically with a magical heir, but that doesn’t make it better. Why should it? You make the confirmation, and, if you wish to, arrange the ritual, and then I will be your magical heir in truth, whenever you die. I hope that won’t be for some decades, by the way,” he added. “I want you alive to see what I achieve, and to see me surpass you.”

He had to hold back his laughter as he watched Lucius’s face change again. He would wager his love for Harry that his father was trying to reconcile what he knew of Draco with the words coming out of Draco’s mouth, which sounded like calculated, guided insults, and failing.

*What he doesn’t know is that this is me,* Draco exulted. *Fashioning insults on the fly is something I’m good at, like spells. Just because he has to plan out what he says in advance doesn’t mean I do.*

“Such rituals are ugly and barbaric,” Lucius began, “and no one in the Malfoy family has used them for thirteen generations.”

Draco shrugged. “Because we were lucky enough to have an unbroken line of magical heirs, and all our powers could transfer automatically,” he said. “Besides, what happened in that fourteenth generation back? Someone used one, didn’t he? And it was for the family’s sake, so that we could adapt and survive. Why are you so reluctant to confirm me as your magical heir now, Lucius? Adapt and survive. You want a magical heir. I want to be one. We both win.”

“I will not use it,” Lucius spat. “I will not use one of those rituals.”

Draco shrugged again.

“And stop that,” said Lucius. “That is a peasant gesture.”

“I’ve seen you shrink, you know, Lucius,” Draco sniped back. “You’re not convincing.” His mind was filled with memories his father certainly wouldn’t want him thinking—not only of the shrugging, but of the fact that he had outdanced his father when he was twelve years old, when he found out that Lucius had been the one who gave Riddle’s possessed diary to Harry. Memory sparked inspiration, and he crafted another insult. “Nor are you currently convincing in your role as guardian of the family honor,” he added. “Of course, you lost your grip on that three years ago, didn’t you?”

Once again, the shot went home, and Lucius’s lips clamped shut so tightly that Draco almost thought he would draw blood from that alone. He kept his exultation off his face, mostly, limiting himself to a mocking lift of his eyebrows. Really, why was this so easy?

*Because my father underestimated me. Badly. He judged me by himself.* Draco thought of some of the comments Lucius had made in his letters to Draco, that he thought badly of the way Draco acted around Harry because it was not the way Lucius acted around Narcissa. *He only loves two people, my mother and me, and he’s blind to other forms of love.*

*He’s blind even to the fact that I might love differently than he does. And at the same time, thinking differently about that would mean doubting his own judgment, which he almost never does. He’s bound himself in chains of certainty. Not so flexible and adaptable, after all.*

“I need only refuse to make you magical heir,” said Lucius, very softly, “and there is nothing that you can do about it.”
“Oh, yes, there is,” said Draco.

“What, then?”

Draco cocked his head. “Well, I will give you a partial list, since I don’t want to reveal all my tactics to an enemy,” he said. “But here it is. I can reveal our family troubles to the Daily Prophet, and tell them the real reasons that you won’t make me magical heir. I can refuse to become your blood heir unless you make me magical heir, and give you no one to leave anything to.” He smiled at Lucius, as if he were seriously considering the next tactic he named. “I can possess you and force you to confirm me, and then your pride would prevent you from taking the confirmation back.”

Lucius’s whole face was pale now. “Someone would know,” he said.

Draco raised his eyebrows. “Do you really understand what I mean when I talk about having possession, Lucius? It’s not like the Imperius Curse. I move with your body, gesture with your hands, and speak with your voice, while you’re trapped in a corner of your mind, helpless to intervene. And I possessed Dumbledore, and held him.” Lucius did not need to know how short the time had been. “I think it would be much harder to detect than the Imperius Curse, really, and I’m damn sure that there are no laws saying that it’s illegal to possess your father and force him to confirm you as magical heir. The possession gift is too rare.”

“This is about your boyfriend.” Lucius’s voice was low, and ugly, and Draco understood that he had broken through his father’s stubbornness at last, and was seeing the honesty he had assumed he would see from the beginning. Thank Merlin. It’s about time he danced to the music. “You’re only doing this because you think he won’t want someone who isn’t the magical heir to his family.”

That did startle Draco into laughter. “Are you mad, Lucius? Of course not. Harry wouldn’t look twice at someone just because he was a magical heir. He looks for other things, like compassion, and that’s where I might not be able to hold him. “I will admit, I want to court him properly, and I need to be a magical heir to our family to be able to use the ritual I have in mind. And I’m sure he’ll ask me all sorts of questions about the ritual when I tell him I want to court him, so I’d like to be able to reassure him that I have everything in order.” He cocked his head, secure, confident, feeling as if they were both in freefall down a mountain and he was the only one who had wings. Lucius was better at studied and practiced situations, and he was better at situations in motion.

“I love Harry, Lucius. That’s not going to change. You should get used to it.”

“You are unworthy of courting a Lord-level wizard, with the weaknesses you have,” Lucius said, face twisted. Draco supposed he was being forced to change his mind about his father’s stubbornness at last, and was seeing the honesty he had assumed he would see from the beginning. “A true Malfoy would have his own interests and ambitions at heart. You think to adapt yourself to Potter——”

“His name’s not Potter any more,” said Draco helpfully. Inwardly, he cheered. Lucius was rattled if he’d forgotten that.

“To Harry,” said Lucius, with a glare that said he resented even Harry’s dropping his surname at that moment, “and not to stand for yourself. Do not lie, Draco. I have seen the way your eyes follow him. You think of nothing else but him.”

Draco cocked his head and hummed. And he had the answer to this, too, rising smoothly to his lips as he could not have imagined it doing before this confrontation. “That’s because I’m thinking of the future, Lucius, and not just the present. Yes, right now I don’t know everything about what I want, and a lot of what I want is Harry, and I’m probably not standing enough on my own.” But it’s still enough to face you and best you like this, isn’t it, Father, without Harry’s help? “But I know that I can change, and, unlike you, I don’t think I need to have the change accomplished right this moment. You want me to be some perfect little statue who never changes again. And that runs counter to the Malfoy adaptability you were just telling me about, the same quality that let you survive Voldemort.” He noted in delight that Lucius had flinched at the name. “I’m going to change, instead, to become who I am and who I want in my own time. Even worse than changing myself just because of Harry would be trying to change myself into someone ‘independent’ of him just because someone else told me I should. I don’t let others’ desires guide me that way, Lucius. I want what I want, and if I want to take some time to discover how I should change, then I’ll take that time.”

“This is ridiculous,” Lucius snapped. “This is mad. You are weak. You need Harry too much. You spend too much of your life spinning around him.”

“I know that you think I should love him more the way that you love Mu—Narcissa,” said Draco, deciding at the last moment that calling her “Mum” would weaken his posture of strength. “But I don’t, and you’ll just have to live with that, too. Part of who I am is bound up with him. That’s all right. I accept that. I even want it that way.” The expression of horror on his father’s face really was going to make him laugh if Lucius didn’t stop that. “I do need him, and trying to change that would be stupid. So I didn’t
choose him out of pure disinterested strength to strength, the way you chose Narcissa and she chose you, but that doesn’t matter. Harry worried about the same thing, once, when he believed that he’d compelled me into liking him with the strength of his magic. I told him that it was impossible to sort out true friendship from magic, and that I didn’t care. And now it’s impossible for me to sort out how much is choosing and how much is needing. I don’t care. I’ll look into what should change and when it should change, and change it as needed. But no one else is going to hurry me into that, no one else is going to rush me. Not you, and not Harry, and not Snape, and not Narcissa. No one else in the world. I’m not a perfect, frozen statue. I’m not the perfectly independent, disinterested spectator that someone choosing Harry based on his power would be. I’m not some mad dueler who ignores his weakness and tries to increase his strengths until he’s defeated, inevitably.” Draco took a deep breath, feeling that the next words were incredibly important, for some reason. “I’m not you, Lucius.”

And he saw them do their work.

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Lucius could see that now, actually. He wondered how he had missed it for so long.

He prided himself on being able to survive because he did not make stupid mistakes, because, once he was faced with reality, he accepted it and rode it. He had done that when his father died, when the Dark Lord fell, when he realized that he had no choice but to ally with Harry, when he had seen how the Ministry changed in the wake of Fudge’s departure. He might try to keep his options open, as he had once done in his alliance with Harry, but when his choices were cut off, then he could take the only one left.

And the only reasonable conclusion left now was that he had been wrong about Draco, wrong about the kind of strength he had. To go on denying that just to salve his own pride would be to act more stupidly.

He’d underestimated his son. It had taken Draco only a few insults to make him crack. His own blows had made little impact. It should not have happened, would not have happened if Lucius had been a little more clear-eyed, but it had happened, and Draco was revealed as not the ice cliff Lucius had despised him for not being, but as a fierce, fast, lithe survivor. He had that quickness that enabled wizards to win on the battlefield, when he wanted to have it.

Lucius had seen him shaken in the past, had seen his son unable to counter insults and lose his temper, and he was of the opinion that Draco needed to summon his determination more often. But that did not excuse his own profound mistake in denying the nature of the opponent he faced.

He held out his hand to his son, who was not him, and not Abraxas, and was not any of the Malfoys Lucius had studied for the last thirteen generations, but surely might be the heir to Septimus Malfoy, who had argued his mother into transferring her powers to him on her death, even though Septimus was not her magical heir. “You have faced me,” he said. “I shall do as you have asked.”

Draco smiled at him. “Thank you,” he said. “I’m glad.” And those were, if not the concluding words of the ritual, at least appropriately simple. “You’ll confirm me as magical heir?” he asked, testing.

Lucius nodded.

“And you’ll use the ritual to transfer your magic to me when you die?”

Lucius gave him a swift, reprimanding look, and Draco nodded, understanding that he had pushed too far. He hadn’t asked for that, only suggested it, and with the facing ended, they were father and son once more. He had no right to ask for something Lucius did not yet want to give.

“Then should we approach the confirmation now?” Draco turned towards the door, but looked expectantly at his father over his shoulder.

Lucius studied him for a long moment.

There had never been much room in his life for delight. The closest he could remember feeling to it was when Narcissa agreed to marry him, and when Draco was born. Lucius took a long moment to recognize the emotion that was rising in him with as much determination as a green plant forcing its way through a stone.
He had raised a son who was a worthy heir. He had spent years reconciling himself to the fact that he’d spoiled Draco, indulged him so much that he had little chance of getting a decent Malfoy out of him, and to the fact that he was not Lucius’s magical heir. And now Draco had proved him wrong, and given him a worthy heir in the process.

He had made one mistake, but it had kept him from making another, and more profound, one—seeing only just enough of Draco to try to mold him in an absolutely contrary direction to the one he wanted to go. Instead, he’d left him almost alone, and Draco had grown strong and flourished without his interference.

“We shall,” he said, and strode past Draco to take the lead, letting the delight grow in him for the moment. It was not as though the other emotions would not come back later.

_I have a son. And he is worthy._

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**Chapter Sixty-Six: Malfoy, a History**

Draco followed his father steadily towards the back of the Manor, not surprised that he could feel a low buzzing in the walls now. He hadn’t noticed it before because he hadn’t been that connected to the Manor. Now he was truly the accepted son of its master, and the building was taking an interest in him that it would otherwise have reserved until Lucius died. Signatures on a piece of paper meant little next to acceptance from magical artifacts, Draco knew.

He wished for a moment that Harry could know this sensation, then shivered.

He’s Voldemort’s magical heir. I don’t think that Harry would really like the sensations that Voldemort’s house would give him, assuming that he even has a house.

Lucius halted in front of a door that Draco had tried to open about twice a year, each time getting a nasty, twitch-inducing shock for his troubles. Lucius opened it effortlessly, and motioned for Draco to enter when he hesitated.

Draco did, and felt the difference at once. The room was so heavy with wards that it entirely shut off perception of the outside world; the rest of the Manor could fall off the face of the earth while he was in here, and he’d never notice. The room was circular, with blue-gray walls and floor, and no decoration to soften the bleak stone. Draco heard a rustling murmur of many voices, rising and falling in his ears as if he stood in the middle of a vast, invisible crowd. He couldn’t quite distinguish what any of them were saying even when he listened, though. But he knew instinctively that they were Malfoy voices.

“This is our room, Draco,” said Lucius softly. “This is the heart of the Manor, the part where the first stones were laid, and the one room into which neither our enemies, nor the house elves, nor anyone not of Malfoy blood, can enter. It was built as a sanctuary for the family heads and their children, if anyone ever invaded the Manor itself.” His mouth tightened for a moment. “Wives and husbands not of Malfoy blood were not included, because they might have been the ones who betrayed the family in the first place.”

Draco nodded. He could feel the difference in the stones here. They were the color of the Malfoy crest, and they gladly accepted him, now. But he would not be able to bring even Harry here to hide, perfect as the hiding place would be. If and when he adopted or had an heir, then he could bring him or her here, and no one else.

Lucius held out a hand, and Draco was startled to see a staff made of what looked like blue light extending from it. He knew his father hadn’t been holding that when they came in. Lucius stretched his arm out to its furthest extent, and the end of the staff brushed the far wall.

“I come,” said Lucius softly, “with my son and my magical heir, sealed in the blood, sealed in the bone. I accept him as magical heir of the Malfoy family. I confirm him as my magical heir.”

The stones rumbled, and the room seemed to grow tighter. Draco sucked in his breath. Had the walls actually drawn closer? Maybe not, but it seemed like it.

“I ask,” said Lucius, and this was the only time Draco had ever heard his father sound humble, “for my ancestors’ approval of my choice, and for their confirmation of my son as heir, if they will give it.” He dropped his hand, the staff vanishing, and then knelt, his long hair falling around his face. Draco had seen him make the gesture in front of Narcissa before, but then, Lucius had always used one knee, rendering the submission less than complete.
This time, he knelt on both knees.

Draco swallowed.

“Down, Draco,” Lucius said, and Draco felt abruptly that it was close to blasphemy to be on his feet in this room. He knelt, using both knees. His hair wasn’t long enough to fall around his face, but it extended to his shoulders, and he hoped that would work. He bowed his head, and waited.

The pressure of watching eyes and voices grew greater, and then Draco felt as if someone drew blood from his arm. He looked that way, expecting to see a knife and a cut, but he wasn’t losing blood. He was losing a thin trickle of blue-gray light that he didn’t understand.

And then he did, and fear cut through his awe. He was losing magic. He tried to scramble to his feet.

Lucius’s hand shot out and clamped on his knee, squeezing so hard Draco was sure he heard the joint grinding. “Still, Draco,” he snarled. “It will be returned to you. But it must be drawn out of you and examined, first. This is why we hold this ceremony in this room, so that our enemies may not attack us while we are at our most vulnerable. Our ancestor who enchanted this room for the confirmation ritual was an absorbere. Kneel. Be still.”

Draco dropped his head and was still, though his body vibrated with pain and discomfort, and he thought he could feel himself growing gradually weaker and weaker. And then he was in the middle of a deep, motionless, almost emotionless state, and he wondered if this was what it was like to be a Muggle.

If so, he wondered why in the world Lily Potter hadn’t killed herself, and he felt sorry for Dumbledore for the first time.

And he felt a frisson of fear he had never contemplated before about Harry. He had the power to do this. Of course, so did Voldemort, and Draco wondered that he could have so witlessly charged into battle against the Dark Lord. He would be more cautious in the future, that was all.

Assuming he got his magic back.

He glanced up to see a corona of blue-gray playing around his head, widening and then spinning back in towards him, as the magic of the room considered his magic. Draco held his breath. He had never heard what happened if the ritual didn’t work, if the child was judged unworthy of becoming the magical heir. Would he stay a Muggle for the rest of his life? He could see why some of his ancestors would have thought that a fitting punishment.

He bowed his head, and tried to ignore his cold shivers. This was bringing him face to face with weakness. Draco couldn’t say he liked the sensation, but he needed to know it, as well as his strength.

The corona abruptly brightened until it was strong enough to send shadows bouncing on and spinning off the walls. Draco squinted, and then the voices returned to his conscious notice for the first time since he entered the room. This time, he could hear what they were saying. They didn’t seem to be commenting on him, but to be living and playing out dramas that must have been real at one time. He suspected that some of them had been translated from French or Latin or even other languages into English.

“…never should have trusted a Saxon to keep his promises.”

“My son, I will say this one more time. If you do not unbind me from this altar this moment, you will not live to see the moon rise.”

“Never to be parted, no, never.”

“Of course he is your son, brother.”

“And how can I think that love is less than complete here, in this wonderful place, beside the slow-flowing river?”

“Will you please tell me how a daughter of mine got herself transported by the Muggle authorities, however briefly?”

“I do not think—“ That one ended in a death gurgle, which might have been made by a knife plunging into a throat, and Draco shuddered.
“I will rise again. The phoenix does not stop burning because you kill it once.”

“It was only Muggle-baiting, Mother! Only a bit of fun! How was I supposed to know that she was my Squib cousin?”

“Because, Mother, you aren’t stupid, and you know I’d make a better magical heir for you than any of the other children you’ve got, lazy bastards that they are.” Draco grinned briefly at that one, thinking he’d like to meet the Malfoy who’d said it.

The voices rose and danced around him, and then the corona shrank, his own magic spiraling back into his body. Draco opened his arms to welcome it, and into his body he took the memories the voices had been speaking of as well.

Images rushed and blurred through his head. The effect, oddly enough, wasn’t of a stream, but of a few images that he isolated from the rest and remembered. They seemed to be in no chronological order. He saw a woman he recognized from her brilliant eyes and serene countenance as Julia Malfoy cradling a baby and singing to him. That would be her son, Draco supposed, the one she’d borne her own brother when she decided that he needed an heir.

Then came a vision of his father entering this room beside his own father. He couldn’t have been more than sixteen, and his face had been cold even then.

Further back the visions reeled, and further back, and Draco caught a glimpse of a young woman on a horse pounding through broken, rocky ground and soaring mountains, bent so far forward over the saddle that he only caught a glimpse of her face because the wind tore her long white-blonde hair back. Behind her came three men who all looked like her, probably brothers or cousins. Draco could feel her desperation, and knew she was thinking that if she could only get to the border of Spain, then she would be safe from the disgusting things they wanted her to do.

Then he was in a soaring room, a cathedral of some sort, and with a young Malfoy man who knelt among the chanting Muggles and sneered. Let them chant, if they would. His Dark Lord was coming soon enough, and he would cause destruction here of the kind that would be remembered for a thousand years.

He caught a glimpse of a lovely, dark-skinned woman whirling beside a river, dancing because her captors made her do it. She looked completely different from a Malfoy, her hair black and her skin brown and her eyes a deep brown, but the defiance and the sternness in her face was the same as that in Julia Malfoy’s, in his father’s face, in the face of the young woman escaping desperately through the Pyrenees.

Forward again, and he was riding a horse with a Malfoy man who thought being among Muggles and pretending to be one of them was fun, and especially when you came across the sea with a brilliant commander and had the fun of seeing if he could actually conquer the man who had tricked him out of a throne and settle his Norman French on this irritating island.

Lightning raked across a deep sky, and Draco stood on a pile of stones beside a Malfoy Dark Lord, who was laughing as he grabbed the storm out of the air and hurled it at his opponent, a Light Lady who fell before him. He laughed again, and then he grew alert and snapped to the south. A storm of Light was brewing there, rolling golden up the sky. The Malfoy, who called himself Lord Lightning, braced himself. The rumors were true, then; the Lady had had a brother of equal strength, and he was coming.

Draco saw weakness and strength and defiance that could have been either. He saw endless faces, endless fates, endless incarnations of the Malfoys, sometimes in a large family, sometimes in a small, mostly marrying purebloods, sometimes sneaking off and marrying Mudbloods or even Muggles, born to Lord-level power and born Squibs. The one thing that thrummed between all of them was that they did not give up, and they reached endlessly for what they wanted, even when they did not achieve it.

Draco nodded. This is what I am heir to. I can handle this.

And then the room wheeled back into his view, the parade of images ending, and he felt the magic draw in a breath. He had been tested in his weakness, and he had seen the strength that he was heir to. What now? Draco asked silently, panting and wondering what else the room had in mind.

A voice answered him like the tolling of a bell. You must face your own weakness.

Draco frowned slightly. He knew he was magically weaker than Harry. Was that what was meant?
No. This is not the weakness in the magic itself, but the weakness that may prevent you from using it.

Knowledge slammed into his mind like the crack of Lord Lightning’s storm. Draco saw himself in many ordinary moments: arguing with Harry, putting aside homework when it was too hard, turning away with a sigh from a spell that he knew he could learn but which required such fancy wandwork that he didn’t see why it was worth it.

Laziness, said the implacable voice of the room. You are capable of great things when you push yourself to be. Most of the time, you will not push yourself. You lapse, you do not work, you allow yourself to be conquered. That is intolerable.

“It’s hard!” Draco burst out. “I don’t see why I should have to put in the effort when I don’t have to!”

Then you will never become better, said the room. There was no sympathy in its voice, only judgment. You will never achieve as you could have. You must ride the storm in all times and places, not only when you truly want something or want to save your beloved’s life. The only way to become better at magic is to do magic. Determination means nothing if it is not sustained.

Draco’s skin crawled at the thought of living like Harry did, pushing himself all the time, barely knowing the meaning of relaxation. Harry had said that he lived most of his life by enduring. Draco could not imagine it. He liked enjoying himself.

You are still making a mistake, said the voice, steady as the iron clump of hooves in the vision of the fleeing Malfoy heiress and horse. This does not cut out enjoyment. It cuts out uselessness, and that is something very different.

Draco admitted, reluctantly, that the room was right. When he enjoyed himself most, it was by doing something, whether that was dreaming up punishments on people who annoyed him or kissing Harry. He also liked lying around and doing nothing, but apparently the room thought he could be using that time to master his magic and become a more useful and productive Malfoy heir.

Wanting does not bring your triumphs to you. Working for them does.

Draco blinked in spite of himself. “I think some of my ancestors didn’t know that,” he had to point out.

But your father does. Very well. And none of your ancestors who did not know this were magical heirs.

Draco bowed his head. He had called up his determination, hadn’t he, and screwed it to the sticking point? He still didn't know if he could do that all the time—it would be both easier and more pleasant to lapse back into the selfish child he liked being, because even trying to see what others thought or meant was hard—but he would try, because he wanted to be magical heir more than he wanted to be anything else at the moment.

And he had had fun in confronting his father, he thought suddenly. The sense of motion, of not knowing what would happen until he actually spoke the words that blossomed in his thoughts, of skipping from rock to rock in a general downrushing fall, had been fun. He could probably learn to find opportunities for that in the rest of his life, if he just looked.

The room let him go. Draco stumbled, and fell forward, kneeling in silence for a moment as the magic withdrew into the walls. He sucked in a breath and blinked several times, then touched his throat, expecting it to be raw with screaming for some reason. He was slightly surprised to find it wasn’t.

“That wasn’t fun,” he muttered.

Lucius’s voice startled him; he had almost forgotten his father was there. “Such rituals never are. That is not their point.” Draco turned around to find his father regarding him with narrowed eyes, kneeling on one knee now, his face cool and utterly composed again. “So your greatest fault is your laziness.”

Draco’s face flamed. “What was yours?” he asked, and then wondered why in the world Lucius should answer.

But being in this room, and having his vulnerability bared, was making Lucius do odd things, apparently. He said quietly, “My sense of direction. At one time, I had a horrible temper which caused me to search for someone to fix blame on, and I was always finding the wrong person—or I misunderstood simple concepts because I could not understand their source, and continually committed or wasted my personal resources in the wrong direction. So now I track misunderstandings and crimes and new social forces to their source, and understand them.”
Draco thought privately that his father had overcorrected for that fault, but he was not going to say it now. This ritual, too, was ending. He’d come face to face with his weakness and survived. They were returning to positions of relative strength, and in this position, Lucius’s was greater than his.

“Shall we go tell Mother the good news?” he asked.

Lucius smiled, the smile that only Draco and his mother ever got to see. “We should. Merlin knows what she imagines is happening.”

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Narcissa watched her owl wing away, and sigh. In the end, her very confused letter of apology to Harry had proved easier to write than the one to St. Mungo’s. They would want to know why Linden Gillyflower needed to know about the consequences of broken threefold oaths, and so far no excuse that Narcissa had come up with sounded convincing to her own ears and brain.

She turned back to her table. Thoughts of Draco and Lucius tried to intrude. Narcissa confronted them with the image of a polished mirror, the one useful trick she had ever learned from Bellatrix, and threw them into the trunk at the back of her thoughts. She picked up her quill again.

Someone knocked at her door. Narcissa dropped the quill, and then cursed at herself. She sat back in the chair, and made sure that her shoulders were perfectly aligned and that her blonde hair fell precisely past them to frame her face.

“Yes?” she called. Her voice did not shake, she was pleased to note.

The door opened. Draco and Lucius stood on the other side of it. Lucius’s hand rested on their son’s shoulder, and Draco’s face shone as if a great fire had passed in front of him and left its reflection in his eyes. He stood taller than Narcissa had ever thought he could at this age. No matter how she scanned him, she could see no sign of a deaging spell.

“He passed,” Lucius said simply. “He is now acknowledged as my magical heir.”

Narcissa’s anxiety burned into joy so fierce that she laughed aloud. She flung herself into motion from around the table and came to stand before her son, staring down into his face. Lucius withdrew gracefully to give them a short time alone.

Narcissa realized for the first time that she didn’t have to stare down so far at Draco. He had not completed his growth yet, but he did reach her shoulder, and he looked back at her with such complacency that Narcissa thought he could intimidate several fully adult wizards of her acquaintance.

“How was it?” she asked, even as she lifted her hands to cradle his face and bent down to give him a kiss on the forehead.

“Difficult,” said Draco. “But I passed. And I’m going to start courting Harry with the full formal ritual on Walpurgis, assuming he accepts.”

Narcissa felt her joy flare brighter and brighter. She had to step away from Draco, to drink in the full sight of him again and understand what this meant.

She had subtly mixed her own influence with Lucius’s in the raising of Draco. She had known from his birth—Lucius could call it mother’s intuition in a contemptuous voice all he wanted, but still, it was real—that the son was different from the father, that Draco would never survive unbroken if Lucius tried to constrain him to the harshest of the pureblood rituals. So Narcissa had at once worked in partnership with her husband and waged a subtle war against him, to insure that Draco could pass his earliest childhood unconstrained by anything, knowing what love was, before the dances had to begin. Even that had been a risk, though. Narcissa had doubted herself often enough, and had had to return to that original intuition for strength, because this was a harsh world that Draco was growing up in, with the next war between Light and Dark on the horizon, and the countless other, less fatal perils that had always threatened a young wizard’s life and wholeness swimming around. Theirs was a world that could break or splinter the heart. Sometimes Narcissa had thought that Lucius was right. Draco might have been broken in childhood, but if he could rebuild himself and survive, surely that was better than his death?

But now she could see the son she had hoped for standing before her, and she knew her high risk had paid off. Draco had taken his father’s and his mother’s lessons, Malfoy and Black, and blended them, instead of becoming so hard he could not feel or so soft that he would smash into pulp at the first harsh experience. He was much better than either ice or pulp, Narcissa thought. He
was alive.

“Thank you, Mother,” Draco said, as if he could sense the trend of her thoughts, “for all that you did for me, and tried to do.”

Narcissa clasped him close in her arms, and shut her eyes. At the moment, her world was perfect, and complete, and she had nothing else to hope for.

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Harry blinked, and looked again at the letter that Narcissa’s owl, Regina, had just delivered to him, to make sure that he wasn’t seeing things. The letter remained stubbornly the same.

Dear Harry:

There is no good way to say this, and there are no good words to carry my feelings. I will simply say that I am sorry for what I accused you of four days ago, and say that I know you did not violate my oath on purpose.

I have been unable to learn the consequences of broken threefold oaths, and that makes me uneasy. Generally, they were achieved, and though certain books speak of terrible consequences if they are broken, they do not specify what those consequences are. I think the authors themselves did not know. Perhaps the knowledge was so common that it was not seen as worth the writing down. I will write St. Mungo’s. They may have treated a patient in the past for the consequences of one, and have more knowledge than the books in the Malfoy libraries (a sentence that would shock Lucius nearly to death if he had seen me write it).

I hope that you are well, and that things will soon grow well between you and Draco, and you and your guardian. I also know that you are heir of the Black fortune and houses. Please assure Regulus that I approve entirely.

Narcissa Malfoy.

Harry frowned, folded the letter, and laid it on the end of his bed. Then he looked at Regina and shook his head. “No response.”

Regina hooted at him in disapproval. Harry could feel his lips thinning with irritation. “No response, I said. I’ll have to think about it a little while.”

That seemed to partially content the owl, as did the treat he fed her next, but she still gave him a disapproving look as she launched herself from his bed, through the open bedroom door, and down to the common room, where she would stare meaningfully at someone until they opened the door for her. Harry turned his attention back to the letter he’d been contemplating before Narcissa’s arrived.

Scrimgeour had certainly heard quickly about his declaration in favor of werewolves’ rights, and he was letting Harry know, regretfully, that they weren’t on the same side in this matter. If Wolfsbane Potion were less expensive to make and able to be distributed to every werewolf in Britain, he told Harry, he might change his mind, but it wasn’t, and that was that. He did agree that some of the laws were restrictive and needed to be changed, but he was not in favor of ending such things as the registration of werewolves. He argued that if the law-abiding ones were registered, then when an attack happened, they would know it came from one of those who refused to accept the rule of law.

Harry growled to himself. Scrimgeour didn’t see the very concept as degrading, probably because he wasn’t a werewolf. Harry would just have to write back and try to make him see it from that point of view.

He’d reached for paper and quill to make that happen when Draco entered the room. Harry started and turned towards him.

Then he froze. Draco had a smile on his face, but that wasn’t unusual. He was walking with a step somewhere between a swagger and a strut, but that wasn’t so unusual, either.

Something had changed, though. Harry thought it was a combination of subtle things—the way he carried himself, as if both the jerky angles and smooth motion that made up his gait were more themselves; the look in his eyes, as though he had heard some grand and terrible news and had to accept both parts of it; the impatience for the future in his face. Harry couldn’t remember Draco looking that impatient for the future before, except when he was discussing something he wanted. Now he looked as if he wanted it to come for its own sake, so that he could see what would happen.
Harry knew he was staring. He realized he didn’t care, and from the smirk Draco sent him, he surely didn’t care, and might even approve.

“I—you went somewhere other than Hogwarts?” When he’d come back to Slytherin after dinner and Draco still wasn’t there, Harry had assumed he was in the library or perhaps an abandoned classroom, sulking. He had stifled the urge to go after him. Yes, in one way he’d wanted to, but Draco was likely to take the gesture entirely the wrong way at this point, thinking that it would mean Harry was admitting he was right about pureblood superiority.

“Yes.” Draco dropped onto his own bed. He was still staring at Harry with that odd combination of expressions on his face, and Harry still couldn’t look away. It was annoying. “I went home.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. “There was something you needed to speak about with your father?” He supposed it was too much to hope for that Draco had talked his father into accepting Muggleborns as equals and Lucius was coming to Hogwarts tomorrow to make an announcement about his conversion.

“Yes.” Draco leaned forward. “I’m magical heir to the Malfoys now.”

Harry found himself speechless. Draco had let him know last summer that Lucius was still angry about him attending Walpurgis Night, and that he’d refused to make Draco his magical heir as a consequence. Harry had expected that Draco would wear Lucius down eventually, but not this soon.

“Why?” he asked finally, and wished he knew what part of the question he was asking.

“Because I went to my father,” Draco said simply, “and faced him, and forced him to respect me. He didn’t really do it before, Harry, did you know that? He thought of me as this weak creature. It’s the only explanation for why he put up as little resistance as he did.” Then his expression, which had dropped away from a smile to something more intense, became a full-fledged smirk again. “I was ready because I wasn’t ready. I just acted from moment to moment, the way we did when we attacked Dumbledore together, and Lucius thought it was part of some careful plan and tried to dismantle it, and he couldn’t, because I didn’t know what would happen next. It was rather fun, actually.”

“I don’t—” Harry said, and then stopped. There were so many things he wanted to say that he didn’t know how to choose among them. He was going to say that that didn’t sound like Draco, but now he suspected that he had seen this Draco before, killing Whitecheek and kissing him last year for the first time and facing his father in second year as well as attacking Dumbledore. He wanted to ask more about what it felt like, but he wasn’t sure Draco would understand him. He wanted to ask about the confrontation, but he wasn’t sure Draco would tell him. He wanted to say that if Draco was now in favor of impulsive actions, had he changed his mind about Harry going to Durmstrang with Rosier? And that would spawn nothing good.

Draco turned and whispered a locking spell at the bedroom door. It slammed shut. Harry raised an eyebrow. “Blaise won’t like that,” he said, grateful that had come spilling out of his throat all on its own.

Draco turned around, and Harry swallowed. This wasn’t going to be put off by distractions, he realized, any of it.

“Blaise can sod off,” said Draco impatiently. “Right now, Harry, I want to have a conversation that doesn’t involve yelling, or insults. It can involve apologies, but only if we both mean them.” He eyed Harry. “Is that acceptable?”

“Did you plan this?” Harry managed to ask.

“I’m going to ignore the tone of that remark,” Draco said pleasantly, “since I could consider it an insult if I wanted. But yes, as a matter of fact, I did. What I was going to do, anyway. Not what I was going to say.” He leaned forward. “So I find the first thing I want to say is that I don’t like fighting with you. So I want to stop.”

Harry wished for a moment that he were in the lynx form he wore in his visions of Voldemort. He would have liked to flatten his ears. “I’m still angry at you,” he said. “I’m not going to stop fighting just like that.”

“And what are you angry about?”

“That you thought I endangered my life on purpose,” Harry said. “You still seem to think that, and so does Snape. I told you, I did the best I could under the circumstances. And I can’t alter my response to events that easily. People would rightly despise me if I
became the kind of leader who let other people die instead of risking his own life.”

Draco shook his head slightly. “I got angry out of worry, Harry. I do think, now, that you probably couldn’t have done anything else right then. But I think you could plan a little more for some situations.”

“Rosier is utterly unpredictable,” Harry reminded him.

“But Rosier,” said Draco. Harry bit his tongue on the temptation to say that of course Rosier wasn’t someone Draco could confront, and listened. “But these situations in general, Harry. Concentrate on learning more healing magic, for example, so that you won’t have to feel utterly helpless when an enemy throws a Severing Curse. Work on strengthening your own magic; you have powers, but you prefer to rely on your old training rather than learn anything new.” Harry tensed, but the tone of his voice was largely neutral, analytical, so Harry let it slide. “Look through the gifts you’ve been given and the artifacts you have now that you’re Black heir. Look at them, not just see if they can be useful later.”

Harry nodded. All of those suggestions made sense, really, and he could think of one Draco had neglected to add, maybe because he didn’t know about it. Harry supposed he had to find out what the hell it meant to have Fawkes’s voice, sometimes, and phoenix fire, sometimes. If those had been gifts from the wild Dark, Harry would have accepted that they had no laws or rules, but Light magic was much more about order and control, and phoenixes were magical creatures who lived by natural laws.

“Why haven’t you done more things like that?” Draco wound up his list of suggestions.

Harry looked away from him with a grimace. “Because I feel as if I’m stretched thin enough as it is,” he said shortly. “The more time I spend training my own powers, the more time I have to take away from something else. There’s been the Durmstrang crisis and Dumbledore and the wild Dark in the past month alone—” he shuddered a little as he realized how fast those had come, one right after the other—“and before that, there was my parents’ trial, and more work to try to determine how to undo the lightning ward. I haven’t even had a meeting of the dueling club in a month. I need to get back to that. Every time I start thinking about how many obligations I have, they start overwhelming me. I know I’m splayed about as far as I can go right now and still accomplish schoolwork, sleep, and eat. Start training my powers, and something else would have to end.”

“And do you think that most of your allies and friends would mind that?” Draco asked.

Harry raised his eyebrows. “Well, yes. Charles and Thomas certainly minded their children being trapped in Durmstrang.”

“But most of these obligations aren’t as urgent as that.” Draco leaned nearer to him to make the point. “And Charles and Thomas were willing to work on that particular problem themselves, while you did other things. Harry, you can delegate. You can tell people that certain things will have to wait while you try to become stronger. What you did in front of the school today was wonderful, though why you gave the money to the Weasleys like that I’ll never know—”

“So that no one would accuse them of stealing it,” said Harry. “So their parents would know they got it perfectly legally. Now you know.”

Draco smiled faintly, but that still didn’t lessen the utter determination in his face. “I was referring more to giving money to Weasleys in the first place, but never mind,” he murmured. “But you’ve only committed yourself to a fight for the werewolves’ rights. You didn’t say that you were going to knock the unfair laws down by next weekend and have a werewolf Minister in place by June. And I don’t think that anyone expects you to.”

“Who are you and what spell have you put Draco under?” Harry demanded.

“I had to learn a few home truths today,” said Draco, and for a moment he winced. “Some things about myself I didn’t really like. This morning, and then again this afternoon.” The next moment, his gaze was steady again. “And I think it’s time you did the same, Harry.”

“I’ve been through that,” said Harry.

“Only one set. Did you really think that was the end?”

Harry ground his teeth. “No,” he said at last. Sometimes he hated it when someone else made so much sense that he couldn’t duck and dodge and offer excuses any more. “But with the way crises have been piling up lately, I was hoping to put that off for a little while. I have to be ready and open to respond to any problem that comes this way, as Rosier showed me. Dedicating so much of
“Not change things fundamentally,” Draco interrupted calmly. “Except that you’d be working with an eye on the more distant future than next week, this time. You’re holding yourself open for crises already, but you still did research on the lightning ward and found time to arrange that account for Professor Lupin.” He looked on the verge of asking Harry why he’d done that, too, but refrained, as he probably knew. “I think you can do this, too, Harry. And if someone asks you why you’ve changed, explain. Most of your allies and friends would be thrilled to know that you’re trying to become a stronger leader instead of simply losing yourself in the small problems.”

Harry had to snort a little, at the sound of someone calling the wild Dark a “small problem.”

“Understatement,” said Draco. “I know. I’m sorry. I’ve got to stop doing that.” While Harry gaped at the casual apology, he forged ahead. “But things have got to change, I think, Harry. Even if you’re still angry at me and Snape, know that.”

“I am,” said Harry. “Still angry, that is.”

“But you’re sitting here and talking to me quietly enough.” Draco gave him an inquiring look.

Harry scowled at nothing and tried to think of words to voice the realization he’d come to during History of Magic, since he’d nothing to do but think about his argument with Draco that morning. “I—the anger isn’t enough, by itself, to keep me from talking to you. It was the idea that you still didn’t see the sense of anything I was talking about that irritated me so much, that you still wanted me to give in about everything. And that’s not the way it works. That’s not the way it can work. Everything’s got to change all the time, Draco, from argument to argument, maybe even day to day. Sometimes I will be completely wrong and unreasonable. Sometimes you will. And I thought that was the way you were acting right then.” He raised his eyes to Draco’s, hoping he could convey what he meant.

Draco said nothing for a moment. Then he said, “Being compared to your mother hurt, you know.”

“I know.”

“Do you really believe that?”

Harry shook his head. “Only in the heat of anger.”

“Then why say it?”

Harry raised his eyebrows. “In the heat of anger, Draco. If we’re going to try as hard as we can to understand each other, then you should understand that I say things I don’t mean, too.”

“And you still haven’t apologized for it.”

“And you still haven’t apologized for anything you’ve said!” Then Harry hesitated. “Unless saying that you think I was right to do what I did in the Rosier situation was an apology.”

“It was supposed to be,” said Draco. “All right. I’m sorry for doubting your competence and your morals, Harry, and I’m sorry that I acted as if you had to become a different kind of person to fight this war.”

Harry nodded. “I’m sorry for comparing you to my mother,” he said. “The rest, not really. I do think that I’ll have to change certain things about myself, the training, like you said, but not the rest. I’m never going to alter myself that much.”

“I know,” said Draco. “I wouldn’t want you to. I’m thinking of you changing the things you concentrate on so you can protect what’s most important about you.” He leaned forward and captured Harry’s lips in a brief kiss, before settling back again. “Now. What you said about changing from argument to argument…it’ll have to happen all the time, won’t it? And just going back to being lazy, the way I was before, won’t work.”

Harry blinked. “I wouldn’t call you lazy.”

Draco laughed dryly. “That’s because you haven’t been inside my head. I was, Harry. I knew sometimes that I could have achieved better marks or more attention or even heroics like you, but it’s so much easier to demand it, or throw a tantrum, or just
not do anything than get it. It’s hard. I think it’s even harder than the putting your head down and pushing you told me about, because here I’m fighting my way uphill, not accepting what comes.” He tilted his head at Harry, and his eyes shone. “But I’m good at dancing on a rockslide. I think I can do that. This. I think I can change from moment to moment, day to day, and not just in our arguments. All the time. I know I can; it’s just been my own reluctance that’s kept me from it.” Harry wondered privately if that was really true, but Draco certainly sounded as if he believed it. “I can do this, Harry. Merlin, I can do this. And I know that you can, though I have to teach you some things about enjoying what you do and not just getting it out of the way, and you have to teach me some things about continuing, not just flaring once and then dying down.”

Harry had to lower his eyes at the vision those words prompted. He and Draco, ever-changing, ever-whirling, ever in motion, achieving so many things that the times when they would slide back and make mistakes were boggled in comparison, because they would know that they wouldn’t make those mistakes and get stuck in them forever. The future didn’t end, wasn’t cut off, and things would always change. So long as they could remember that, then they would avoid most of the pit traps Harry had seen other people fall into.

“Harry,” said Draco. “I want you to think about this. Now that I’m magical heir to the Malfoy family, I can court you with a full ritual that no one but a magical heir is allowed to use. It takes three years.”

Harry stared at him. Even with the vision in his head, to hear that Draco wanted to take this kind of step to make the vision a reality was—odd. Perhaps it was easier to think about than to do.

But Draco had taken a risk. The least Harry could do was meet it. He cleared his throat. “Go on.”

“It’s a joining ritual,” Draco said. “Or a marriage ritual, but you are definitely not a girl.” His eyes had a lazy, appreciative look in them as he ran them over Harry’s body. “It takes place four times a year, so there are twelve rituals—or thirteen, really, but the final ritual is the joining itself. Walpurgis is one night, and then the holiday that used to be called Lammas, on August first.” He grinned. “I think we can use your birthday for that one. Then Halloween marks the third ritual, and then the old holiday of Imbolc, on the second of February, is the fourth. Rituals will happen on those days, if you agree.” He cocked his head at Harry. “I hope you agree, obviously, but take some time to think about it.”

“Is that why you’re not starting this Imbolc?” Harry asked wryly, when he’d recovered his breath.

“Right,” said Draco. “So that you can have some time to think about it. Besides, all the best rituals like this one start on Walpurgis Night. Everyone says so.”

Harry nodded absently, and rolled back on his bed. He had time to think about it. He really did. He could trust Draco to let him take that time.

And now he had a different kind of vision of the future, one that spun him dizzyly around and made his breath come short and fast. It didn’t need to be totally separate from the world where he trained people in dueling and worked for werewolves’ rights, either. Harry suspected that that was what Draco was most trying to show him.

“You’re thinking about it?” Draco asked.

Harry closed his eyes. “I’m definitely thinking about it.”

“Good,” said Draco happily, and they leaped over a bit more of the argument between them, and into a new whirl of motion.

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Chapter Sixty-Seven: When Light and Dark Get Together

Harry hesitated.

“Oh, come on,” Draco urged him. “It’s not as though anything in here will burn, not after we asked the Room for a room that won’t.”

“That was normal fire,” Harry muttered. “I’m not entirely sure about phoenix fire.” But on the other hand, he wouldn’t learn anything if he never used it, so he extended his hand and concentrated, for the first time, on making the flame spring up instead of
simply accepting it when it appeared.

He felt an odd rush of blood in his veins, as though the fire intended to well to the surface of his skin that way, but nothing happened. He frowned slightly and closed his eyes, creating an intricate vision of what the flame had looked like the other times it had sprouted on his palm.

Blue at the center, clear azure, spreading out into orange and white. Harry found, though, that he could not remember exactly what the shape of the flame had been, or how the boundaries between colors looked. Was that why he was having so much trouble? He tried to cudgel his memory into behaving, and reached for a yet better vision of it.

“Harry!”

Harry’s eyes shot open in surprise, and he realized he was looking at the world through a blurry, blue-white sheet of flame. Phoenix fire covered his arms and shoulders like a mantle, crawled in his hair, and played around his face. Argutus, around his neck, was uttering a stream of excited chatter, basking in the heat. “Can we do this all the time? I think this is better than the sun. It feels more personal, as if the fire cares that I get warm. Maybe we could sleep like this? I think that’s a good idea. So what if you set a few blankets on fire? That’s all right. I—"

With an effort, Harry both stopped listening to the Omen snake and calmed the fire. It withdrew into his skin like wings retracting onto a bird’s back. Harry let out a shaky gasp, and then touched his hair, his face, and other exposed parts of his skin. The fire didn’t seem to have burned him. He had no idea what would have happened if he’d sent the fire at the walls of the large dueling chamber the Room of Requirement had provided them when they’d asked for a room where Harry and Draco could both work on their spells.

“Don’t do that,” said Draco furiously from the other side of the room.

“Sorry,” muttered Harry. “I don’t know what caused it, though. I was only envisioning the small flame in my palm.”

Draco made a soft, exasperated noise. “Well, think about it later. I want to test my rune circle out.” He gave Harry an expectant look, and Harry nodded and looked at the symbols Draco had painstakingly scribed into the stone floor while Harry searched through the books the Room had provided them for healing spells he wanted to study.

Harry hadn’t taken Ancient Runes, so he only knew those shapes that bore some slight resemblance to the letters of the alphabet. Based on that, he had no idea what the circle did, and he had to eye it dubiously. The last full rune circle Draco had tried had left him trapped in the room where he’d drawn it until the sun stopped shining on the circle—perfectly safe, of course.

He asked Draco about that, and received a haughty look in return. “That was a circle for binding and confinement, Harry,” he said. “This one has a different purpose.”

“What’s the purpose?” Harry asked.

“You’ll see what it is when it happens,” said Draco, and then stepped into the circle. At once he slumped to the floor, his head nearly smudging one of the runes, and fell asleep.

Harry blinked. Well, I suppose that could be useful for trapping an enemy, though we’d still have to have chosen the battlefield first. That rune circle took him forever to draw. He inched forward, wondering if the circle had some other property after all, and Draco was about to spring to his feet and catch him the moment he came up to the boundary.

Draco didn’t move, though, other than the rising and falling of his chest in slow, peaceful breaths of deep sleep. Harry frowned. If that’s his demonstration, how did he plan to get out of the circle without breaking it?

He studied the runes on the floor; they gave him no clue, of course. Harry shrugged and stretched out his hand, concentrating, to lift Draco with a Levitation Charm. He floated over the edges of the circle and landed on the floor.

Harry didn’t think the landing had been that hard, but Draco was awake in instants, spluttering about “oafs who didn’t realize that dropping someone onto a hard surface from a height hurt.” Harry just shrugged again. “Was the rune circle supposed to put you to sleep?” he asked.

Draco’s face turned a deep red.
“No?” Harry delicately suggested.

“It was supposed to render me invulnerable to any spells that might try to cross the boundaries of the circle, including your wandless magic!” Draco snapped. He scrambled to his feet and strode back to the circle, working around the runes. Argutus wriggled around Harry’s neck, and Harry put him down on the floor. The Many snake poked her head out of the pocket of his robes, too, where, based on the hive’s advice, he’d been keeping her lately, but pulled her neck back when she saw no danger to Harry. Argutus started slithering around the outside of the circle, reflecting the runes in his bright scales and staring hard at them. Harry bit his lips to keep from laughing, especially when Argutus mirrored one rune Draco had passed up and then looked at him, saying, “This one is wrong.”

“Um, Draco?”

Draco sighed and looked back at him. “What?”

“Argutus found a rune you didn’t write down right.”

“That’s impossible, I can’t have come to it yet—“

“‘This one is wrong,’” said Argutus. He still couldn’t understand English, but he had told Harry he knew from scent when he was being doubted. He flicked his tongue out now, and his hissing took on an annoyed sound. “‘Have him come back here and look at this one. There is a tiny hook that projects out to the left. In my reflection, it should project out to the right. But it goes right on projecting to the left. Something is wrong.’”

Harry told Draco that. Draco gave him an extremely doubtful look and strode back, leaning down to peer into Argutus’s scales—which of course blocked the light and destroyed the reflection. Argutus hissed in deep displeasure, and writhed one coil that didn’t contain the mirrored rune as if he would grab Draco’s wrist. Harry raised an eyebrow. Argutus was long enough now to drape down over his shoulders when he coiled around Harry’s neck. He might break Draco’s arm if he squeezed hard enough.

“Don’t doubt him, please,” he said.

Draco sighed, and moved, and looked at the reflection from a different angle. Then he said, “That’s impossible.”

“Tell him he is ugly when he doubts me,” Argutus commanded.

Harry sighed. “Apparently not impossible if an Omen snake can sense that something is wrong with your circle, Draco.”

“But that’s a bit of spontaneously wrong magic,” Draco persisted. “I’m sure I didn’t draw the rune that way. It shouldn’t have gone wrong. Besides, most wrong rune circles just don’t work. They don’t have an effect so completely different from the one the creator intended.”

Harry couldn’t conceal a smile now. “I guess you’re just talented, Draco.”

“Really?” Draco leaned back with an expression very similar to Hermione’s when she’d got a potion right in Snape’s class and was hoping, against all expectation and experience, to be praised this time.

“Yes,” said Harry. “I do think that you’re talented, Draco. Prone to rush on small details, maybe. See what happens if you erase the rune and then draw it again. Maybe it’ll work this time.”

Carefully, Draco erased the tiny hook on the rune and redrew it. Then he stepped triumphantly into the circle and turned around to look at Harry. “All right, Harry. Send your most powerful spells at—“

He collapsed, deeply asleep again.

“Now it’s upside down in the reflection,” said Argutus helpfully.

Harry had to laugh then—it was not as if Draco were awake to hear him—before he used his magic to float him out of the circle again.
“Potter! What do you think you’re doing?”

Harry was so startled that he cut his arm more deeply than he’d intended, and the knife skittered out of his hand and onto the floor, joined by a cascade of blood from the wound. Muttering under his breath, he turned and glared at Millicent, who’d come down the stairs into the common room at an unfortunate time. Nearly everyone else was outside enjoying the first sunny day of February; Harry had thought she’d gone, too. “My name’s not Potter anymore,” he said. “I know you must have heard that news. Perhaps you disregarded it because your brain was half asleep at the time.”

Millicent ignored this, hurrying across and taking his arm. “May I ask why you’re cutting your own arm, Harry? And deeply, too,” she added, as her fingers became slick with the blood in a moment.

“Practicing healing spells.”

Millicent shut her eyes. “I’m going to pretend you didn’t just say that.”

“Well, it’s true.” Harry fumbled in his pocket for his wand, muttering under his breath again as it slipped from his grip and fell back into his pocket. He summoned it into his fingers, then aimed it at the wound. He found it better to practice new spells with his wand first, before he tried to make them wandless. “Integro meliusculus!”

The flow of blood slowed, and the wound began to reknit itself, slowly. Harry nodded in satisfaction as a thick scab developed over about half the cut. The cut itself was deeper than he’d planned to make in the first place, but the spell still worked.

“Why didn’t it heal completely?” Millicent asked, frowning at Harry’s wand as if it were to blame.

“Because I didn’t want it to,” said Harry. “Integro meliusculus is only meant to make the wound somewhat better. It’s used on cursed wounds where too much healing magic at once would just trigger the curse to flare up again. I wanted to see if I could do it, and I can.” He nodded at his arm, feeling absurdly proud. The first few healing spells he’d practiced had needed two tries each before they worked. He wondered if healing magic was one of those subtle areas of magic where the passage of certain spells through the wizard’s brain and body and wand “prepared” them to handle others of the same kind of spell better.

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“You still have to have this healed,” Millicent said flatly, looking as if she were about to dash to the hospital wing on her own.

Harry blinked. “Oh, that spell I already know. Integro!” he added, showing off by doing it without a wand.

The rest of his skin knitted over, and became an ugly, but healing, scab. Harry tugged his left arm away from Millicent and flexed it. “See?” he added. “As good as new.”

“Not quite.” Millicent shook her head, her mouth still so tight with exasperation that Harry thought she was the one who’d been taking lessons from Madam Pomfrey. “You do realize the standard procedure to test healing spells isn’t to cast them on yourself, Harry, right? Apprentice mediwizards and mediwitches treat real live patients with their trainers, or they use animals.”

Harry laughed. “Well, I’m not about to begin training as a mediwizard—I’m not old enough for it, even if I wanted to—and I’m certainly not about to use magical creatures. I don’t see what’s wrong with this. I only cut myself that deeply because you startled me when you yelled my old name,” he added, feeling the need to defend himself before Millicent’s darkened eyes.

“It hurts, though,” said Millicent, as if Harry were mentally deficient. “And you could always damage yourself more deeply than you meant to, and be badly hurt or die before someone else finds you.”

“That’s not going to happen,” said Harry.

“Why not?”

Harry indicated Argutus, watching in interest from a nearby couch. “He knows to go for Draco or Snape if I tell him to or if I fall on the ground and don’t move. No, they can’t understand Parseltongue, but they’ll follow Argutus if he’s grabbing the edges of their robes and pulling.”

Millicent looked as if she were trying to decide between throttling him or herself. “And the pain?”
“I can ignore it easily,” Harry said, raising his eyebrows. He would have thought she would have remembered that before anything else. “The training, you know. If I can manage to concentrate through pain to tuck my guts back in, then I can concentrate through most of the pain I cause myself. Besides, it’s good practice. A battle that hurts other people isn’t going to leave me unscathed most of the time. If I have to heal someone else while concentrating through the pain of my own wounds, better I know what that feels like now, in a non-battle situation.”

Millicent still breathed deeply, her eyes fixed somewhere over his head. “I’m going to tell Professor Snape about this,” she said suddenly.

Harry flinched. Most of the other adults he had some hope would listen to his side of the story. Madam Pomfrey would cluck her tongue and glare, but accept that he could heal himself, and probably be more professionally interested than anything. Headmistress McGonagall had other things on her mind, given that the wards were starting to melt down into the earth again. Remus might object, but Harry thought he could talk him around. Snape, though, whom Harry had had a coldly polite relationship with for the past two weeks, would go mad. Harry was just starting to work towards reconciliation with him, was in fact planning on it when they could be in the same room for more than five minutes without wanting to bite each other’s heads off. This would spoil it all.

“Look, Millicent, don’t do that,” he said, in the calmest voice possible, as if her threat hadn’t affected him. “What do you want?”

Millicent cocked her head. “For not telling Snape, you mean?”

“For not telling anyone.” Harry vowed to himself that he wouldn’t let anyone catch him again. He didn’t want to cast his Complete Vanishing spell, because then Argutus wouldn’t be able to bring help if something nasty did happen, but there were out-of-the-way corners in the school where no one would think to look for him. And Argutus knew Hogwarts well enough, from his constant wandering, that he could find his way back to the dungeons from any corner of it.

Millicent bit her lip, chewing it. Harry waited. He could imagine a few prices she might ask from him. She’d been unable to master the last few spells they practiced in Charms. Perhaps extra tutoring was in order. Or perhaps she wanted some specific piece of magic from him? Harry could do that—

“I want you to stop giving yourself injuries to practice the spells on,” Millicent said abruptly.

Harry blinked. Then he said, “What? No!”

“Then I tell Professor Snape.” Millicent shrugged and turned towards the door out of the common room as if she would go do that right now.

“No!” said Harry in frustration. Sometimes, the world really would be simpler if I could just go around compelling people. “Listen, Millicent, I have to practice them this way,” he went on, when she turned back around, distinctly unimpressed. “I can’t hurt animals for this, and I don’t want to practice on humans when I don’t really know what I’m doing and might hurt them, too. This is the best way for me to get battlefield experience without actually being in battle.”

Millicent shook her head. “You always insist on doing things the hard way, Harry. You could have talked to Madam Pomfrey, you know. Why didn’t you?”

“Because the only way she could have me practice is on other students,” said Harry. “I already told you why I objected to that.”

“So perhaps you should just wait to actually do the spells, and learn the theory first.” Millicent’s voice had several shades of sarcasm in it. “I know that your usual method is to throw the spells first and then learn how they work, Harry, except in Defense, but I really think you should treat this like Defense.”

Harry controlled his frustration. He couldn’t think of any way to sway Millicent. If there had been the slightest softening in her expression, he would have tried, but she looked as stern as she had when she caught one of the third-years talking about putting a love potion into someone else’s breakfast. She’d been chosen Prefect for a reason, Harry knew.

And if she told Snape, he really would go mad, and every bit of progress Harry had made with him since the original argument would be undone. Harry valued his relationship with his guardian more than the chance to keep practicing healing spells on himself.
“All right,” he agreed.

“Promise me,” Millicent said. “Swear by Merlin.”

“I promise, in Merlin’s name,” said Harry glumly. He could admit that, looked at from the outside, this probably did sound like a stupid idea, but the more he read about healing magic, the more he thought that it would be useful, and he absolutely had to practice it. The thought of deliberately injuring someone else so he could practice horrified him, and then what would happen if he couldn’t master the spell and couldn’t heal the hurt? This had seemed the best compromise.

“Then I won’t tell Snape,” said Millicent, and made a little dusting motion with her hands. “Now, I’m going outside to watch the second-years. There’s a gang of them who’ve developed a rivalry with a whole group of second-year Gryffindors, and they’re all little monsters when they think someone isn’t looking—the kind of children to give a snowball a lead core if they can.” She shook her head and swept out of the common room.

“Are those lessons done?” Argutus asked.

Harry sighed and Scourgified the blood on the common room floor and the knife blade. “Yes.”

“Too bad,” said Argutus. “But perhaps we will learn other things now.”

Harry nodded and wondered if Millicent would have been more sympathetic if he’d revealed that this was only his second day of practicing healing spells this way. He doubted it.

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Harry ignored the glances. He knew how it looked. There were six post owls sitting patiently on the Slytherin table, awaiting their turn for attention, and he was furiously scribbling letters, trying to be diplomatic and persuasive at the same time. Even though a few of his allies wouldn’t be coming to this grand gathering on Saturday, most of them would. They were asking questions about when they should arrive, whether they really had to Apparate outside Hogwarts’ wards, if they had to bring gifts, whether gifts would be brought for them, demanding that he add just a bit of persuasion to make them come instead of attending to other commitments, and saying other things that Harry was more than willing to answer, as long as it would coax them into actually arriving.

This had been his main political business for the last three weeks, sending letters to all his allies and to all the families, Light and Dark, that his allies had mentioned as being potentially interested in alliance, trying to get them to agree to meet in the Room of Requirement on Saturday the seventeenth of February. First he’d had to overcome objections about meeting with wizards of the opposite allegiance, and then mass efforts to make him choose a different day, and then declarations that they wouldn’t arrive if such-and-such a wizard or witch was there, and then, at last, these petty objections. Harry was willing to do almost anything to make it work, except the stupidly obvious things like meeting with only Light or Dark wizards, and now he almost thought it would.

Mortimer Belville wasn’t coming, citing family commitments, but Compton Belville, who had now offered Harry adoption several times, was, and several of the minor Light pureblood families Augustus Starrise had told Harry usually did what the Starrises did. There were also several wizards tied in to the Opallines who were coming, strangers, and apparently a French witch had heard of the meeting through someone else and had written to Harry herself, asking permission to come. Harry had been pleased, especially since she told him she sat on the Veela Council. No, this wouldn’t encourage them to make a decision about allying with him any faster, but it might at least present a positive impression of him.

If he could pull this off. Harry had never met with this many people before, and the nearest meeting in size had had an overwhelming majority of Dark wizards. At this one, if everyone attended who promised to, then there would be more who claimed allegiance to the Light. There were approximately several million things that could go wrong, but if he could pull it off, then perhaps abominations like the one he’d seen Voldemort performing last night would stop.

Harry grimaced and paused in writing, both to rest his wrist and to rub his scar. He’d gone into vision last night as a lynx and quietly watched, and there had been no sign that Voldemort noticed him. He certainly had never paused in chanting the spells that stitched pieces of cut-up human bodies into a creature bigger and stronger than the worm Harry had seen in the graveyard, a creature that resembled a lumpish dragon if it resembled anything, and had wings.
Harry had a sick feeling that he knew what had happened to the Muggles whom Voldemort had captured, using sirens, on the autumnal equinox.

He took a deep breath and plunged back into his letter-writing, ignoring Argutus’s peaceful eating of sausages off his plate all by himself. Let people think he had terrible manners if they wanted. He had to make this work.

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“And how does this spell work?”

Narcissa hid a smile as she finished casting the spell that would alert them when someone entered the Room of Requirement. She had come early to help ward the Room, partly with such spells and partly with Black artifacts placed in discreet locations, and Harry had been following either her or Regulus around most of the time, asking questions about the theory behind spells as if he were going to have an exam on them any moment.

“It senses flesh and blood,” Narcissa told him now, as she stepped back and considered the light shimmer of the spell across the doorway. “It’s one of the spells I used when we were searching for my cousin’s body, trying to find out if he was hidden somewhere as himself. If someone enters in an Invisibility Cloak or under a Disillusionment Charm, the spell will tell me—and you. It has its limitations. It doesn’t sense flesh and blood surrounded by other flesh and blood, for instance. If a woman came in with a baby in her arms, it wouldn’t sense them as separate entities. And it wouldn’t sense something like a poisonous spider clutched tight in someone’s fist, until the fist open and the spider moved.”

Harry cocked his head. He looked so charming at the moment, so incredibly full of concentration, that Narcissa felt any resentment she still carried towards him on account of the violated threefold oath fall away. She still hadn’t received an answer from St. Mungo’s about what the consequences of breaking the oath might be, but that was all right. It hadn’t been Harry’s fault—certainly not something he intended to do. And having listened to other descriptions of the incident at Durmstrang now, Narcissa had to accept that Rosier would have killed Bellatrix if Harry had not.

“That sounds like a hard spell to escape detection by,” Harry said now. “What’s the point of clutching a poisonous spider in your fist for hours?”

“Well, it’s rumored to be the way Arabella Zabini killed her seventh husband,” Narcissa said, as she began casting the next ward. “He used that spell because he thought she would lure him to a room where her next lover was hiding and have them duel to the death. Instead, she had a spider in her hand, and he didn’t sense any other flesh and blood until she opened her hand and it bit him.”

Harry blinked. “I’ll remember that the next time I see Mrs. Zabini,” he said.

“You should.” Narcissa gave him a faint smile. “Many of your allies are dangerous, Harry, some of them more so than any wizard or witch left unallied with you—at least in Britain.”

“What about Indigena Yaxley?”

Narcissa felt her smile fade. “I misspoke, then,” she said. “There is at least one dangerous witch you do not have on your side.”

“Is there any way of getting her?” Harry’s face was intent. “Lucius told me a little bit about the debt of honor she has, when I asked, but it sounded as though she could choose to get out of it.”

Narcissa shook her head. “Debts of honor are a contrivance that very few families respect any more,” she said. “They’re not like life debts—not recognized by magic itself. In this case, Indigena’s nephew swore his loyalty to the Dark Lord, but ran away even before he fell, and pretended he’d never been a Death Eater; he was certainly never suspected in the Ministry. Nor did he respond to the Dark Lord’s call when he returned last summer.” She saw Harry’s hand move to rub the stump of his left wrist, perhaps unconsciously, and briefly let herself wonder if enough of her sister’s handiwork was undone to grant Harry a hand now. “Then Voldemort demanded a debt of honor from the Yaxley family, a loyal servant in return for a disloyal servant. He could have chosen anyone he wanted. He chose Indigena, quite sensibly. It is her choice, her will, that binds her to the Dark Lord. And she hates traitors and those who forswear their vows; most of the Yaxleys do. She would look on someone like Severus or Lucius as blasted and damned. I fear you will never sway her, Harry.”

Harry’s face assumed the mild, stubborn expression Narcissa had seen there a few times just before he went out and did the
impossible, including riding a dragon into a storm of the wild Dark. “I still might try, if it’s her choice and her magic wouldn’t punish her for turning away from Voldemort.”

Narcissa sighed. “At least promise me that you won’t go marching up to her on the next battlefield you see her on and try to sway her.”

Harry gave her a fleeting smile. “I promise.”

Then the first of their guests began to arrive, and Harry turned to welcome them, and Narcissa turned back to warding the room, wishing fretfully that she could be sure Harry wouldn’t try to persuade Indigena out of her allegiance. Indigena’s nephew was the only cowardly Yaxley in the history of the family that Narcissa could remember. If they chose a side at all, they stayed with that side, no matter how doomed it was; a Yaxley had fought at the Eagle Lord’s side even when he knew that Calypso McGonagall was bringing an earthquake down on them, according to legend.

*And why should this one be different?*

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Snape knew it was all going to go wrong with the arrival of the first wizards and witches.

Oh, they were polite enough; most of them smiled, and took chairs in the growing circle of seats, provided by the Room of Requirement, with their smiles still intact. But they were separating themselves rigidly, sitting with either Light or Dark contingents, and when they looked at the wizards and witches across the ring from them, their faces wore nothing more neutral than frowns. Snape shook his head as he watched. He was sensitive enough to undercurrents, Merlin knew, after a year of spying among the Death Eaters for Dumbledore and forcing himself to pay attention to not only the tiny gestures but what the tiny gestures added up to. Most people had come here not out of curiosity, but because they felt they couldn’t afford to be left out of a meeting their enemies would attend. The dominant emotional tone of the gathering was belligerence, and nothing would persuade them to lay it down, unless Harry agreed to meet with the members of each allegiance separately.

Snape knew that wouldn’t happen.

His gaze left the gathering and moved back to Harry, who remained near the door of the Room of Requirement and welcomed the new guests in. His courteous mask never faltered. He had obviously looked up any details of pureblood greetings he didn’t know, and Snape had the satisfaction of seeing some of the cold masks falter, for a moment, as the strangers accepted more politeness than they’d counted on.

It wouldn’t work, though. Their faces hardened again as they walked towards the circle.

Quietly, Snape cast a spell that would tell him if someone was influencing others with an emotional compulsion. Voldemort had sometimes used that to stir up enthusiasm for killing among his more sluggish Death Eaters, and it would be exactly the kind of tool that Harry’s enemies would use to destroy something that he’d worked so hard on.

No trace of the spell came back to him. Snape felt his mouth tighten. *So. It’s only the fools’ natural tempers.*

On and on they came, Harry’s old allies and new ones. A few Light wizards and witches were exchanging smiles with a few Dark ones now, but too little, too late. The meeting had been spoiled before they arrived, Snape knew. Harry’s haste and hurrying probably had something to do with it, as did the fact that the Light wizards didn’t trust the Dark ones to actually fight Voldemort, and the Dark ones didn’t trust the Light ones not to hide their heads, now that the Light side had been trimmed of its last leader.

Snape allowed himself a single moment of hard satisfaction for that. Dumbledore was gone, and though Snape believed Harry should have absorbed the Headmaster’s magic instead of storing it in a tie, of all things, he would not be a threat ever again.

Then he went back to studying the gathering, and shook his head. There were a few wizards and witches here he would have advised Harry not to invite, if he and Harry were on speaking terms that close. Gloriana Griffinsnest was so entirely under the domination of Augusts Starrise that she would do almost nothing without his permission, but in one thing she was firm, and that was her hatred of werewolves, since two of them had killed her parents. Her eyes had not moved from Remus Lupin since he came into the room, and Snape had seen her robes swirl and part, briefly revealing the silver knife she carried. She would kill Lupin in a moment if she thought she could get away with it.
Compton Belville sat like a black swan among the wizards on the Dark side of the circle, murmuring greetings and responses to questions with a blank look on his face. Snape had to fight to keep his snarl from his lips when the old wizard’s gaze briefly touched his. Compton was timid in letters, and could sound like a fool; so long as he and Harry had communicated only by owl, Snape saw no reason to encourage his ward to drop the correspondence. In person, though, the foolishness was revealed for the act it was. Compton Belville, though eighty-four years old, was dangerous if he decided to be so. And now he could observe Harry close at hand.

And Augustus Starrise… Snape did not care if he was Harry’s ally, not when the man’s eyes lingered on several faces around the circle with that special contempt in them. He was looking at Snape that way, currently. Snape knew he would have cast a spell to determine which of the wizards in the room had either Muggle or Muggleborn parents. He would have sensed Tobias Snape’s blood in Severus Snape’s veins, and that Snape’s mother had been a pureblood witch would matter little to him. Starrise lifted his lip as Snape watched. Combined with his eyes, they expressed a perfect, practiced, pureblood scorn.

Asking to have Augustus Starrise behave politely in any room that included halfblood witches and wizards was like asking a Kneazle to play nicely with pixies. Snape watched others become offended as they noted Starrise’s scrutiny, and Lucius Malfoy watch Starrise all the while with a fixed air of hatred—they were too much alike for Lucius to do anything else—and ripples spread out from there, as wizards or witches who relied on others to guide them scrambled to adjust their positions to the emotions their guides were expressing.

Snape shot Harry a glance as he welcomed in the last guest, the French witch, who arrived in a cloud of shimmering silver hair and took a seat between the Light and Dark sides. It seemed Harry did suspect that not everything was perfect. Of course, his chin was up and his green eyes incredibly stubborn. He would not back off on holding the meeting now simply because of potential problems. He would persist until it collapsed.

Snape concealed a snarl. He would not be responsible for his actions if Belville or Starrise launched a spell at Harry. He wished that he could have simply stepped over the boy’s barriers, or his own, to warn Harry about them, but Harry was stuck on handling their reconciliation slowly, and didn’t want to talk about anything except that or Potions. Snape knew his warnings would have been unwelcome.

He concealed another snarl and turned back to the gathering. Harry had moved through a gap between the French witch’s chair and her nearest neighbor’s, and taken his place in the center of the circle. He turned in a slow circle himself, meeting everyone’s eyes. He radiated power and confidence. Snape had to admit it made a difference from the trial, the last time Harry had been on such public display to a captive audience. This was more like his air during the press conference he’d held to warn the wizarding world of the danger of the wild Dark.

“Thank you for coming,” Harry was saying, formally. “It has been decades since the last gathering of Dark and Light wizards this large. When I studied the historical records, the last time I could find a mention of one half so big was an alliance against the Dark Lord Grindelwald, in 1944. That fell apart after a few months of dissonance.” He paused and gave a sharp smile in Compton Belville’s direction. “I hope this one will prove steadier.”

“Perhaps it would help if you told us what you intend, Harry,” said Paton Opalline, one of the few wizards here Snape would trust to stand at his back with a wand in his hand. He sat with his tattoos exposed and gleaming on his skin, probably to show the others that his family was at Harry’s disposal. “What are your goals for this alliance?”

Harry nodded. “I intend for us to fight Voldemort,” he said, and a surprising number of Dark wizards flinched at the name. Snape rolled his eyes, and did not care who saw him. “But not only that. When he is defeated—”

“If,” said Compton Belville, with the soft-voiced and utterly stalling kind of interruption he was so good at.

But Harry did not stumble and ask what Belville meant, as so many of his victims did. He merely turned to face him and flashed him a dangerous grin. “I plan to defeat Voldemort in a few years,” he said casually. “I certainly don’t intend for him to run about for decades and wreak havoc on my life and my brother’s.”

“Perhaps you could see your way clear towards telling us the prophecy, then,” said Belville, leaning forward, his face full of bloodless curiosity. “What exactly does it say? Why should we believe that you will defeat the Dark Lord?”

Harry paused for a long moment. Then he said, “Forgive me, sir, but I know that a traitor lurks among the ranks of my alliance. I have reason to believe that this traitor warned Voldemort about a battle that my allies and I fought in the autumn. Unless everyone here will consent to swear an oath promising to speak nothing of this meeting outside this room, then I cannot tell you the
prophecy. There is too much danger that it might run back to my enemies.”

“To ask us to take such an oath is an insult!” Gloriana Griffinsnest exclaimed, clasping her hands together. “Would you really ask us to do such a thing, Lord—”

“I am no Lord.”

Harry’s flat declaration stopped Griffinsnest as effectively as Belville could have done, Snape noted with approval, but not for long. Then she was bustling forward again. “I have heard that you call yourself a vates, a guardian of free will for the magical creatures,” she said stiffly, raising her head. “Is this a sign that you respect the free will of wizards and witches less, then?”

Harry shook his head. “It is a simple precaution, ma’am. Unless I have that assurance, it would be stupid to let my enemies have that prophecy.”

“Then you are afraid of the Dark Lord,” said Belville. Had it not been for the fact that Griffinsnest and Belville hated each other too much to cooperate, Snape would have thought they had arranged this, so perfectly were they playing off each other. “I did not know you were afraid of him.”

“Of course I am,” said Harry, so simply that it was hard to wrestle fear out of his tone. “He is a Parselmouth, in possession of knowledge of how to breed basilisks—”

“Via books he stole from me,” said Arabella Zabini, her face gray with rage.

Harry inclined his head to her. “Nonetheless, stolen or not, he has the knowledge now;” he continued. “He is also an absorbere, able to swallow magic. He has drained—Muggleborn children too young for Hogwarts, and I think his victims may be legion in a battle. He is a compeller, an Occlumens, and a master Leglimens, as well as able in Dark Arts from years of study between the time of Grindelwald and his return to Britain and first rise. He had an alliance with the sirens, though they may have broken free of him by now, and he has sent negotiators to the giants, though most have failed. He can possess others. Indigena Yaxley fights with him, and I have already seen how much damage her plants can do.” Harry took a deep breath. “I also have information from a new source that Voldemort is stitching pieces of dead flesh together into beasts. I faced one on Midwinter that looked like an enormous worm. The one I have been informed of is a dragon, or resembles one.”

“That is a Dark Art unpracticed for nearly two hundred years,” said Hawthorn Parkinson, who looked sick. “My—my husband, who was a necromancer, told me of the last time it happened. A monster in human form escaped among the Muggles and caused great damage before he could be stopped. One of the Muggle authors wrote a book about it, though of course most of the facts were wrong. Frankenstein, I think it was called.”

Harry nodded slightly. “I know he could animate the worm. I am unsure how he will bring the dragon to life, but I have no doubt that he will manage.”

Snape sat still in his chair. It might appear to anyone who looked at him that he was considering how much damage Voldemort’s beasts would do. He, however, was thinking of how Harry could have learned about the Dark Lord’s dragon. He could think of only two routes, neither of which pleased him.

Either Evan has been writing to him again, and he should know better than to believe the liar by now—

Or he has been opening the Occlumency link and stepping into the Dark Lord’s head. Damn him!

Snape sent Harry a furious glare just as Harry turned his way. Harry froze for a moment, eyes wide, then shook his head and set his shoulders and glared back. Snape sat back in his chair, suppressing his incandescent rage that his ward had taken yet another foolish risk, rather than coming and asking for help with his dreams and visions.

“How do we defeat him, when he has such armies?” That was one of the wizards from a minor Light family, Dawnborn or something of the kind. His eyes were wide and fearful.

Harry started to answer, but Edward Burke spoke before he could. “Why do you have to worry about that? You’ll just cower in your holes, which is the only activity proper to rabbits.”

The Light wizard squawked, and Augustus Starrise’s voice rang out. “Do you claim that Dark wizards fought You-Know-Who in
his first rise, Burke? They did not. They fawned at his heels as his hounds, or ran beside him as leashed slaves.” His eyes found Lucius Malfoy’s face.

Snape sat back in resignation as he saw Lucius lean forward. The circle was falling apart all along its fractures. Yes, Harry should have considered more carefully whom to invite.

“Some might say that, under the Imperius Curse or not, at least his servants saw battle, and often without him,” Lucius murmured. He was using the kind of voice that did not sound loud, but could easily reach across the circle, and was the fiercer for being the softer. “They did not sit in their homes and wait for one wizard to lead them, as happened too often with Albus Dumbledore. Nor did they become first captives and then suicides.”

Starrise stood in a single, flowing motion. He did not have the white staff bound with gold he had carried at the trial, or Snape would have feared for Lucius’s life. But he was enraged enough that white, glowing sparks of wandless magic leaped about him. “Were you one of them?” he whispered. “Were you one of the bastards who did worse than rape my sister?”

Lucius merely leaned back in his chair and raised his eyebrows. “Did that happen to your sister? I had no idea. My humblest apologies, Starrise.” His voice had no tone at all, which was worse mockery than laughter.

Starrise trembled as if he would rush forward. Gloriana Griffinsnest, beside him, fingered her silver knife and eyed Lupin. Hawthorn Parkinson sniffed once, and then focused on the knife; Snape could hear a low growl bubbling in her throat. Tybalt Starrise and Honoria Pemberley were tensed, bright grins on their faces. Snape did not know which way they would leap, but he was certain they would enjoy the chaos of it.

“Enough.”

Snape winced. Harry had enchanted his voice to throb in the ears of everyone who heard it. Most wizards and witches fell back clutching their heads. Lucius and Starrise never took their gazes from each other, but they were the only ones who didn’t.

“This is obviously not working,” said Harry, with firmness and no disappointment in his tone. “Very well. I have thought of another plan, one I that considered as less preferable than this one. However, perhaps it will give you time to restrain your tempers and become accustomed to working beside wizards and witches of an opposing allegiance.” Snape turned his eyes to Harry, along with everyone else, and saw Harry shrouded with a mixture of deep green light, one of the colors that symbolized Dark, and blue phoenix flame. It did make a striking tableau, and it kept most everyone transfixed while Harry spoke. “This is an alliance of Light and Dark, and always will be. I will never Declare for either Dark or Light. I am a vates, and I will work for the rights of magical creatures. That does not mean I consider them more important my own species—and vice versa.

“Paton Opalline asked me what I wished the alliance to accomplish. While the first answer is finding ways to fight Voldemort, the next answer, and the more profound, is to find new ways of living. Most magical creatures are bound under webs that prevent them from coexisting equally, or at all, with witches and wizards. Light and Dark battle generation after generation, with useless slaughter in the name of names. Injustice prevails in many wizarding families, and not only child abuse. Muggleborns and their children are scorned by purebloods.” His gaze came to Starrise, and it was hard, but it didn’t soften when he looked at Lucius, either. “I would like to change all of that, and anyone who wishes to help me is welcome.”

Silence gripped the room for a long time. Then Paton said, his voice still as cheerful as before, “What is this second opportunity for meeting that you were talking about, Harry?”

“On the spring equinox,” said Harry softly. “The old day of reconciliation, of ending wars and making up family quarrels. The day when day and night, Light and Dark, are of equal length. I would invite anyone who wishes to come to an enormous gathering, not held in Hogwarts—”

“Where, then?” Compton Belville asked.

“In a place I will reveal to those who choose to come, and only those,” said Harry simply. “And I will require oaths, before you enter the area, that you will not cast spells save in self-defense. We are going to talk about revolution, but bloodless revolution only.”

“Such a thing has not been done since Merlin’s time.” That was the French witch, leaning forward and looking at Harry with interest. “The memories of the Veela are long, and such oaths of peace were rare even then. Will people from other countries who
“Anyone who wishes, yes.”

“There could be centaurs there, then?” Augustus Starrise asked.

“And werewolves?” Gloriana Griffinsnest asked.

“And Muggleborns?” That was Edward Burke, who looked dismayed.

“Yes, anyone who wishes to attend and will swear the oaths.” Harry looked at them and shook his head. “I will remain here until everyone is left, to make sure the remains of this gathering do not explode into violence. It troubles me, indeed, that this had to happen, that so many powerful adult wizards in Britain will surrender themselves to names and no more than that.”

His tone was perfect, Snape had to concede, not exactly scolding but full of proud and stern dismay. More than a few people bowed their heads and looked chastised before they slowly began to leave. Snape waited until he was sure that most of them were gone, and the small crowd around Harry had cleared, before he began working his own way forward.

Harry was speaking with Paton Opalline when he arrived. Paton took one look at Snape’s face and raised his eyebrows. “It seems that your father wishes to speak with you, Harry,” he said, “and I know better than to stand between a parent and child. My brother gave me a scar I still bear for it.” He stepped back.

“He’s not my father,” said Harry.

His voice was querulous, sulky, to Snape’s ears, and it was that or it was the words that made Snape lose control of his temper—though he managed to keep his voice soft, so that no one would have reason to look their way.

“You have been going into the Dark Lord’s mind in your dreams,” he whispered harshly.

Harry stiffened. “What makes you think I’ve done that?” he asked, and his eyes met Snape’s, wide and guileless. Occlumency shields were guarding his emotions, so that Snape couldn’t read, even with a focused Legilimency probe, anything to contradict what he was saying. If Snape hadn’t taught Harry to do that, and in part to lie, himself, he might even have believed him.

*If small winged pigs had been swooping overhead, perhaps.*

“How else could you have learned about the Dark Lord’s use of a flesh dragon?” Snape snarled. “Unless Rosier has written you.”

Harry shook his head. “No, he hasn’t.”

“Then it was the dreams,” said Snape, and other emotions than pure anger were stirring in him now: resentment for Harry’s disregard of his own safety, and fear, and resentment of the fear, and a marrow-deep frustration. “You have done many things in the past month that you have not informed me of.” And he was thinking, now, of the fact that Harry had obviously made up with Draco and not him, and of Harry becoming Black heir, and of the fact that Harry had mostly arranged this meeting before he bothered to tell Snape about it.

“I didn’t want you to worry.”

Snape’s eyes snapped away from his memories and back to Harry. The words were soft and laden with poison. Harry’s gaze sparked with his own resentment and frustration. Snape could see the progress they had made in the past month falling to pieces in them.

“What have I said about that?” Snape said, more softly and more coldly than before. His anger was rending him again. It was one thing not to be able to protect Harry from suddenly appearing dangers like Dumbledore and Evan Rosier, it was another for Harry to have to face one only he could face, like the wild Dark, and it was another, quite another, for Harry to hide information from him that would have aided Snape in protecting him—for Harry to do things that damaged Snape’s role of guardian.

“That I have to trust you.” Harry’s voice rose a notch higher. Snape could see Draco hovering anxiously off to the side, but his mother had her hand on his shoulder and wasn’t letting him approach. “You don’t see that I do trust you. Merlin! Would I pour this much effort into arguing with you, would I care this much, if I didn’t trust you, didn’t love you? But that’s not the only role I
I have to be a leader, have to do what I can to protect others. He hasn’t sensed me so far; I promise he hasn’t. I’m learning to distinguish between the dreams I get, the ones where he’s dreaming and the ones where I see what he’s doing and the ones where he tries to trap me. I know what the traps feel like, and he’s not using them.”

If he had ever been more sheerly infuriated at any point in his life, Snape could not remember it. “Perhaps he senses you,” he whispered. “Perhaps he is merely waiting you out. Did you think of that?”

Harry snorted. “Would he really let me see his plans that way? I don’t think he would. He would use a false vision instead. And I told you, I know what those feel like. He lured me to the Weasleys this summer with a misty dream of him attacking my brother. He’s not using those now. I’ve been watching him, and he can’t sense me. I haven’t been jumping into the connection like I did in September. I promise.”

“Why will you not let us protect you?”

Harry apparently couldn’t speak for a moment. Then he snarled, “Because you can’t. I’ll never be safe. I’ve got used to that. You still haven’t. And I’m not a child, and the ways you try to protect me are all ways you would try to protect a child. If I thought you would take the information I have about my danger and discuss it with me like an adult, then I would give it to you. But you don’t, and you won’t.” He paused, then added, “Maybe that’s the way I don’t trust you, sir. I don’t trust you to remember that this is a war, and I have to do my share of the work.”

He turned and strode rapidly from the Room of Requirement, giving his head a single sharp shake when Draco tried to accompany him. Snape knew he was probably going off alone to brood.

He controlled his temper with a combination of Occlumency and sheer ruthlessness. He would go back to his quarters, conjure targets, and destroy them. Then he would brew potions. But not here, not here.

“Trying to raise a child is difficult,” said Opalline. He didn’t put his hand on Snape’s shoulder, merely regarded him with compassion. “Particularly when they begin to insist that they are children no longer.”

Snape only nodded once, curtly, and strode from the room. He hated vulnerability, and he hated helplessness, and he felt as if he were helpless on all sides, with his tie to a life that Harry refused to guard.

~*~*~*~*

Interlude: The Serpent Strikes

February 17th, 1996

Dear Lord Voldemort:

By the incantation to take a letter directly to you I send this, with information that I hope and believe you will need. I have heard of the vengeance of Dark Lords upon those unworthy servants who dare to disturb their important plans, and I know that I have not been honored with Your Lordship’s confidences, but I believe that you must hear this news, that it is important and will continue to be so.

I attended a meeting today with the rest of those fools who continue to overlook me and think I do not matter. In this case, I was very literally overlooked. Not a single eye alighted upon me. I can be ignored, but they do not know the depth of the cunning that hides behind my face, and they can never be bothered to find out. I believe they hold my bloodline against me, although I have done nothing that would taint it further than it is already tainted.

The meeting was a short one. No one could reach an accord, and Potter—so I call him, for though he rejects his family name he certainly has no claim to any other, and I will not call him by his first name alone, as if I were his friend—dismissed us, calling for a meeting on the vernal equinox. He will not tell us where the meeting is to be held until each person contacts him, swears an oath not to use magic except in self-defense. I think he will find the numbers at this supposed reconciliation meeting between Light and Dark smaller than he thinks he will.

More than that, though, my lord, I sensed a weakness in the wards of the school. It seems that Albus Dumbledore’s death tearing
up the wards was not rumor or idle speculation after all. He has weakened them, and the weak point seemed to be below the Room of Requirement. I cast a spell that would enable me to see the wards—as no one still thinks I am worth anything, that was easy enough—and watched them running downward. The Headmistress cannot have found the weak point yet, however, or she would have sent the children home while she reestablished the wards. The movement of the spells was slow, but given that they were moving at all, I would estimate the waxing and waning cycle as no longer than a day. May this information be useful to you, my Lord, as you plan an attack on Hogwarts. I would suggest Draco Malfoy as a target, if your servant may have the cheek to hint at where you direct your illustrious might. The boy stays close to Potter at all times, and is rumored to be starting a formal courting ritual with him soon. His loss would break Potter.

With sincerity,

*The Serpent.*

February 19th, 1996

Dear Serpent:  

I will use the name that you continue to prefer, so that if this letter falls into the hands of your erstwhile “allies” it will not reveal you. Lord Voldemort has directed me to write back to you, and to thank you for your information. Harry’s meeting on the vernal equinox sounds interesting, and we will trust you to report what happens there to us. Make sure that you are invited.

We also thank you for the information on the wards, though we had already attained this from another source. (Strike more quickly, my dear Serpent. I would hate to see you no longer of use! My lord laughs most heartily whenever he receives one of your letters.) My lord has also chosen how best to employ their weakness. He will not attack Draco Malfoy at this time. There is another set of people connected to Harry whom he will bleed instead.

A most curious thing, my dear Serpent: When we broke the charm to disguise your handwriting on your second message, the one informing us of Harry’s presence at his press conference, we learned that you are apparently ambidextrous. Are you, by any chance, able to take the Dark Mark soon? My lord welcomes one who, as in the old legends of ambidextrous wizards, could wield his wand with either hand.

May affection hold you like the embrace of thorns,

*Indigena Yaxley.*

~*_*_*_~*

**Chapter Sixty-Eight: Stolen Child**

“I think that if you just apologized—“

“Draco.” Harry controlled himself with an effort, which in this case meant he kept his voice calm, though cool, and didn’t look up from the letter he was writing. “We’ve been over this. I’ve tried all the compromises I can think of. I’ve told him I love him, I trust him, that I understand what he’s trying to do and why he’s trying to do it. I can’t just agree with him, though, and I think he’d take an apology the same way right now. When I work out what I actually want to say, then I still have to say it to him without shouting, and so far that hasn’t worked.” He looked up at Draco, who was leaning on his bed on one elbow and watching Harry as he wrote the letter on top of his Transfiguration text. “So stop talking to me about Snape right now.”

Draco snorted. “I don’t see why it’s so hard. You love and trust me, and you made up with me just fine.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “And you actually made an effort, Draco. Snape seems caught in his own little world, one where I’m a child to be protected and he’s the father to do it, and he and I have no other roles to play. He actually got huffy last weekend when Opalline said that he was my father and I said he wasn’t.”

Draco said, “It is very disturbing to hear Professor Snape being talked about as if he were paternal.”

“See?” Harry shook his head. “This needs to be fixed, but neither of us can fix it in the moods we’re in now.” He leaned back on his own elbow, disturbing the Many snake in his pocket, but she just squirmed into a new position and went back to sleep. Argutus was more vocal.
“What are you writing?” he asked, as he slithered along Harry’s shoulder and draped himself to look down at the letter. He still couldn’t read English, but that didn’t keep him from trying. So far, he claimed to be able to recognize “a” and “s.” “Is it a challenge to the other snake-speaker, so that you can fight him in a duel to the death?”

“You’ve been listening to too many fey stories in the Forbidden Forest again,” said Harry, deciding that he could do worse than just close the letter with a simple thanks for the time the reader had put into reading it. “Not every war ends in a duel to the death.”

“But lots of them do!” Argutus wound his head in several directions, which for him was the equivalent of bouncing up and down. “You could challenge him to a duel to the death, and then all the snakes in the world would come and surround you in a ring. And you would defeat him in a blast of fire, and the snakes would tell the legend of the other snake-speaker’s death for the rest of time.”

“You’ve been listening to the Many.” Harry started to read his letter over again from the beginning. “Believe me, Argutus, most snakes aren’t that concerned with me and Voldemort unless they actually come into contact with us. Even Sylarana only decided to come to me because she wanted someone to compliment her and feed her, and she decided that, since she’d seen me fighting in the Forest with Voldemort, I was able to talk to snakes and could do it. There’s no mystical bond between Parselmouths and snakes.”

“The Runespoors said there could be,” said Argutus, sounding hurt.

“Do we have a mystical bond?” Harry raised his eyebrow and looked at the Omen snake.

Argutus lifted his head and flicked his tongue rapidly three times, one of his signs of irritation. “We could, if I was just a different kind of snake or you were a different kind of human,” he said primly.

“Exactly my point.” Harry turned back to his letter.

“I’m itchy,” said Argutus, running his neck up and down Harry’s. “Scratch me.”

“My nails aren’t sharp enough.” Harry gently pushed the snake in the direction of the head of the bed, which had a few sharp ridges he could rub himself against. Argutus was shedding his skin for the first time, and continually wanted someone to oblige him by helping to scratch his skin off, and continually complained that nothing was sharp enough to actually tear the skin and give him relief.

Argutus huffed at him and slithered away. Harry shook his head, completed his reading of the letter, and then looked up to see Draco smiling at him with barely concealed amusement. “What?” he asked, reaching up to his neck, thinking Argutus might have left a bit of shed scales there.

“You have no idea how cute you look, arguing with him like that,” said Draco smugly. “Even if I can’t understand what you’re saying. And I remember that I chose Argutus for you when I watch him with you. That’s my gift you get on so well with.”

“I am not cute,” said Harry, because he didn’t even have an answer to the rest of it. He lifted the letter to the Daily Prophet. “Well, here it is. I’m asking them to consider running an article about the equinox meeting, so that as many people as possible know about it. Want to go to the Owlery with me so I can post it?”

Draco made a face as he stood. “That means that Mud—” Harry’s gaze cut him, and he flinched. “Uh, I mean, Muggleborns can be there, doesn’t it?”

“You heard what I answered Edward Burke last week,” Harry said as he turned away. “Yes, if they’ll contact me about coming and swear the oath. You really should get over this prejudice of yours, Draco,” he added, in the most chiding manner possible. He wasn’t going to condemn Draco for his beliefs, but he was going to try to persuade him out of them. “After all, it’s not as though there’s any difference between Muggleborns and purebloods when it comes to magical skill, is there?”

“Of course there is!” Draco sounded scandalized. Harry made sure to keep his laughter silent. Luckily, he was facing forward as they went through the Slytherin common room, so Draco couldn’t see the grin on his face. “Purebloods have been the most powerful wizards and witches throughout history, Harry.”

“And I suppose you’re stronger than Hermione, then?” Harry asked, as if this were merely a question in which he had an
Draco made an inarticulate sound at his back. He knew very well that he was not stronger than Hermione in sheer magical strength, though he probably knew more spells, and he hated it. “That’s not the point,” he said, finally.

“Really? I thought it was.”

“I mean—I meant, that is, that pureblood wizards are strong in other ways than sheer magical strength,” said Draco haughtily. “They have a completely different culture backing them than Muggleborns. Muggleborns lose one culture when they enter ours, and then they can’t adapt.”

“Then Zacharias Smith’s education has been sadly neglected,” said Harry. “I’ll be sure to tell him.”

There was a long silence behind him. They got up three whole staircases before Draco gave in and said, “What does that mean?”

“Hermione manipulated him with a pureblood ritual in the dueling club last week,” said Harry, grinning at him over his shoulder. “But she must have been making it up, because, as you said, Muggleborns can’t adapt. And Zacharias is a pureblood, so he should have realized the ritual was false. Such a sad gap in his education.”

“Look,” said Draco, and then stopped.

“Yes?” Harry kept his eyes on the staircases ahead of him, and his voice as free as possible of either smugness or laughter.

“Granger’s a freak of nature,” said Draco firmly.

“Oh,” said Harry, with a nod of his head. “So if a Muggleborn is powerful and tries as hard as she can to learn pureblood culture, then she’s a freak of nature? But you won’t deny that she might be able to be and do those things?”

“That’s right,” said Draco, sounding relieved.

“Then tell me,” said Harry. “If it’s neither power nor culture, then what does separate purebloods from Muggleborns?”

Draco seized his shoulder and spun him around, glaring at him. Harry looked up at him and cocked an eyebrow, secretly pleased to note that he no longer had to look so far up. He was growing again, and was probably only an inch shorter than Draco now.

“You can’t argue this way with just anyone,” Draco said. “You’ve got to understand that, Harry. There are thick, old prejudices in some of your allies from the meeting that you can’t hammer down with mild, reasoned arguments like this.”

“I know,” said Harry. “But some of them, I will be able to convince just by showing how stupid they’re being. The smarter ones, at least. And you’re already getting there, Draco.” He held Draco’s eyes calmly. “You can’t deny that Hermione exists and that she’s done these things, because that would be even more stupid than holding these prejudices in the first place. So you’ll need to start shedding them, unless you want to act like an idiot and shut your eyes to reality.”

“It’s the blood that separates us, Harry,” said Draco steadily. “And you know it. Purebloods have pureblood ancestors. And you might consider that silly and separatist, but there you are. We don’t have Muggles for parents. We don’t get torn away from one world at eleven years old and plunked down in another. Merlin! You ought to understand that part, at least. You were raised in the wizarding world yourself.”

“A very small part of it,” said Harry quietly. “I learned most of what I knew about it from books. And one thing that my parents were never very successful at teaching me, even when they tried, was that only certain people could inherit certain things, because they were pureblood or Dark or Light. I learned the Dark pureblood rituals, Draco. I wasn’t born to them, if you can even be born to such a thing. And as for having no contact with non-magical people, pureblood families have Squib children sometimes, and you know it.”

Draco let him go with a scowl. “It’s still different,” he muttered. “I don’t expect you to understand, Harry, I really don’t, but it’s about family. That’s not something that people are going to give up easily.”

“I know,” said Harry. “I do know that, Draco. But saying that they won’t give it up easily isn’t the same as saying that they’ll never give it up at all, or that I can’t get some people to realize what blind gits they’re being.”
“You really do mean it, don’t you?” Draco asked resignedly as they started to climb towards the Owlery again. “You want to change the way people live. That’s what you said at the meeting.”

“Yes,” said Harry.

Draco sighed. “I don’t know why I’m doing this,” he complained to the ceiling. “Since I don’t even believe in half of what you’re spouting, and I’m a pureblood, born to lounge around and be served delicate sweets by house elves. But I’ll tell you to start with the children first, Harry. I was thinking the other day that I didn’t want to kill Muggleborns because I know some of them. It’s different when you think about killing someone of a different kind of blood, and when they have faces. So you’ll have better luck with Millicent than with her father, for example.”

Harry turned around and smiled at him. “Thanks, Draco. I really do appreciate it.”

“Someone has to protect you when you’re being blind,” Draco replied. “I—”

Harry dropped to one knee abruptly on the steps, his letter fluttering out of his hand as he slammed it to his scar. It had started bleeding. Harry tried to breathe through the pain that possessed every inch of his body, his mind racing. Was Voldemort here at Hogwarts? That was the only thing he could imagine that would start his scar flaring this way.

“Harry?” Draco’s voice, and even the touch of his hands on Harry’s shoulder, were distant, and no more important than blocks of wood.

Harry opened his eyes. He found himself in an unfamiliar house, looking straight at a window through which he could see a dark sky. This wasn’t now, then—it was still early afternoon—but some time at least a few hours in the future.

He turned, and saw a long trail of blood on the floor of what looked like an ordinary Muggle hallway. Harry followed it, not knowing if he was moving his body or not. He was so entirely gone into the vision that he couldn’t feel or hear Draco anymore.

The trail of blood ended in a room with Muggle devices shoved back to the walls, and an awful kind of rack set up in the middle of it. Harry felt his stomach heave as he stared at the two bodies hanging on the various branches of the thorn tree that had grown up through the floor. He knew them, though he hadn’t seen them in almost ten years, and had only met them once. This would be his Muggle aunt and cousin, the Dursleys.

Their blood ran from star-shaped holes in their bodies, probably cut with the help of knives or magic. It was painted over their faces in careful masks, patterns that Harry recognized from looking at some of the more unpleasant books Regulus had gifted him with. Dark magic, evil magic, magic that could be used only when the victims of the ritual were blood relatives of a target.

He heard a distant roar as he stood there, and he knew that Voldemort and the storm he would have raised from this blood were coming. It made sense that Voldemort would strike at the Dursleys, really, Harry thought numbly. They were the most vulnerable of his blood relatives. Connor, Lily, and James were all too well-protected.

The vision ended as Harry felt the hurricane gathering closer and closer at his back. If Voldemort completed that ritual, he thought from deep in his daze, he wouldn’t be able to defend himself against it. It would strike through the common bond that linked Petunia to Lily, and Lily to him—a bond that he wouldn’t be able to get rid of unless he somehow tore every bit of shared genetic material from his body.

And it would likely hurt Connor, too, and perhaps even his parents. It would depend on whether Voldemort thought he needed to get rid of them. Connor, at the least, he probably would kill.

Harry sat up, slowly, leaning against the wall of the staircase. He knew that he was moving too slowly—though not fast enough for Draco, who was shouting in his face—but he needed to get his bearings. He could not remember where the Dursleys lived, which meant he couldn’t ride his broom there, and he wouldn’t want to Apparate based on a glimpse of a bloodied, altered room several hours in the future. The Knight Bus was a possible solution, but he still had to learn their address. He hoped that Dumbledore would have kept it among his papers, and that McGonagall would still have those papers.

“Harry!” Draco was insisting on his attention. “What’s the matter?”

“I had a vision,” said Harry. His tongue felt thick in his mouth. He didn’t know if that was from the searing pain that had finally
left him, or the shock of the vision. “Voldemort’s going to be attacking my Muggle aunt and cousin, I think. He’ll use blood magic to get at me and Connor.”

“You can’t trust those visions,” Draco said desperately, kneeling down next to him. “I didn’t hear much of your conversation with Snape at the meeting, but I heard enough. Surely Voldemort could have sent you a vision to entrap you and make you do just this? Go running off to protect these Muggles, and straight into a trap?”

Harry let out a sharp breath. “I don’t know. The vision could have come because of the blood connection we share, Draco. The magic of families will sometimes reach out and attempt to protect its members like that.” Draco was nodding slowly, reluctantly; he’d probably heard of at least one instance where one member of the Malfoy family had a vision of another in trouble. “I have to look in one of the books Regulus got me.” He strangled his own impatience, which was both trying to calculate how much time he might have left and get him to dash to the Headmistress’s office right away. “You’re right. This could be a trap. I’ll have to look up this kind of vision in the books and see if this is actually likely, that it could be a real thing.”

Draco’s hands were shaking as he supported Harry to his feet. Harry glanced curiously up at him. “Are you all right, Draco?”

“You were on the floor in such intense pain that you stopped breathing for a little while, you prat,” Draco said. “What do you think?”

Harry pressed his hand briefly, in apology, and then they started back down the stairs in the direction of their bedroom, and Harry’s trunk, where he’d put the books Regulus gave him.

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There is a blood ritual that can be performed with any blood relative in the first two generations of connection. Thus grandparents can be used against their grandchildren, and second cousins can be used against each other. Further than that, this ritual cannot bind them.

The words beat in Harry’s head like wings as he lurched against the side of the Knight Bus. Draco, sitting in the armchair across the aisle, reached out as if to help him, and then lost his own balance and launched sideways. Harry heard him mutter something uncomplimentary about “Muggle-based” methods of transportation.

Connor, who was sitting in the chair in front of Harry, turned around with a grin. He had balanced himself perfectly, somehow. “Fun, isn’t it?” he yelled, as the Bus spun around a corner and then shot down a street that Harry was glad he couldn’t see too clearly.

Harry ground his teeth and didn’t say anything. The vision he’d seen still blazed in his head, and the words of the Black book he’d looked up the ritual in still pounded in his blood, his heartbeat.

His blood.

The ritual must be begun precisely at the turn of nightfall, the moment of sunset. The victims—the ritual may be done with one victim alone, but every sacrifice gives it an added potency—must be trapped without the use of magic that binds or confines. The only magic used in this ritual must be that which draws blood.

Harry heard Auror Moody’s voice from the front of the Bus, urging the driver, Ernie Prang, to go faster. Though that would mean more jostling, Harry was glad for it. They were still probably an hour from sunset, but it was February, not Midsummer, and the daylight was waning fast.

Tonks, who was sitting opposite from Moody, had already turned to him a few times with different faces and tried to cheer him out of his bad mood, but it was hard for Harry to be comforted. The vision was still present whenever he closed his eyes, and the book had said that it would be present for an unnatural period of time, unless he died from the magic raised by the blood ritual.

The ritual relies on star-shaped cuts. What “star-shaped” means has been widely debated, but in general stars with five points are used (though four-pointed ones may be cut as well, with no apparent loss of potency). The victims must be marked on every limb and on their torsos, and their hands and feet removed. Then their faces must be painted with the blood in the shape of a Guile mask (see the description on page 263), and their bodies impaled, preferably on a thorn. This operation must be completed before midnight. If it is, then a storm will come to the caster’s call. Named a ‘blood-gale,’ this will tear through the shared bloodline at the caster’s command, destroying any specified blood relative of the sacrificed victims within two generations of
On occasion, this ritual has been thwarted by a vision—the family bloodline reaching out to defend itself. This happens most often with Lord-level wizards and witches. The vision, which usually comes to the intended victim of the blood-gale, will show the completion of the ritual several hours in advance, and thus warn the victim in time, hopefully, to prevent the sacrifice. The vision lingers behind the eyes, burning, for up to a month, or, in one case, six months. It gives no guarantee, however, that the victim can actually thwart the completion of the ritual. And it cannot be controlled, either compelled to appear by a victim who knows that his family may be in danger, or stopped by the caster.

Harry leaned back in the seat and closed his eyes. He’d read the book, and he’d discussed with Draco the possibility that this was a trap, and Draco had reluctantly agreed that it didn’t seem likely, not when the vision would come in spite of everything Voldemort could do. But he’d insisted on taking proper precautions, and everything he said was so sensible that Harry had agreed to it.

They’d gone at once to the Headmistress. Though pale-faced, she had told Harry that, yes, Albus had retained information on the Dursleys, as he had on almost everything connected with “Lily’s boys,” which he usually referred to Harry and Connor as in his own writing. Their address was Number Four Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey.

Harry tensed against the impulse to go charging off, and firecalled the Minister from McGonagall’s hearth. Scrimgeour had agreed without complaint when he heard the vision to ward Lily and James as tightly as he could, just in case Voldemort intended to send Death Eaters to sacrifice them at sunset. If they were the targets of the blood-gale, and Voldemort did manage to kill the Dursleys, there was little any guards could do to stop it.

But Harry, of course, didn’t intend that Voldemort’s ritual should succeed. He abhorred the thought of someone dying simply because they were his relatives, when they’d done nothing to attract Voldemort’s attention, and he would have ignored them otherwise.

That done, he would have been all for calling the Knight Bus and going to the Dursleys’ house himself, in the company of Draco, who refused to stay back, and Connor, to make sure that he wouldn’t be left behind as a target, held only by Hogwarts’ weakened wards. But Scrimgeour had said—well, insisted, really—on sending two Aurors, and Tonks and Moody were both skilled, experienced, and trustworthy enough that Harry had accepted.

It made sense. Voldemort would surely have people in place already, since he would know that Harry might receive a vision like this. The Death Eaters were unlikely to move before sunset, since they would have to confine their prey without binding spells, and the easiest way to do that was inside their house. But while Harry thought he could face them alone, he had to admit that it made sense to have two battle-tested adults come along with him. Other Aurors would arrive later, nearer sunset, to help if they were needed, to catch Voldemort and some of his Death Eaters if they could.

Harry had asked the Minister why he was so determined to help. Scrimgeour had wrinkled his brow as if the question were a stupid one, and said, “When the wind blows, Harry, you don’t pretend it isn’t blowing. And I’d rather get the good from this ill wind, by helping the one Lord-level wizard alive who doesn’t seem to have an interest in corrupting my Ministry.”

Harry had nodded his thanks, and then they’d waited for Tonks and Moody to come through the fireplace. Moody had cast a curse first thing to test Harry’s vigilance, and Harry had blocked it with a shield. Moody grinned, his familiar-strange face—Harry had seen it across the desk for months at a time in Defense Against the Dark Arts class, but of course that had been as Mulciber’s mask—fierce and half-mad. Harry had heard Moody described as the wildest of the Aurors. It made sense.

“A chance to punish them as they should be punished,” Moody had snarled, and slapped his wand so hard against his hand that Harry had thought for a moment it would break. “I like this mission.”

Tonks had rolled her eyes and whispered at Harry from beneath her mop of currently long, currently blue, hair, “He’s hated most of the missions Burke’s given him. Complained that they aren’t half as challenging as the ones when he was young.”

Harry had nodded, and then they’d gone outside Hogwarts to catch the Knight Bus. The Ministry had no one who knew the area where the Dursleys lived well enough to Apparate in or create a Portkey, and no one magical lived very near on the Floo Network. Once Tonks and Moody saw the street, they could contact the other Aurors and give them a detailed enough image of it for Apparition.

“Here,” Moody said, his voice sharp enough to cut Harry’s absorption in a moment. “Stop here.”
Harry looked up, or at least looked up once he’d recovered from the Knight Bus throwing him into the seat in front of him as it jerked to a stop. They were on a street that stirred vague memories in him. He thought he’d seen it the one time Lily brought him to meet the Dursleys. The sign said nothing about it being Privet Drive, though.

Moody turned back to look at him, teeth bright. “Don’t want to alarm our little friends by arriving on the street itself in the Bus,” he said.

Harry nodded. The Knight Bus was rather noticeable. Death Eaters might have seen them already, but once they got out of the Bus, they would be under Moody’s expert Disillusionment Charms. They were more likely to think it was normal wizarding travelers.

At least, so Harry hoped. If not, the best the Death Eaters could do, since it was still half an hour to sunset, was try to stop Harry and his companions, and he was ready if they tried that. He called, and his magic swirled around him. He also touched the pocket of his robes, where the Slytherin tie with Dumbledore’s magic stored in it rested. He still hadn’t figured out a way to cleanse that power, but he had less compunction about using it against Death Eaters than just about anyone else.

Moody cast the Disillusionment Charm on himself, then on Connor, Draco, and Harry. Harry shivered a bit as the spell spiraled down over him like a cold, rotten egg. Tonks had already changed her features to that of a nondescript woman in ordinary wizarding robes, to give any watching Death Eaters an excuse for the Bus stopping here in the first place. She ambled off the Bus, looked around several times, and began wandering up the street, muttering and comparing addresses on a piece of parchment in her hand. Harry relaxed a bit. Tonks was in danger, that was true, but she was in less danger than most other Aurors in the same situation, if only because she so emphatically did not look like an Auror. She would find an out-of-the-way place where other Aurors could Apparate in.

Moody guided them off under the Disillusionment Charm, and they went slowly towards the street that Harry knew must be Privet Drive. Behind them, the Bus charged away like a mad thing. Draco gave another mutter about “Muggle-based transportation,” but fell silent quickly enough.

Privet Drive was a very Muggle place, Harry decided almost at once. The houses were small, and square, and neat, and looked as if their owners’ greatest ambition was for them to have as few distinguishing features as possible. Here and there a different kind of fence surrounded the snow-dusted gardens, or a different kind of curtain hung in a window, but altogether, it was uniform and devoid of magic. Harry shook his head. There are wizards in hiding, though. We have to remember that, that we’re almost certainly being watched.

Number Four had no one obviously standing outside it. Harry swallowed. He wondered if the rooms he’d seen in his vision were inside it, not blood-splattered right now, but about to be in another twenty minutes. The light above them and around them had turned red, as if in anticipation.

Harry arrived at the door and knocked, once, not yet taking off the Disillusionment Charm.

A loud voice shouted from inside, “Muuuuu!” A moment later, footsteps sounded, coming towards the door. Harry tensed, thinking the Death Eaters might take the opportunity to attack, but nothing had happened yet. Besides, Moody would be standing at his back, watching the street, and his magical eye could see through Invisibility Cloaks and most other means of concealment.

A woman opened the door. Harry stared, but, try as he might, he could see barely any resemblance to his mother in her face. This woman had lived a perfectly ordinary life, he thought, and her face had querulous lines and laughter lines, and her eyes had a tendency to squint. She did not look as if she had ever seen the blast of a sacrifice burning, which was the thing Harry remembered best about Lily from his childhood.

Moody muttered a quick spell to make the doorstep and door of Number Four unnoticeable for a few moments, and then dropped the Disillusionment Charms. The woman, whom Harry knew must be his Aunt Petunia, reeled back, clutching at the door, and then put one hand over her mouth. Harry thought she was suppressing a scream.

He stepped forward, letting the movement draw her eyes to him. “Aunt Petunia?” he asked.

She froze for a moment, as though that combination of words was one she’d never expected to hear, and then looked at him. Harry saw her recognize him—by his green eyes, if not as the little boy she’d met once nine years ago.
“You,” she said. “Harry.” Her eyes found Connor for a moment, flinching away from Draco and Moody as too obviously "wizarding." “And you. Connor. Her boys.” The words were poisonous. “What do you want? What are you doing here? Bringing this sort of—of freakishness to our doorstep?” Her hand scrabbled at the door like a rat’s claw.

Draco stiffened. “This is your aunt, Harry?” he asked, his own voice icy. “Muggle or not, there’s no excuse for such poor breeding.” He lifted his head and managed to look down his nose at Petunia, though she was taller than he was.

“The freakishness is already here, Aunt Petunia,” said Harry, ignoring Draco entirely. “Did Mum ever tell you about a wizard called Voldemort?”

Petunia bowed her head, and her cheeks grew paler. “That name,” she whispered. “That man!”

“He’s targeted your family,” said Harry. “He plans to sacrifice you at sunset today. I came to stop it, but we don’t have much time. I think his servants are already here, watching. May we come in?”

Petunia nodded as if overwhelmed, and stepped mechanically backwards. Harry went in first, but Connor wasn’t far behind him, looking around the Muggle house with open curiosity. Harry wasn’t sure what was stranger to him, personally: the furnishings, such as the unmoving pictures, or the fact that he couldn’t sense any magic in the house at all except what they brought with them.

“Muuuum!”

An apparent half-giant watered down and made to grow sideways instead of up came waddling down the hall. Harry blinked. That must be Dudley. The vision hadn’t shown him just what his cousin would look like while still alive. He looked grotesquely fat, that was how he looked.

“Who’re they?” he asked, staring at Moody. Moody’s magical eye rolled around to point at him, and Dudley shrieked and backed away, waving his hands in the air as if he thought that would make Moody cease to exist.

“Friends, Dudders,” said Petunia in a voice which had lost all its tone. “Go to the kitchen, all right? Sit in the kitchen. Mummy will be along in a moment.”

Dudley hesitated a moment, eyeing all four of them as if he thought they might chop him apart and use him for Potions ingredients, and then turned and lurched back up the hall. Petunia returned her gaze to Harry.

“We should all be in one place, shouldn’t we?” she whispered. “Just in case they try to take us while we’re isolated.”

Harry nodded, wondering now just how much Petunia knew. Lily had claimed that Petunia was jealous of her magic and had cut off contact with her completely, but this sounded like Petunia knew at least a little about the Death Eaters.

“Yes,” he said. “You should call your husband, too. Uncle Vernon?” he added, when Petunia just stared at him.

“Vernon’s dead,” Petunia said shortly. “A car accident, two years ago.” She shook her head, as if asking herself why in the world she was discussing this with freakish wizarding strangers, and then turned and led the way into the kitchen. Her back was thin, her shoulders set with determination.

Harry followed her, and found Dudley cowering on the other side of a large table. “Mum?” he whispered the moment he saw Petunia. “Who are they?”

“Your cousins, dear,” said Petunia. “Harry and Connor Potter.” She cast a thin-lipped glance at Moody. Harry had to admire her strength of mind; some of his students who’d had weeks to get used to Mulciber-as-Moody couldn’t have looked at him as if he should be binned. “I don’t know who these two are,” she added, in a tone that implied introductions should have happened by now.

“Alastor Moody,” said Harry quickly, indicating Moody. “He’s an Auror, the wizarding equivalent of a—“

“I know what the Aurors are,” said Petunia, eyes distant. “And this one?” She glared at Draco, who glared back.

“Draco Malfoy,” Draco said. “And really, Harry should have introduced you to me, because I’m above you in ways you can’t
imagine.”

Petunia’s gaze became glacial. Harry stepped on Draco’s foot and shook his head at him, then looked back at Petunia. “I’m sorry to burst in on you this way,” he said. “I know it’s sudden.”

“You said that my family had been targeted for a ritual,” said Petunia, apparently recovering herself enough to remember that. “What kind of ritual?”

Harry winced. “A blood ritual,” he said.

“So he’s targeting us because of my sister,” Petunia finished, in a dead voice.

Harry nodded.

Petunia sat down at the table and said nothing. Harry hesitantly arranged himself across from her. Connor took the seat next to Dudley, still looking around him with friendly fascination, while Dudley peered at Connor through his fingers, shaking. Moody began pacing a beat between the kitchen window and the door, his wand already out. Draco stood behind Harry’s chair, putting a hand on his shoulder as if that was the only way he could keep from screaming at the sheer Muggle-ness of it all. Harry waited, trying to be as alert as Moody, and suspecting he was failing. His gaze kept coming back to his aunt’s strained, pale face, filled with memories, all of which looked bad.

“Where is Lily?” Petunia asked abruptly. “Why didn’t she come?”

Harry winced. He hadn’t thought of the fact that Petunia wouldn’t know what had happened to her sister, either. “Mum’s in prison,” he said.

Petunia spun and stared at him.

“For child abuse,” said Harry, and looked away from her. The silence in the kitchen was thick with unspoken things. Harry caught a glimpse of Connor looking anxiously at him, and shook his head to tell his twin he was all right. Connor sat back in his chair, but didn’t seem reassured. Draco’s hands were both on Harry’s shoulders now, rubbing as if they could calm him that way. Harry didn’t think he would relax until this was all done. He reached out intently with his magic, seeking some sign that Voldemort was here.

“She was stolen from me, you know.”

Harry looked back at Petunia. None of the Muggle lights in the kitchen were on, meaning the only illumination came from the sunset. Harry shivered, even though the light wasn’t nearly as bright as the blood in his vision depicting the Guile mask on Petunia’s face.

“She was stolen from all of us, but mostly me,” Petunia whispered. “She was my sister before that letter came. My sister. My parents could accept it, after a while. I think she convinced them it was her destiny to go.” Petunia spoke “destiny” in a high-pitched voice that told Harry exactly what she would think of prophecies and the wild Dark and the rest of it. “And she was never the same again.”

She turned and looked at Harry. “You’re like fairies,” she said fiercely, “all of you.”

Harry blinked, trying to figure out how wizards were like creatures only a few inches high and not very bright.

“You steal children,” Petunia said. “Just like the old legends. You took my sister from me. She was never the same after that first year. Just talked a lot of nonsense about blood status and not fitting in, and when I tried to tell her what did it matter, because she had a family that loved her, she looked at me and said, ‘That’s why you can’t understand, Petunia. Because you’re a Muggle.’ She made no sense any more. She’d spent eleven years of her life being as Muggle as I was, and now suddenly she wanted to be some kind of grand witch, respected by all. Magic was all there was to her. I didn’t matter. Nothing mattered but that freakishness.”

Harry could feel Draco opening his mouth. He reached up and squeezed one of his hands, hard. Draco shut his mouth with an audible smack.

“And then she came home after her third year there and started talking even more nonsense,” Petunia went on. Harry wondered if
she even realized she was speaking aloud. Her voice rambled, and didn’t make it seem so. “About sacrifices, and how she understood what they meant now, and almost no one else did, and they were all going to save the wizarding world from Voldemort.” She clenched her hands on her arms as if she were cold. “I told her I wanted my sister back. She got this pitying look in her eyes and said, ‘I’m not just your little sister anymore, Petunia. Can’t you see that? I’m going to save the world, and you’re just going to live a little, petty life and die a little, petty death. This is better. The Headmaster says so.’”

Petunia turned around, as if she’d exhausted her reserves of bitterness. Harry didn’t think so, though, and waited, still reaching for Voldemort. Sunset was drawing closer and closer.

“And now she’s in prison for child abuse.” Petunia laughed dully. “I wonder if she thought of that, too, when she was making sacrifices? But she couldn’t have. She was stolen.” She stared down at the table, and said no more.

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It was just past sunset, and Harry was jumpy.

Dudley had finally decided Connor wasn’t going to hurt him, and tried to make conversation. Connor replied with bright incomprehension, but Dudley kept it up, probably to soothe his own fear.

Petunia hadn’t looked up from the table since she’d finished her strange little speech. Draco was currently hovering over Harry as if he would protect him against an attack from the door, and muttering phrases that Harry recognized as ones they’d used in his training in possession under his breath. Moody snarled like a grumpy hound, glaring out the window as if it was the sun’s fault that he hadn’t seen any action yet.

Then pain grabbed Harry by the throat so suddenly that he couldn’t speak. He stiffened, and his scar burned, and a vision stole his sight again.

Voldemort was laughing, and the words overrode and twined with the vision, until Harry found he was listening more than looking.

“I couldn’t stop a vision if I sent a blood-gale, Harry, but I could make up a false vision that would make you think of a blood-gale,” he said, and he laughed, and his laughter tore the world apart. “Carefully manipulate it, and send you running to the wrong place. Lord Voldemort is more clever than you think.

“And now this.” His voice sharpened, turned racking. Harry shook with the force of it. “Come without your wand. Come alone. If I sense either your wand or someone with you, including your Omen snake or your little Malfoy, I will destroy him at once. It’s a simple enough matter, Harry. You can see where we are in my vision. You know how to get here.” His voice soared exultantly again. “I swear, Harry, by blood and breath and bone, your life for his. Come to me, and yield yourself willingly, and he lives. Violate any of the conditions I have named, and he dies.” He laughed again. “I wouldn’t hesitate very long, Harry. Each moment you wait gives me more time to bleed him.”

The vision ended. Harry sagged forward over the table, working to get breath back in his lungs, and answer Draco’s shaking and shouting, and assimilate what he’d seen.

Voldemort had Snape.

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Chapter Sixty-Nine: There Is Also Love In The World

Indigena Yaxley did not much like torture, and she found suffering a source of boredom. Thus, she wasn’t enjoying her latest mission—on which Voldemort had told her that she was the only one permitted to accompany him—that much.

On the other hand, needs must, and a duty wouldn’t be much of a duty if it didn’t have an objectionable part buried in it somewhere. So she had come along, doing exactly as her Lord had told her.

When Evan Rosier had found her alone one freezing night in January and told her about the weakness of Hogwarts’s wards, Indigena had disbelieved him. Rosier had fled, quite sensibly, before her Lord could find him, but Indigena had carried the news to the Dark Lord anyway, thinking he might know better than she did the truth of it.
He had laughed. How he had laughed! And then he had sent her to spy in the Forbidden Forest, guarded by her plants against animal betrayal, and bade her to send some of her vines twirling about the bones of Hogwarts, testing for a hole. If the wards were at full strength, even a plant like Indigena’s, under the control of a hostile mind, should have been seen and destroyed. But all her vines came back to her alive, and with reports of the wards melting each day. They had been stabilized, but there was a weakness in the middle of them, a hole, into which they continued to run. The melting was simply slower than it had been.

Indigena jumped, a bit, as a deep groan came from behind her. She was facing the stone wall, and having one of her vines that bound wandless magic grow up it and around in circles. No matter how fast Harry entered the room, she would bind and hold him. She kept her concentration on that, and not on what her Lord was doing behind her. And if she could recite the events that had brought them here in her head as another distraction, so much the better.

The Dark Lord had changed his original plan for their February outing, which involved some Muggles who happened to be related to Harry, and chosen to target Hogwarts instead, as soon as his own spies, two of his bred snakes, brought back word of where the weakness in the wards was located. It seemed the Dark Lord had had a good idea, and the snakes had confirmed it. So they had come to a tunnel beginning in the Forest that the snakes had shown them, Indigena had hollowed it out further with her vines, and they had walked underground and into an older tunnel, and then into Hogwarts.

They’d emerged from behind the statue of Salazar Slytherin, into the Chamber of Secrets.

Indigena looked up from her vines. She had to admit the Chamber made an impressive sight for someone, like her, who had never seen it. The Dark Lord had touched the statue of Slytherin and spoken in incomprehensible Parseltongue to it, walked about with his hand lightly brushing the walls, and had in other ways acted like a man coming home.

Then he had gone up through the Chamber—which, he’d told her in slit-eyed amusement, was guarded from the notice of both Headmistress and Founders’ spirits by Slytherin’s old spells—and to fetch Snape. It had all been ridiculously easy, more than Indigena would have expected it to be.

She jumped at another groan from behind her. She shouldn’t be reacting like this, she thought. Severus Snape was a traitor. He had taken the Dark Mark, the kind of brand that in the old days would have signaled an unbreakable contact between Lord and companion, and yet turned against the Lord he had sworn to serve. He had said one thing, and then learned to mean another. And from the stories Indigena had heard about him, he had done it more than once, or he would not have given up Albus Dumbledore to the Ministry. A small, sniveling worm, a snake who didn’t obey the Dark Lord, a damned man with no honor. Why did her stomach still twist as she listened to her Lord torturing him? It was true that she found most torture boring, but she didn’t find it revolting. Setting her thorns on Evan had even been fun. At the least, it gave her information about how they reacted to human food.

She told herself sternly that revulsion was not permitted to a Death Eater—and that was what she was now, however much she might wish it otherwise. She settled her stomach, and then turned.

Voldemort had taken Snape into the center of the Chamber, a good distance from most of the plants Indigena had had overgrow the walls, all except a set of the vines that would bind Snape from using wandless magic. He had his limbs splayed out, stretched to their fullest extent, and gradually moving further apart; Indigena had told the vines to do that. Being on a rack was the least Snape should experience, really, Indigena thought, and did her best to convince her mind of that. It didn’t help that Voldemort had removed Snape’s robes and left him only shirt and trousers, so that she could see exactly how far his limbs were stretched.

The Dark Lord paced in a quick circle around Snape, currently, hissing to two snakes curled around his arms. They had their fangs locked into Snape’s flesh, pumping in venom. Indigena didn’t know what kind of snakes they were, other than ones that her Lord had bred out of his Parseltongue books. She only knew that they were what made Snape utter those groans every now and again. Her Lord had said something about the venom withering the flesh from the inside. Indigena could see why that would hurt.

Her Lord paused now, eyeing the snakes, and then abruptly hissed out a long, breathless command. The serpents released Snape and slithered off him and towards their Lord, twining around his pale arms as he stooped to receive them. They were black, with long red dashes running the length of their spines. They swayed their heads back and forth even when the rest of their bodies were coiled along the Dark Lord’s arms, as if they could not miss a moment when they might dance.

Indigena saw Snape recover, somewhat, from the cessation of pain. He really was extraordinarily tough. Of course, he had survived two years at Voldemort’s side during his first rise, and Indigena knew he would have suffered curses and pain from both his Lord and other, jealous Death Eaters. Now, he opened his eyes, and while a spasm crossed his face, he kept his gaze locked on
...the Dark Lord’s and did not look away. Indigena saw no defiance in his face, unless it was a patient, stony kind.

“Now, Severus,” Voldemort said in what was almost a croon, “I did so want you not to be distracted while I spoke to you.” He gestured at the Chamber. “We are in the sacred place of Salazar Slytherin, the Founder of our House. Will you not look at it? Will you not enjoy?”

Snape never looked away from Voldemort. He said nothing.

“You have fallen so far from a Slytherin’s true ideal,” said the Dark Lord. One thing Indigena marveled at was how he could make his voice seem almost caring. Of course, he might use Occlumency to control his emotions, she supposed. “Poor Severus. Serving a Light Lord. Ignoring the call of your rightful master, who will bring back the world Salazar would have wanted.” His voice altered, and Indigena learned why in the next sentence. The Dark Lord really did find it hard to control his passionate hatred of Harry. “Running about after a boy, as if he were the one who could grant you the power and prestige I know your heart so desires.”

Snape continued saying nothing. Indigena supposed he was trying to avoid giving Voldemort what he wanted. So far, he hadn’t even screamed.

“Do you know, Severus,” the Dark Lord said, “that I considered sparing you at one time? My Potions brewer. My servant who overheard the prophecy concerning the supposed Boy-Who-Lived for me. My perfect spy.” Shockingly sudden, one of his hands flicked, and a strip of skin separated itself from Snape’s leg and peeled away. Snape closed his eyes and held still, muscles trembling as if he were a horse on the verge of running, while Voldemort flayed his leg with precision and care. Indigena watched the coating of skin slide from muscle and bone and delicate red-pink coils of flesh, and told herself it didn’t matter, that this was the least a traitor like Snape deserved.

She could not convince herself. She was not so far gone to honor as to vomit, but she did have to look away for a moment.

When she turned back, Voldemort had begun to flay off the muscle as he’d flayed off the skin. Snape did make a sound now, not quite a scream, but an abbreviated cry, forced from him entirely against his will. Indigena looked into his eyes, but she knew he didn’t see her. His face was blank with suffering.

“I will do this,” the Dark Lord said, his voice and face gone emotionless now, “as payment for your transgression, Severus. But I made a promise, and I shall keep that promise.” And now he was laughing, a sound that made Indigena feel as if he were flaying off her ears. “I will leave you alive. I swore an oath. When Harry arrives, Severus, and trades his life for yours, then, I think, it will not matter to you whether you ever walk again.”

Indigena saw the bolt go home. Snape must have thought, until that moment, that he was being tortured solely for betraying the Dark Lord. Voldemort had said nothing to indicate otherwise, and had seemed interested in inflicting physical pain more than emotional. Now Snape knew he was bait in a trap, and for the boy Indigena did believe he must love, as much as traitors could love anyone.

He made a valiant effort to fight. He bucked and twisted in the vines’ hold, and Indigena felt them briefly begin to burn as Snape’s wandless magic started to rise through his skin. But the vines had been bred to take care of that. They bore down a little harder, and the magic turned into ashes and embers.

Snape slumped back again, and Indigena looked away from his face. Snape knew he was bait now, knew that Harry was coming to save him—if by “save him” one meant “lay down his life in his place.”

Indigena fully expected her Lord to keep this oath, in fact. He had told her what he intended from this evening. Not just to kill Harry, not just to destroy the one who might destroy him, but to drink all of Harry’s magic, make the boy an empty shell and himself powerful beyond measure. The power would be doubled or tripled if the boy came as a willing sacrifice, and his willingness would end if he did not see Snape safe before giving himself to Voldemort.

Indigena had wondered that her lord was prepared to give up vengeance on the traitor so easily, but she’d seen Snape’s eyes now. This was not giving up vengeance. It was deepening it, spreading it through Snape’s flesh like the venom of the black-red snakes, to linger and cause damage even after the sacrifice was complete.

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The Dark Lord was destroying his right leg layer by layer; he’d reached the level of tendon and ligaments now, and was untying them like cords around a Christmas gift, laughing softly all the while. The pain was hideous.

Snape knew that laughter. He’d stood beside his Lord often enough when it sounded, as they watched some poor victim taken apart at the seams by Bellatrix Lestrange, or killed during an initiation, or, on rare occasions, tortured by Voldemort himself. He writhed under the pressure of it, his eyes closed and his throat now and then opening to release a scream.

But the physical pain and the sound of the laughter only intruded on his consciousness in jolts and flashes. He was an Occlumens, a better Occlumens than the Dark Lord was a Legilimens, and his training had run deep enough that he could retreat behind the suffering and think.

And perhaps Voldemort had known or guessed that, because now he had polluted the serenity of Snape’s mind, his near-resignation to dying, with the one venom he could not purge.

Over and over, Snape saw the vision of Harry coming to the Chamber of Secrets, allowing Voldemort to bind him, allowing his magic to be drained or his blood to be taken in whatever obscene ritual the Dark Lord had planned—it was always rituals with him, always, always, as if he could make up for his own corruption by appeals to something greater—and then dying.

Because Snape had allowed himself to be taken. Because he had never expected, ever, for his vision to go dark as he paced in his quarters, worrying about Harry, and for it to come back in the Chamber of Secrets, his former Lord looming over him.

The realization pried deeper and deeper, tore open his mind and touched delicate places that Voldemort could not have assaulted with the most tireless torture. There was no safety. There never would be. They had relied on the wards of Hogwarts, and those wards had failed. He might try to protect Harry, but he would be turned into the very victim that Harry must come to rescue. And Harry would die, because, it seemed, there was no other fate that could take him.

When Snape screamed, he felt that pain more than the other.

They had tried. They had fought, and in the end, it was not enough. They had lost.

Snape had thought himself resigned. He had believed that he thought their struggle desperate, that he respected the Dark Lord as a powerful enemy Harry might not defeat. Now he saw how foolish that had been. He had lived as if he had hope. There was none. Why should there be any?

Despair moved on him, the heaviest snake Voldemort had yet created, crushing and strangling him both at once. He could not breathe. Fire ran up the inside of his arms, but it was only an echo of the anguish slowly destroying his mind. This must be, he thought, his thoughts dim and sluggish, what it is like at the end of the world, when one can no longer deny that the world is ending.

Strange. He had always thought himself stronger than this. There was a point in his life when he would have welcomed the Dark Lord’s triumph, had worked for it and hastened it on, and another when he had not wanted it but had believed he could survive it, since he could always go cold, the way his mother had taught him. He could have endured being a slave, being tortured and humiliated, seeing people he knew die. What tie did he have to the wizarding world so precious that it was more important than survival, that most Slytherin of goals?

And now the end of the world was here, and he was breaking before it.

He had to fight. He understood now the kind of suicidal courage that Harry had told him Black had exhibited, moments before his death. Black had understood that his death was the best way to destroy the fragment of Voldemort growing within him, and it was no wonder he’d smiled as he died.

If Snape destroyed himself, then at the very least Harry would have no reason to come here. The Dark Lord would have no hostage.

He began to gather his magic, folding it in under his skin. Now and then he screamed more often, to distract his Lord and get him excited. Let him think Snape’s Occlumency barriers were crumbling, and he was surrendering to the physical pain. He ought to know better, since he was the one who had told Snape about his purpose as a hostage, but that was the Dark Lord for you. He never had understood the existence of love, let alone how it actually worked.
He hated and feared death. He would never think that someone else might rather die than contribute to the death and torture of someone he loved.

Snape waited until a moment when the Dark Lord had stopped to consider what torture he should begin next, and the vines had showed no sign of readjusting their grip on him, a kind of breathing pause.

Then Snape focused his own magic on his heart, bearing down, going from no pressure to all pressure in a moment, willing it to stop beating. He felt his heartbeat speed up, the instinctive fear that threatened to destroy his attempt, the crushing sensation that he had always heard signaled a heart attack. But stronger than any of those feelings, and the reason he was doing this at all, came his vicious satisfaction. He would do this, and his Lord had laid no defense against it—

Then his will drained away quite abruptly, the way the wards had run into the weak point of the Chamber. Snape found himself lying flat on his back, or as flat as he could in the hold of the vines, with his Lord kneeling above him and staring at him. His scarlet eyes conveyed a moment of genuine amusement.

“Sssseverus,” Voldemort said, deliberately hissing the name. “Did you think your Occlumency barriers would hold in such a moment of focus elsewhere? Did you think I would not see what you intended to do, and that I could not stop you?”

He reached out and stroked Snape’s hair, his white fingers moving as quick as beetles’ legs over his face. “No,” the Dark Lord said, with a hint of the tenderness and compassion that Snape remembered from his speeches about poor young pureblood wizards whose culture would be lost if Mudbloods overwhelmed their world. “No, that would never do, would it, to lose my pet when he is on the verge of fetching me the fine fat prey I want?”

He lifted a finger from Snape’s face to his mouth, and smiled at what he tasted there. “There was once a potion recipe I read of that used the tears of true despair as an ingredient,” he murmured. “A pity I have no use for what it creates.”

Snape gave up. Physical pain and mental pain had blended into each other, and he was lost in suffering, so pure a state that keeping track of where the various sensations came from was pointless.

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He could feel him coming.

Oh, yes, he could feel him coming, could Lord Voldemort, his head high as he prowled around the bloodied and half-skinned mess of his former servant, and gazed at the doors to the Chamber of Secrets. The doors were closed, but that did not matter. His heir could open them. Had not his heir received the gift of Parseltongue from him? He could open the doors.

_Harry._

He restrained a snarl. Lord Voldemort was too dignified to snarl. He had done what was needed, and this night, _this_ night under a frosty February sky and in the presence of the greatest of the Hogwarts Four, he would receive back what he deserved. He had created a magical heir when he never meant to. It was only fitting that his heir’s gifts would come back to him.

This was a day of no particular distinction, not Midwinter and not Midsummer and not even an old Muggle or wizarding holiday. That did not matter. When he rose again, after having consumed all of Harry’s magic and licked his corpse clean, then it would become a day of horror and loathing for all who opposed him, a day of celebration and rejoicing for those who knew the right way of things.

He could imagine, he could imagine, children being brought to the Chamber in the future and learning that this was the very site where the Dark Lord had regained his full powers. Their eyes would gape. Their mouths would open. And then they would turn and look at him, Lord Voldemort, because surely sometimes he would be here. And he would be here however long the children might come, because he was never going to die.

He paced. His serpents, of a kind not seen, not bred, for a thousand years, sang and danced on his arms. Now and then he spoke to them, and praised them. Snakes were the only creatures he had ever truly understood. They obeyed him, and were loyal. They understood power, and yielded to it. There were no suicidal charges with fangs bared. He had often thought that life would be improved if more people were like snakes, and understood his dominance instinctively.
Oh, yes, he could feel him coming. He cocked his head and laughed softly, exultantly, hunter’s pride singing in his veins. Harry was at the entrance to the tunnel far above them, now. Soon he would speak to the sink with the snake carved on it and begin his descent. Oh, yes, soon. He was a hunter, a hunter who did well. Any prey could be lured in. One merely had to know what bait to set.

Lord Hunter! He had considered that as a title for himself once, before he had seen the value of using his common, ordinary, Muggle name as the basis for a name both the worlds that had betrayed him would learn to hate and fear. But he could adopt it as a secondary title when he took the Ministry. He could insist that the Minister take the title of Lord Hunter. He could insist that people speak of him as that every second time they spoke of him, should he wish.

He was dizzy with the possibilities of the future opening before him. All his study and pursuit of Dark Arts knowledge—all the years in Egypt and China and Russia and even that year in New Zealand when he had thought he would die of strain as he painstakingly learned bone magic—all the years of his first rise, and the thirteen years of suffering he still owed Harry for, and the eight months since, all had led to this moment.

The boy was walking willingly into his trap. Had he considered, at all, that coming to his destroyer of his own free will would mean that his surrendered magic rang with power? It would be one thing if Lord Voldemort had to take his magic, tear it from him; it would still aid him, it would still give him what he needed, but it would still be a spoil of conflict, a prize of war. Surrendered, given up, then Harry’s will would agree with his own, and when Harry was dead, the force of his will as well as his magic would join Lord Voldemort’s.

And why not? He is my heir.

He prowled back and forth, back and forth. His heir was coming up the tunnel that led to the Chamber now. He knew where they were. Had not Lord Voldemort shown him the Chamber in the vision? The true vision, not the false one. The false one had moved Harry out of Hogwarts, where he would have sensed Lord Voldemort the moment he arrived, otherwise. The true one told the truth: that he intended to let his little Severus live, as long as Harry came alone and without his wand.

And now Harry was coming. He lifted his head and focused his senses forward, through the numerous spells he’d put on the tunnel when he went to fetch Severus. Among them were spells to sense cypress wood, to sense flesh and blood, to sense Omen snakes.

Harry came alone and without his wand.

He laughed exultantly.

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Harry had not realized, as he walked the tunnel to the Chamber of Secrets, that it would be such a process of stripping away the unnecessary thoughts.

There was Draco’s voice, sounding in his ears, furious, panicked, as Harry explained his vision of Snape and Voldemort in the Chamber of Secrets, Snape’s limbs wound with vines that Harry had good reason to recognize after that night at the graveyard. “You can’t go, Harry! I forbid it!”

Oh, he had said other things, too, especially once they got back to Hogwarts and Harry found out that Snape was gone from his private rooms, but they were all variations on that one, central theme. Harry could not go, because Draco had forbidden it. A rescue party could be organized, but Harry could not be one of its members. Or, if he had to go to defeat Voldemort, Draco would be at his side.

Draco had not changed his tune. Harry had tried reasoned argument, had explained his plan, had told him what he thought would happen to Snape if Harry did not go, but that did not matter. In the end, it was largely because of Draco that Harry had first used Extabesco plene to vanish from the sight of the people around him, and then used wards to block the door to the bathroom where he would enter the Chamber of Secrets. Let them bang on that barrier all they liked. They were never going to get through it. Harry had carefully set the ward so that it would take an equal amount of magical power to his own to burst it, and only one wizard in the school had that.

“This is…most disturbing, Harry.”
That was McGonagall, her face understandably pale at the thought that the Dark Lord had walked the halls of her school, and was under them right now, and she had had no clue. She had to admit that the Chamber of Secrets made an excellent candidate for the hole in the wards, though, and that none of the Founders’ spirits would have been able to sense anything; they had never been able to find Slytherin’s Chamber, or they could have told Headmaster Dippet the truth about Tom Riddle’s first opening of it fifty years ago. And she was concerned about Snape.

Nevertheless, she, too, had told Harry not to go, though her face said she understood why he wanted to better than Draco. She had told Harry that he could not trust Voldemort to keep his word, an understatement if there ever was one.

She didn’t understand, though, not really. Harry had to go because there was no other choice. Voldemort had Snape, and Harry had to go, and that was really all there was to it.

He set the memory on fire and sent it drifting in ashes behind him.

Tonks and Moody had tried to reason him out of it. Connor had looked into his face and said nothing, but his eyes spoke his fear. Remus, summoned at McGonagall’s insistence, had said he would rather bite Harry than see him go to the Chamber.

Harry set all the memories on fire, and he was going to the Chamber alone, quiet, feeling the tingle of Voldemort’s spells seethe over him. Argutus was not with him. Draco was not with him. Snape, especially, was not with him.

He had come, quiet, with Dumbledore’s magic in the tie in his robe pocket. He didn’t think Voldemort would have cast spells to detect cloth, since that would only reveal that Harry wore robes.

He had come, and he was quiet. He did wonder what he would do about the doors to the Chamber, but, as it turned out, Voldemort had opened them before he ever reached them. The bastard probably wanted him to make a dramatic entrance, Harry thought, dimly, as he stepped inside.

Three things happened at once, so quickly that he had to think about them to sort them out. Vines lashed around his arms and legs, binding his wandless magic. Voldemort Vanished his robes, leaving him naked and rendering any weapons he might have hidden in his robe pockets perfectly useless.

And Harry saw Snape, lying on his back in a nest of vines, one leg a looped, unwound, bleeding mess, his arms red as fever with magic destroying them from the inside, his head lolling on his neck, and realized that the sight hurt him more than any moment of his parents’ trial had.

He let his hand hang, and watched as Voldemort strode forward to pick up the tie containing Dumbledore’s magic, which had fallen to the floor. He stared at it for a moment, then laughed. Harry bowed his head further, squeezing his eyes shut.

Don’t scream. Don’t scream.

“A fine feast you have brought me, Harry,” Voldemort said, and under his voice Harry could hear Snape panting, small and breathless and desperate sounds. “Youself, and this tie. You know, I trust, that a willing sacrifice of magic makes it all the more powerful?”

Harry shuddered, let himself shudder, made the vines tremble with the force of his shuddering. He had not really thought that he could simply walk into the Chamber of Secrets and use the magic stored in the tie. But he wanted Voldemort to think that. He wanted Voldemort to think him helpless, nearly conquered, so gone, so lost, to anything but the rescue of Snape that he had not thought to come in fighting, or use the magic in the tie before he entered the Chamber.

Harry knew what he had to do. He had known from the moment he confirmed the vision was real, from the moment McGonagall came back from Snape’s quarters with a white face. And causing a battle that could destroy the school was not part of that plan. Nor was causing the battle only after the children had been evacuated, partly because none of the people he cared about and who cared about him would have let him go to the Chamber even then, but also because Harry wanted Hogwarts to remain standing, thank you. He was done with sacrifices, except the ones he chose. And a sacrifice of pride was a small one. Look helpless now. Lure him closer.

Don’t scream. Don’t scream.

“You have not answered me, Harry,” said Voldemort, his voice low and sweet. “Do you know, it was through your forays into my
mind that I learned the secret of the wards’ weakness? I sensed you at once, my little dreamer, but I preferred to wait and see what you wanted. It seemed a small cost to reveal some of my plans when I could read your mind at my leisure.”

That nearly did destroy Harry’s self-control, but he clung to the plan in his mind, straight and sleek as an arrowhead. Snape had been right about the danger of the dreams and he had been wrong, and Snape had suffered because of it, but that would have to come later. There was a place for love here, but not for apologies, and not for guilt.

Don’t scream. Don’t scream.

“Still no answer.” Voldemort paced closer to him. “Do you think it a point of honor not to scream, then? Is it the last strength left to you, when you’ve yielded every other one to me—willingly?”

Harry flinched, a half-jolt that he seized up before it had gone too far, as if Voldemort had accidentally hit on his best-kept secret. He leaned further back in the vines, and closed his eyes.

Voldemort laughed softly. “Well, then, Harry, let us see how long it takes you to scream, then.”

Harry had known it would be Crucio, sooner or later, but Voldemort did not speak the incantation aloud, and the sudden pain seizing him seemed to come out of nowhere. He tipped his head back, and felt his muscles shudder and judder and shake themselves apart. He didn’t know if he would be able to stand when it was done.

Don’t scream. Don’t scream.

“Still no scream from you?” Voldemort had moved closer, from the sound of his voice. Harry did not yet know if it was close enough, and he did not dare open his eyes, just in case Voldemort used Legilimency to read the truth in them. “Well, then, perhaps this is in order.”

A weight smashed into his right elbow, and filled Harry’s vision with blinding yellow pain. He suspected that Voldemort had chosen the spell for its shock value. He had known agony was coming, but not from where, or how braced he should be.

Don’t scream. Don’t scream.

Voldemort snarled, and moved closer. Harry half-slitted his eyes, and found him standing a few feet away from him, still too far. He was angry, from his tone; Harry shut his eyes again before Voldemort could actually meet his gaze.

“I will make you scream yet,” Voldemort whispered, and then invisible fingers seized Harry’s kneecap and began to pull. The pain was exquisite.

Don’t scream. Don’t scream.

Harry clung to the mantra, calling up every bit of training he had received to survive, and rode the pain out without screaming. Another shuffle of Voldemort’s boots. Harry peered. He was close. He was very close.

“Now, this,” Voldemort whispered. “Ulcero iterum!”

And Harry felt, again, the pain of his left hand being severed. Voldemort leaned over his face, bending nearer and nearer to him.

It served.

Harry opened his mouth to scream.

And the tiny Many snake, coiled inside his mouth and thus invisible to the spells that sensed flesh and blood, lifted her head and spat her venom directly into Voldemort’s eyes.

Harry saw the Dark Lord blinded, that blindness that neither Muggle nor magical cures existed for. The Dark Lord reeled back, screaming, his hands flying to his face. His pain spell on Harry’s left wrist wore off.

The Many snake slithered out of Harry’s mouth as Harry hissed a command at her, and straight towards Indigena Yaxley. Harry looked up, catching a glimpse of the woman’s startled face, and yelled in English, “Let me go, or I set her on you!”
Indigena might have done better in a different time and a different place, a time when she hadn’t just seen her Lord blinded and a place where she had chosen the battleground. She might have been startled, or she might have seen how quickly the Many snake moved, and known that none of her vines or strangling grasses, which depended on her will to guide them, were that fast. Or perhaps she thought she had to stay alive to serve Voldemort, and that was more important than holding Harry, since there would be other chances for battle.

Whatever the reason, she believed him, and the vines holding Harry relaxed.

Harry dropped to one knee, ignored the fact that he was naked as well as he could, and then reached out and began to swallow.

He had reconciled himself to what he would have to do. As Voldemort screamed in his blindness, as Snape thrashed in his nest of vines, as Indigena did Merlin-knew-what, Harry ate magic. He reached out towards the Slytherin tie, Draco’s tie, and unfolded the magic he’d contained there. It flooded towards him, a great filthy tide, and he swallowed it.

Before, he had feared that Dumbledore’s magic would overwhelm him, because it was stronger than his own, and he didn’t know how to cleanse its taint. Now, one fundamental thing had changed: he no longer objected to the taint. It was a weapon, and he would use it. He had become reconciled to what he had to do. As it filled him, he rose above it, his will greater than his distaste, and lashed out at Voldemort, using that swallowed magic to increase his own absorbere abilities.

Voldemort screamed as he felt his own magic being ripped away, and he might have tried to stop it. But his blinding had unseated him, distracted him fundamentally; he could not even command the snakes wound around his arms to attack Harry. Harry gulped, and gulped, and gulped, and still Voldemort could not absorb the sudden loss of his sight enough to fight him. Harry had counted on that. He ripped and tore and ripped and tore, and did not allow himself to think about what kind of damage he was doing, or what kind of filthy magic he was swallowing. This had to be done. He would do it.

No more sacrifices of lives to my morals. I’ll hurt him if that’s what I need to do.

Voldemort screamed, and screamed pitifully, and Harry’s limbs shook as magic flooded them. He felt like a great, sloshing reservoir of polluted water, and still he drank.

“Harry! Call her off!”

That was Indigena. Harry turned his head, feeling swollen, and saw Indigena hanging from one of her own vines that had grown up the wall. The Many snake was climbing the vine tenaciously.

“Enough,” Harry hissed, and she turned and slithered back to him, winding around his neck. Harry turned to look at Voldemort. He had never felt more like him than in that moment—full of Dark magic, having used Parseltongue and snake venom and absorbere magic to get this far.

Perhaps that was what made him speak the words he did next. Perhaps it was only the idea that, since he had the Dark Lord so much at his mercy, he should kill him now and save the war that might follow.

“Avada Kedavra,” he whispered.

The green light took form at his fingertips. It gathered, it blazed, it fled forward. It hit Voldemort with the force of the Hogwarts Express.

It did nothing. When it faded, Voldemort was still screaming, his hands clutching at his eyes.

Harry nodded. Somehow, he was not surprised. The Dark Lord had sought to make himself immune to death. It seemed he had succeeded, at least in part. After all, he had not died from the rebounded Killing Curse the night he cursed Harry.

Or perhaps it had something to do with the prophecy. That needed an elder and a younger to kill him, and Harry didn’t know which role he might play in it, but there was no thunder of prophecy in the air now.

He turned, slowly, feeling ponderous with the weight of the taint he carried, to look at Indigena Yaxley. She looked back at him, and was silent.
Harry knew he could kill her. The problem was that he no longer knew which reason he would be doing it for. He had come down determined to drain Voldemort’s magic and Dumbledore’s so that he would not cause the destruction of Hogwarts and he could save Snape from unnecessary death. But, so filled with Dark magic, with power that had been used to kill and hurt and scar, he felt detached from the world. He could kill Indigena, but he would never know whether he had killed her because she could be a threat in the future, or because it had seemed fun at the time. A sluggish current in his own thoughts said it would be fun.

No more sacrifices. If I will not sacrifice lives to my morals, neither will I sacrifice my morals to this war. I must know why I am killing.

He turned away, back towards Snape. This one thing he could be sure of. Rescuing his guardian was still a good thing.

Wandless magic scooped Snape up on a bed of wind. The vines slid from his limbs, and he rose, gently, his head lolling. His eyes were open, though, and sane, and fixed on Harry.

Harry met Snape’s eyes in the middle of the Chamber, the only sound Voldemort’s screams of pain and horror, and reality surged back into him with the force of the pounding tide, of the magic he had swallowed. He was more than the soldier who had determined he would need to wound, and he would have killed Indigena just because it sounded fun at the time, because he hadn’t been himself, and getting Snape out of here was not only a good thing but his first priority.

There is also love in the world, he thought, and realized he was weeping and did not know when he had begun.

He called the bed of wind towards him and stood on unsteady feet. Crucio had left him shaky, and the spell pulling at his kneecap had hurt, but he could walk. The magic in his body saw to that. He realized he was naked, still, but that didn’t seem important. He turned towards the entrance of the Chamber.

“Harry.”

Harry didn’t know why he looked at Indigena Yaxley. She stood with arms around her Lord, who had at last fallen unconscious, gazing at him with a complex mixture of emotions on her face.

“You should know,” she said softly, “that we had the information on the wards’ weakness from Evan Rosier. Not from your dreams. My lord knew of it back in January, and only waited so long to attack because he wanted to be absolutely sure of our way into the school.”

Harry blinked, once, twice. Then he said, “I don’t understand why you’re telling me this.”

Indigena gave him a kind of fragile smile. “No,” she said. “I suspect you never will.” She paused, and freed one hand from Voldemort’s twitching body to make a fist of it and touch it to her heart. “Thank you for my life.”

Harry just stared at her. Indigena smiled once more, and then she drew her Lord towards herself and Apparated.

Harry floated Snape towards him, and saw that his guardian had fallen unconscious as well. He did not look at the ribbons of blood and flesh that covered him; he looked to make sure that he was alive, and then he turned towards the entrance into the Chamber.

It was time to go back up.

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Chapter Seventy: Rapprochement

Draco hated the barrier on the entrance to the second floor loo more than he had ever hated anything in his life. It was a smooth, shimmering opaque curtain of gray light, which didn’t yield for all the spells Draco had cast at it; it simply ate them, much as Harry would. A fist pounded on it made it feel as hard as stone. Draco cradled his bruised hand and glared some more. McGonagall and Lupin and the others who’d been standing here with him had gone upstairs to discuss ways of breaking it, but Draco refused to think that there wasn’t some easy method to get through.

Perhaps he could create a spell in his head to dissipate the barrier? He narrowed his eyes and reached for the will that he’d used when Dumbledore threatened Harry. He kept losing it to fear of what Voldemort might do to Harry, but surely he could think,
Go! And the barrier would have to go, wouldn’t it?

The barrier vanished so suddenly that Draco was left stunned, and blinking, and wondering if his spell really had worked. Then he realized that Harry was standing on the other side, with a white-gold wave of light behind him, supporting Snape.

And Harry was naked.

Draco hastily whipped off his own robes—he was wearing a shirt and trousers under them, so that was all right—and slid them around Harry’s shoulders. He barely seemed to notice. He was breathing so slowly that he sounded mesmerized, or asleep. Draco stepped in front of him, though, and those green eyes tracked him. They looked so exhausted that he winced.

“Harry,” he whispered. “Harry, what happened?”

Harry whispered back, as if he were intent that no one hear them, “Voldemort is blind. And most of his magic is gone. I—I’ve got it.” He grimaced. “It feels like I swallowed half a river, and the river was more shit than water.”

Draco didn’t know how to react to any of that, so he said, “I think we should get Professor Snape to Madam Pomfrey.”

“Yes,” said Harry. “Yes, of course.” He gave a faint frown, and then turned towards the stairs to the hospital wing. Draco walked beside him, now and then glancing back at Snape. The gleam of bone came through the torn mess of his right leg. Draco looked away again. It wasn’t that he had a squirmy stomach, he told himself, just that—well, he couldn’t perform healing magic as well as Harry, and right now he’d rather make sure that Harry stayed upright on the way to someone who could help.

And he wanted to think about Harry.

He was absurdly glad, now, that McGonagall and Lupin and the rest hadn’t been with him when Harry came through the barrier, even though at the time he had hated them for giving up too easily. He wouldn’t have wanted to share the sight of Harry without his robes with anyone.

Perhaps his guilty enjoyment of the sight meant he was a bad person. Draco preferred to think of it as a gift from some kind fate that had noticed his patience and his worth and given him that brief glimpse as a reward.

Of course, to a certain extent that would increase his impatience—now that he knew what Harry looked like naked, he was more interested than ever in sharing a bed—but fates were like that, he thought complacently, fond of contradictions.

He had thought he would spend the first minutes after Harry came through the barrier yelling at him for going alone and using that ridiculous Vanishing spell again, but the look in Harry’s eyes and the sight of Snape mutilated argued against the wisdom of that. And the sight of Harry naked did help to make up for a lot.

Draco was aware that his thoughts were not the most virtuous in the world. He didn’t care. As he helped Harry up a step when he stumbled, and admired the Many snake gleaming like a torque around his throat just above the deep green robes, he didn’t care at all.

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Harry entered the hospital wing feeling as if he floated beneath a scrim of dirt. Everywhere he looked, objects were gray for a moment, and then color bled into them. For that first moment, Harry thought he wouldn’t want to live in the world his sight portrayed.

He knew it came from the filthy magic he’d swallowed, and as soon as he managed to shed that and tuck it into an object somewhere, then he’d be free of this feeling. But he couldn’t help it right now, and so he watched Madam Pomfrey utter a sharp gasp and float Snape at once into a bed from behind that thick glaze of dirt. It scummed over his emotions, too, and stretched them out, and some of them never seemed to arrive at all.

That left him, oddly, more open to intellectual truths. He looked at Snape’s still face, and his red-glowing arms, and the mass of looped flesh and tendon and skin that Madam Pomfrey, with tears in her eyes, was beginning to wind back into its proper place, and knew he had caused it, at least in part.

Oh, Voldemort would still have come hunting. If Yaxley told the truth and Rosier had been the one to tell them about the wards,
then he could have hurt Snape even without Harry’s dreams. But that open link had allowed Voldemort to send him the false vision of the Dursleys in trouble. If Harry had kept the Occlumency barriers up, he would have remained in the school, and sensed Voldemort the moment he came out of the Chamber of Secrets—or even before that. Since he could enter the Chamber, and knew its location, Harry wasn’t entirely sure that Slytherin’s spells were proof against him.

The guilt hovered a long way behind the realizations, thanks to the magic. Harry blinked. He saw Madam Pomfrey turn to him with tears on her face, and ask him to fetch a Blood-Replenishing Potion from the cabinet on the wall. Harry walked over to it mechanically, only then feeling the swish of cloth around his ankles. He looked down in confusion. Oh. He was wearing robes. He had wondered if Draco tucking them around his shoulders was a vision, or a concoction of his mind. He didn’t remember the walk to the hospital wing, come to that.

He glanced over his shoulder, though, and saw Draco leaning on one of the beds, staring at him anxiously. Harry relaxed a little. He wasn’t alone here, especially if Madam Pomfrey had to say that Snape would never walk again.

Yes, the guilt hovered a long way behind the realizations. He handed the Blood-Replenishing Potion to Madam Pomfrey and watched her force it down Snape’s throat. Snape swallowed with some difficulty. Harry listened intently, trying to hear if his breathing had eased, and then pulled himself up short. He wouldn’t be able to hear that yet, if anytime soon.

He had caused this, in part. But more important than the blame and the guilt was the acceptance of that fact, in all its sharp-edged dimensions. Harry let out a long breath, and asked, “Madam Pomfrey?”

“What is it, Harry?” The matron never looked away from Snape, tracing white lines in the air with her wand. The pieces of his leg followed the lines, dancing like snakes charmed to a flute.

“Can you save his leg?”

“I think so.” Madam Pomfrey extended a hand towards him, still not releasing her concentration on his injury. “But it would help if I had more magic. Can you pass power to me the way that you once drank the old Headmaster’s?”

Harry blinked a bit, then said, “Yes,” and reached out, clasping her hand. He closed his eyes, thinking of the way he had passed magic to Elfrida Bulstrode, so that she could continue to be a witch after pouring all of her magic into her daughter.

The trickle of clean power crept past the taint and into Madam Pomfrey’s fingers. Harry felt her jump, heard her gasp. He wondered if it came from the suddenness of the gift, or the growth of her magic. She would never have experienced that after a certain point in her childhood that she was probably too young to remember, he thought with giddy affection. He closed his eyes and poured a little more, carefully straining out the impurities that might come from Dumbledore’s or Voldemort’s magic.

“That’s enough, Harry, I think,” said Madam Pomfrey, her voice unsteady.

Harry opened his eyes, and had to blink against the sheer shine of the white lines that sped above Snape’s body now. He listened, and could hear them singing as they put Snape’s leg back together. He stepped back. Madam Pomfrey could attend to Snape’s leg. Harry was going to watch his face, and absorb this particular sharp edge of what had happened.

Snape might walk again, but if so, it would take a long time for him to heal. Or he might walk with a limp, or his right leg might be next to useless. And Voldemort had had him for a relatively short time.

Harry touched his right arm, and frowned. The fever-colored magic still danced beneath the surface, and he wasn’t sure that Madam Pomfrey, in her rush to attend to Snape’s leg, had even noticed it. For that matter, he wasn’t sure that anyone but him could see it.

“Madam Pomfrey?” he whispered.

“What is it, Harry?” The matron’s voice was hard, but she spoke in the way that someone did who was utterly concentrated on a task and easily passing through it. She could spare a bit of focus for the outside world.

“Will it disturb you if I drain out the venom from his arms?” Harry thought it must be venom. He remembered the red-black snakes coiled on Voldemort’s arms with a shudder of revulsion. Then he blinked. It seemed his emotions had caught up with him at last.
“Of course not,” said Madam Pomfrey, her voice abstracted. “It would be a help.”

Harry nodded, and then turned to Draco. “Draco, will you fetch me an empty vial?”

Draco ran and got it without questions. Harry didn’t know if that came from his understanding that questions would hold things up right now, or his anxiety to be of use. Harry positioned the vial just under his own left arm, then reached out and began to eat the fever-colored magic from Snape’s arms.

It burned as it passed into him, and it also tasted foul. This was like drinking boiled shit. Harry grimaced in resignation, and concentrated the venom into his own arm as fast as he could, then forced it to the surface of his skin. He had to close his eyes as a bloody blister erupted above the vial, burst, then began to drain into it.

“Harry?”

Harry opened his eyes and met Draco’s concerned ones. He smiled. “I’ll be all right in time, Draco,” he said quietly, though he could feel the venom ravaging the flesh inside his arms and knew he would probably have to stay in the hospital wing himself when this was done. “But Snape’s had this time in him for longer, and Merlin knows what it’ll do if it stays there.”

He dropped his head and took several harsh breaths as the magic continued to pour through him. Draco took control of the vial, moving it along Harry’s arms to receive the fluids from the several blisters that appeared. Harry studied his face, and saw disgust there, but determination to remain until things were done.

He looked around the hospital wing, searching for another empty vial to Accio to himself, and caught a brief glimpse of the Headmistress standing in the doors. She had one hand to her mouth, and Harry didn’t know if it was to conceal an expression of horror or hold back her dinner. She met Harry’s eyes, and he nodded, once. McGonagall nodded back, then withdrew. She would tell the others that he had returned safely, Harry knew, and that Snape was still alive—neither he nor Madam Pomfrey would be working that intensely if Snape were dead—and that they couldn’t be disturbed right now.

“You’re dripping on the floor, Harry.”

Draco’s voice recalled him to himself. Harry shook his head and used a non-verbal spell to swing open the doors of Madam Pomfrey’s Potions cabinet. That way, he could see the empty vials, and call another one.

So it went, until Harry had filled four and a half vials with the mixture of blood and venom and tainted magic, and no matter how he looked, he could see no trace of the feverish glow left in Snape’s arms. He sat down in a chair that someone—Madam Pomfrey? Draco?—had brought to him, beside the bed, and stared at Snape. His face was still slack with unconsciousness. Harry didn’t know if any of the lines of pain had eased. He hoped they had.

He turned his gaze to Snape’s right leg. Madam Pomfrey had done an extremely careful job of reassembly, aided by the magic he’d given her, but she’d warned Harry that she wouldn’t know all the consequences until tomorrow afternoon. The leg still seethed with the “heat” of the spells she’d used. When that cooled away, then she could see how much permanent damage had ensued, and whether Snape would have a long recovery, a short recovery, or none at all.

Harry nodded. So he couldn’t quite absorb all the dimensions of what he had done or not done, yet. He wouldn’t know that until tomorrow afternoon.

Was there anything else that he could do right now?

Yes, one thing.

Harry closed his eyes and began, carefully, to rebuild the Occlumency barrier between his mind and Voldemort’s. If he probed, he could sense great pain on the other side of the link, waiting to swallow him. He smirked, which stretched his face oddly, and then blinked. He hadn’t known he would enjoy his enemy’s pain this much.

But he did. Voldemort was blind, and drained of a good part of his magic, and mingled with the rage and pain came a great deal of fear, like sluggish, chill water. Voldemort had not really feared him before, Harry thought, crouching on the edge of their connection like a werewolf in high grass. Now he did, and as he struggled to heal, he would know that his enemy might come down on him at any moment, and take advantage of his weakness. It was what Voldemort would do, and Voldemort judged all other minds by his own.
Harry withdrew behind the high grass, and thickened the barrier again. He didn’t think swooping off after Voldemort would be a help right now, particularly when he had no idea of the Dark Lord’s physical location without opening the scar connection wide. He would prefer to set a trap that took advantage of his surroundings, the way Voldemort had tried to take advantage of the Chamber as home ground for Slytherin’s heir. And he knew when he wanted to set the trap. If cosmic events and world-shaking storms were going to happen anyway, one might as well use them.

“Harry?”

Harry opened his eyes, and blinked, and saw Draco standing beside him, with a vial of sweet-smelling potion in his hand. Harry lifted his eyebrows. He knew only one potion that smelled that sweet. It would put him into a healing sleep. Presumably, Madam Pomfrey had decided it would heal the damage the venom had done within his arms as well as relax him, but there was no saying how long that would take. And Harry wanted to remain awake until he was sure he understood everything he had done.

“Harry,” said Draco, pushing the vial at him.

Harry bit his lip thoughtfully. Perhaps Madam Pomfrey was right. He might miss some of the considerations he needed to make in this state. Certainly, seeing the world from behind a scrim of dirt wasn’t normal, and nor was the almost emotionless determination with which he made decisions right now. Perhaps he would do better when he had rested.

He accepted the vial and swallowed it quickly. Then he stood and made his way over to another bed, not far from Snape’s.

He actually didn’t know if he made it there before he fell asleep. If he didn’t, though, he trusted Draco to catch him before he hit the floor.

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Snape opened his eyes slowly. He remembered everything, of course he did, but the fact that this was not the Chamber of Secrets still overwhelmed him for a moment. He had given in to despair so thoroughly before Harry arrived that his mind could have made up the delusion of a rescue for him.

But no. He was in the Hogwarts hospital wing, and if a twinge from his right leg warned him not to move it and his arms ached as though someone had beaten them with a Flagellum curse, at least he was alive, and the Dark Lord did not stand beside him.

A light snore attracted his attention. Snape turned his head and saw Harry curled up in the next bed over, sleeping. Draco was in the bed beyond that, but he didn’t look hurt, though Snape scrutinized him closely for a moment before turning to stare at Harry.

Harry had come in with one of the Many snakes in his mouth—presumably the same one coiled around his neck now and watching Snape with glittering eyes—and proceeded to save Snape’s life.

It had been risky, of course it had, but they had all been at enormous risk from the moment Voldemort had stepped inside Hogwarts’s wards. And, Snape had to admit, it had been a calculated risk. He had heard Voldemort elaborating on Harry’s refusal to scream; every minute of that torture blazed in his mind like letters of fire. He had thought it strange, since he knew Lily had trained Harry to scream during pain, overriding it and giving his enemies what they wanted while maintaining more of a chance to save his own sanity and break free later. So he had looked over, and seen Harry open his mouth to scream at last, and instead of overwhelmed pride, a snake’s venom had erupted.

And the Dark Lord was blind.

Snape laid his head back on the pillow and stared at the ceiling, and thought about the implications of that.

No one that he knew of had dealt the Dark Lord such a blow during the First War. Dumbledore had stopped him from taking over wizarding villages several times, and sometimes he took a punishing loss in the form of Aurors or Order of the Phoenix members ambushing his Death Eaters, but he had more magic, and he had more Death Eaters, and he had inventive, cruel magical geniuses like Adalrico Bulstrode. He had always risen, always grown mightier—slowly, true, but steadily. His fall had been only temporary, and when he returned on the night that Harry was taken to the graveyard for the first time, Snape had assumed the Dark Lord would move forward again, gaining ground until a final battle.

Reversals such as this were not supposed to happen, not to the mightiest Dark Lord in ten generations.
Snape looked at Harry again. Harry breathed normally, as if he had never done anything remarkable. Of course, the illusion of innocence was disrupted, if one knew how to look, by the snake around his neck and the way his left sleeve lost substance abruptly around the wrist.

Harry had saved his life.

Snape closed his eyes and shook his head. He was still angry with himself for letting the Dark Lord take him so easily, but other than that, he felt none of the emotions he would have expected to feel. The idea that he ought to be angry at Harry for taking such a risk was there, of course, but it met the memory of the Chamber and stopped dead.

Something had happened there, a crossroads that afforded him a choice of paths forward. He could take the one he had walked before, accusing Harry of risking his life needlessly. He knew that Harry would accept the blame from him because of the injuries he’d sustained. He might never cease silently resenting Snape’s attitude, but he would not oppose it when he had only to glance at the remains of Snape’s right leg and feel guilt.

But that wasn’t enough, because Snape did not feel that way anymore. It would be the easier road, because of the changes that the others implied—a path laid over a broad and flat course that Snape had walked many times in the past, rather than the treks over mountains and dales that the others promised. But ease was not enough. Choosing a path because it was easy seemed almost insulting, after what both he and Harry had endured.

He could admit that he’d been wrong, about everything, and see the dawning of forgiveness in Harry’s eyes. But that wasn’t enough, either. If Harry ever found out that Snape had spoken of his guilt merely to earn that forgiveness, he would be disappointed—perhaps blame himself. Or he would blame Snape, and so far as Snape was concerned, there had been more than enough of that.

So that left another path. Snape scowled at nothing; other than himself and the two sleeping boys, there was no one in the hospital wing. Snape wished there had been, so he could snap at their well-meaning concern instead of being alone with his thoughts.

This path would involve changing himself. He didn’t want to. He knew what he was—former Death Eater, repentant spy, horrible teacher, someone who cast blame and aspersions on others. The potion he had brewed that had let him look at his soul when he was seventeen had shown him all the ugliness of what he was. And Snape had accepted that ugliness. Why shouldn’t he? When someone else clashed with him, he had the satisfaction of knowing that, yes, he was not a good man, that he was a bastard, and that it was a comfortable niche to be in. If he knew himself, he never needed to delve deeper.

And then this.

“If the Dark Lord has never suffered such a reversal before,” Snape whispered to Harry, who went on healing and sleeping and didn’t hear him, “then neither have I.”

So much of what he’d believed about the world had turned out to be true. Given Dumbledore’s methods, there was little difference between Dark and Light. James Potter had been even more of a coward and a bully than Snape had credited him with, and he had lived to see his rival fallen and humiliated. Black had been a fool. Lupin was, perhaps, not so bad, but he’d certainly never made an overture to friendship, either. Regulus had returned, and proved just as much of a hero, just as much of a shining guide star, as Snape had suspected he was when Regulus’s example inspired him to turn against Voldemort. He’d readjusted his mind a bit around Harry, but Harry’s recklessness had seemed to prove that Snape was right to play the role of clutching guardian.

And now he would have to change. He’d have to treat Harry more as a comrade-in-arms than a child. At the same time, he’d been right about the danger of Harry opening the Occlumency link, and he would have to emphasize that. And that didn’t begin to cover the fact that he had no idea how to apologize, not really, and his humiliation at being such an easy capture, and the fact that he’d loved Harry enough to take his own life.

All of this was very confusing, and Snape did not like confusing things.

But his three most powerful emotions—rage and pride and love, say it—would not allow him to walk any different path. It would have to be this one.

Snape scowled at the ceiling and lay down again, to contemplate wrenching his life and self out of line, how impossible it would be to do that, and how impossible it would be to do anything else, and how in the world he was to keep the balance between what
he needed and what Harry did.

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Harry patiently held out his right arm as Madam Pomfrey finished running her wand down his left one. She checked the right one, then glanced up with a nod and a look of pleasure. “The venom did nothing more than chew some of the flesh inside your arms, Harry,” she murmured. “There will be some pain, but you bled it out fast enough that the damage should heal quickly.”

“And Professor Snape?” Harry asked, casting a glance at the far bed. Snape was asleep, still, though it was almost noon on the day after the rescue. His chest rose and fell with such deep, even breaths that Harry envied him. He’d slept the same way under the potion, but he really couldn’t remember it. At least the scum of dirt was gone from his vision. The tainted magic had flowed back from the surface and settled into the depths of his own power. That worried Harry a bit—he needed to drain it into an object that couldn’t be broken or shredded easily, and he needed to do it before it mingled so completely with his own magic that he couldn’t tell the difference any more—but at least he could think and feel normally again.

“His leg still needs to cool, Harry,” said the matron, and stepped away from his bed. “I believe his arms should recover, though they’ll be weak and have tremors for a few months. Now, I’ll have a house elf bring you lunch—"

“No need.”

Harry turned towards the door, and blinked in surprise. There couldn’t have been many students who had seen the Headmistress carrying a tray of tea, bowls of soup, and what looked like scones. Madam Pomfrey herself blinked as though she suspected she were seeing things, then shook her head.

“If you wish, Headmistress,” she said dubiously.

“I do,” said McGonagall firmly, and put the tray down on Harry’s bed.

Harry studied the tray, and was grateful that McGonagall had thought to bring two cups of tea and two bowls of soup. Draco had gone to the loo, but he would return in a moment, and he would want to eat. McGonagall sat down in the chair Draco had been using so far, and waited both until Harry had had a sip from his cup and Draco had emerged, sitting down in another chair.

“I wished to discuss the wards with you, Harry,” said McGonagall.

Harry nodded and sipped at his soup. “The wards were draining into the Chamber of Secrets, Headmistress,” he said. “Slytherin worked some magic into the stone that kept the other Founders from discovering it, I think. But I’m not sure if they can enter it even now. You know where the entrance is, and I left the sink open behind me—at least, I should have—"

“You did,” said McGonagall. “I’ve found it advisable to put up a barrier on the loo, however. It seems that many of my students, the first-year Gryffindors in particular, think an adventure in the Chamber of Secrets would be fun.” She pinched her lips tight and shook her head.

Harry blinked, wondering how in the world they could want to be somewhere Voldemort had walked, and then remembered that they’d had no direct experience of the Dark Lord. “And so I know that you can enter,” he finished. “But I don’t know if the Founders can go with you.”

“I was thinking more of your entering the Chamber, Harry, and doing what you can to stabilize the wards,” said McGonagall.

“What would happen if you sealed the stone, do you think? Closed every entrance for a ward?”

Harry paused in lifting a spoonful of soup to his mouth, at least until Draco glared at him and his right arm began to shake from the effort of holding it up. Harry swallowed the food and said carefully, “I don’t know if that would work, Headmistress. I didn’t sense the magic of the wards themselves when I went to the Chamber. It’s more as if that’s the central weak point, and the magic flows down towards it and passes through and around it.”

“If we destroyed the Chamber?”

Harry winced. He hadn’t recognized the spells woven into the stone, even after a few weeks of studying the Dark Arts books Regulus had gifted him with. “I don’t think that would work either, Headmistress. Knowing Slytherin, he used spells that would bring down the school itself if his Chamber was hurt.”
McGonagall nodded. “Then what would you recommend?”

“The construction of new wards altogether,” said Harry, and smiled despite himself as she winced. “I know, it’ll take time, and it can’t be a time when any students are in the school and need you for other duties. But I believe it has to be done. The wards that were connected to Dumbledore will be tattered and go on draining. You’ll have to create an entirely new set of them that are tied to you and won’t fall into the Chamber because you don’t want them to. Easter holidays, perhaps?”

“And until then?” McGonagall asked.

“I’ll talk to Scrimgeour, and ask him about having Aurors to guard the school, the way we did last year. And I can create a ward protecting the outside of the school,” said Harry, “and the more vulnerable areas, like the common rooms. I think sealing the entrance to the Chamber, and any of the other tunnels the Founders know about, should be done, as well.” He started to push the tray on his knees away. “I should do that now, in fact, before—”

“Relax, Harry,” said McGonagall firmly. “It’s daytime, and the wards are stable for now.”

“And you haven’t finished your lunch,” Draco added, sitting back and sipping at his own soup as if he wanted to provide a good example.

Harry scowled at him. Draco raised his eyebrows, in a gesture that made Harry feel ultimately childish. Harry sighed and turned back to his soup.

“I have been in contact with the Minister once already today,” said McGonagall, “as he wanted to know the details of what had happened in the Chamber. I told him that I didn’t know yet.” She fastened her eyes on Harry and waited.

Harry let out a sharp breath, and began to tell the story as emotionlessly as he could. It helped that he’d related his plan to McGonagall and Draco before he entered the Chamber, and they knew why he’d used the Slytherin tie embedded with Dumbledore’s magic—to make Voldemort think both that he’d come armed and that he didn’t have any other weapons—and the Many snake. When he spoke about the spell slamming into his elbow, Draco snatched up his arm. Harry winced, but allowed it.

“You didn’t tell me about that yesterday,” Draco said.

“Because it left a bruise,” said Harry. “And bruises are just a little irrelevant compared to what else went on down there.”

“Harry, they—”

“They are, Draco.” Harry was surprised by how vehement his voice was. It was a voice for making speeches with, not replying to his boyfriend’s concern with, but he’d started and he couldn’t stop now. “I realized quite a lot of things down in the Chamber, including how I need to fight this war. Without mercy to Voldemort, yes, but it’s not going to be as simple as dueling him. I cast the Killing Curse, and it accomplished nothing at all. And I only managed with the Many snake because he hadn’t thought I was cunning. Now, he knows I am, and he’ll be more cautious next time. I’ll have to fight him in a different way.

“I plan to lure him to Hogwarts on Midsummer Day—“

“What?” Draco said that, rising from his chair and staring at Harry. McGonagall remained seated, but the look of shock on her face could not be greater if Harry had slapped her. “Why?”

“Because a storm is going to happen then,” said Harry quietly, “the twin of the storm that the wild Dark woke. A storm of Light. A prophecy that Professor Lestrange recited to me says so. And it’s going to fall here. I plan to draw on the strength of that storm. I have allies who can use it, even if I can’t.” He glanced at McGonagall, who nodded slowly, her eyes alight with wonder.

“Choose the time, choose the place, and lure him in.”

“He’d never just launch an attack on Hogwarts on Midsummer Day,” said Draco skeptically. “Why?”

“Because he’s obsessed with symbols.” Harry shrugged. “There are other rituals he could have conducted to resurrect himself, but he chose to come back on Midsummer Day, and go through the bother of tricking the Light into giving him the power to bind me. And it was a limited power, at that, ending at the moment of true sunset—but that mattered to him, that symbolism of Dark overcoming the Light. He chose to stage this latest confrontation with me in the Chamber of Secrets, partly so he could choose the
battleground, I’m sure, but also because that’s the home ground of Slytherin’s heir. He tortured me; he didn’t use the Chamber’s spells against me. I believe it was the symbolism that was important to him. He’d even opened the doors for me when I arrived, to insure that I’d have to enter the monster’s lair with my eyes open. A good thing, too, since I was wondering how I was going to hiss the command without opening my mouth and letting him sense my snake.” Harry touched the Many snake’s smooth scales.

“He was interested in the prophecy, too,” Harry added. “But he never knew the full thing. What if I created one? What if I hinted, pretended, that part of that prophecy says he’ll face me at Hogwarts, on Midsummer’s Day of this year, and that he’ll stand or fall when he does so?”

“All of this depends on his dancing to your tune, you realize,” said Draco, doubtfully.

“I believe it can be done,” McGonagall said; her eyes were still alight. “Albus—that is to say, Dumbledore tricked him several times that way during the First War. He never seemed to connect our use of his weakness for symbols to our attacks. He merely believed that of course we would choose to face him on the first day of spring, or on Halloween, because those were important days.”

“He even attacked Connor and me on Halloween,” Harry told Draco, “months after we were born, and sent the Lestranges after Neville’s parents on the same evening. Why? Because it’s the night of the dead come back, one of only two nights that necromancers can speak. It’s symbolic.” He spat the word, but he felt a grim satisfaction. It would take work, but they had nearly four months until Midsummer. He would make Voldemort dance to his tune yet.

Some of the icy disbelief in Draco’s eyes melted, and he nodded. “I think you can do this, after all,” he murmured, smiling at Harry.

“So nice to have your faith in me,” Harry said.

Draco sniffed. “I make fewer mistakes than you do, Harry. I think it only right that I should have more faith in myself, first. You get gifted with it when you prove you can do something right.” But his hand found Harry’s and gripped it. Harry grinned at him, feeling fierce determination rise up in himself.

*If I know my enemy, and he doesn’t know me, then I can take him.*

******

Snape stared at the ceiling of the hospital wing, while he kept his breaths moving in the mimicry of deep, peaceful sleep, and damned himself for a fool, *again*.

He had assumed that he would have to do the majority of the changing in his relationship with Harry. What had happened to him in the Chamber had carved so deep and profound a change into him already that he had forgotten much the same thing might have happened to Harry himself. The fact that he had come in with a plan and managed to win had, Snape supposed, signaled to him that he was wrong about Harry’s tendency to go dashing into dangerous situations without a thought in his head, but he had assumed that it would not last. He had certainly never expected to drift lazily back to consciousness and hear Harry calmly listing the reasons why he had some chance of luring the Dark Lord to him.

And that was a contradiction in terms. If Harry could create a plan when he had only a few hours to do so and someone he loved was in danger, why couldn’t he create a plan when he had months and the chance to think more rationally? And if Harry was incapable of creating plans at all, then he would have come into the Chamber as a sacrifice only, the way both Voldemort and Snape had at first assumed he had.

So Harry had changed, or could—his methods, at least. Snape supposed he would have to look at the last few months in light of this new information, *again*, and see what he had missed and what was new and what methods Harry had formed in response to his anger.

He must have huffed once too deeply, because abruptly McGonagall was bending over him, saying softly, “Severus?”

Snape nodded at her. It was too late to pretend he really had been asleep, and certainly he couldn’t ask the Headmistress not to reveal that fact to Harry.

McGonagall did something he hadn’t expected, though. She stepped back, her face stern, and called, “Mr. Malfoy, come with me,
please. I would like you with me when I speak to the Minister. You can give him another perspective on the events of yesterday.”

“But I—“

McGonagall had turned away from Snape, so he couldn’t see which expression she wore, but whatever it was, it made Draco swallow audibly. A moment later, he walked past Snape’s bed, pausing to give him an expression that was a mixture of a smile and helpless relief.

“I’m glad that you’re alive, sir,” he said.

Snape only nodded, since he thought he would need all his words for the coming—conversation? confrontation?—with Harry. Draco turned away a moment later and hurried after McGonagall, who firmly shut the doors of the hospital wing behind her, and might have spoken a locking spell, too. Barring the entrance of Pomfrey, Snape supposed, he and Harry had a chance for uninterrupted conversation.

He started to turn over, slowly, but Harry had already kicked his own blankets off, with an impatience that showed how little he thought he needed them, and pulled up one of the chairs grouped around his bed next to Snape’s.

Snape stared at his ward in silence for a moment. Harry’s face was lined, but Snape thought that not all of that came from last night; he’d been stressed before it, after all, with his attempts to gather his allies for the spring equinox meeting and knock down misconceptions about it, and the very polite argument he’d been having with Scrimgeour over werewolves’ rights. The real change was in the eyes. Snape had not seen Harry look at him in months the way he was looking right now, as if he were the crisis Harry needed to conquer, the person he needed to heal or protect.

But guilt was not the only emotion there; Snape would have felt ready to strike out if it had been, because he had survived, and he must have a good chance of keeping the leg, or Harry would have told him at once. Instead, Harry spoke concern in the way he reached out and grasped Snape’s hand with his own, and resignation in the twist of his mouth, and determination in that he never looked away, even when he began to speak words that he must have thought condemned him.

“You were right about the visions. It was a false one that lured me out of the school, because I thought my Muggle aunt and cousin were in danger.” He took a deep breath, and gestured towards his scar without releasing Snape’s hand. “I should have known it, from the way this burned. That’s always been a sign of Voldemort’s presence. He got me out of the school just so that he could go after you. I’m sorry.”

Snape forced his voice to work. “What happened as a result of this was dangerous,” he agreed. “The Dark Lord is an incredibly accomplished Legilimens. It may still be possible for you to use the link as a weapon against him, but it would need to be very carefully controlled and regulated.”

Harry blinked at him warily. Snape realized he must have braced himself for another scolding, the way he had received after Rosier had taken him to Durmstrang.

“Perhaps it is best that I tell him now. He shall never face that again.”

Harry nodded. He shifted in the chair, but it was only to get more comfortable; his eyes and his hand remained steady.

“Harry. Listen to me.”

Snape said. Merlin, this was hard. He wanted to be both honest and qualified, so that Harry could see what this truly was: an offer of reconciliation, not a surrender. He would not, he could not, become only what Harry needed him to be. Even if he’d had the ability, Harry would have hated that, to think he was forcing someone else into a different mold. “You can plan, and I accept now that you made a calculated sacrifice when you went to Durmstrang. You did the same thing last night.” He tried a smile, and if it came out as a half-sneer, even that minor effort made Harry sit up as straight as if he’d been stung, so it was worth it. “I should know the signs of it. I took the same kind of gamble when I served as a spy among the Death Eaters. Sometimes a risk, a sacrifice, is the only way we can win anything at all. When we fight the Dark Lord, that is even more true than it is at other times.”

Harry responded, his voice soft and full of such mingled emotions that Snape couldn’t tell what they were yet, only that he was glad for their existence. “I—you were right in some things, sir. Not all. I have changed enough. I know that I need plans to fight Voldemort, let alone to gently tell wizards and witches what idiots they’re being about magical creatures, and Muggleborns, and
Squibs, and Muggles, and everyone else they might treat like scum on the soles of their boots.” He squirmed, as if he didn’t like what he had to say next. “But I didn’t discuss my plans with you. So I suppose from the outside they might have looked fragmented, as if I didn’t know what I was doing.”

“They often did look that way,” Snape had to admit. “With the meeting that you held last weekend, I believe that you lost control because you did not realize that Gloriana Griffinsnest hates werewolves, for example.”

“She hates werewolves?”

Snape nodded, hiding his amusement. Harry’s face had twisted in dismay that indicated he hadn’t learned that since the meeting, either.

“No wonder Claudia Griffinsnest finds it so hard to tell her family that Fenrir Greyback bit her,” Harry muttered, and then looked up at Snape, making a visible attempt to shake the perils of his allies away. “That’s the kind of thing that you can help me with then, sir,” he said quietly. “And if I tell you what my plans are, they’ll make sense to you, and ease your worry about me.”

“I would not blame you if you didn’t trust me, after my efforts to dig myself out of your good opinion in the last month,” said Snape.

Harry cocked his head. “It’s more complicated than that,” he began.

“Is not everything, with you?” Snape would have restrained the comment if he could, but when Harry grinned at him, he realized that the humor had probably reassured Harry more than a dozen words might have that he was coming back to normal.

“Yes,” Harry cheerfully agreed. “So this should be, too.” He bit his lip, and his smile faded. “I trust you, but only to do certain things. When I can predict you, sir, then I’m confident. I thought I could trust you to react to my every possible risky plan with anger, so I didn’t tell you about them. That included the dreams and the meeting and the vision about the Dursleys. And when you got angry at me after the meeting, I only had that reinforced.” He gritted his teeth and drove forward through the next words. “It contrasted with the way that you helped heal me after Midwinter, but I think I convinced myself that that was a mistake, that you didn’t care, or that you could only do that because I’d been hurt so badly. If I escaped unscathed, the way I did from Durmstrang, then you’d yell at me.”

Snape nodded slowly, and restrained several of those things he wanted to say before he spoke. No one else was here, he reminded himself. That meant that he could speak words that would make him look weak in front of an audience, even if that audience had consisted only of Draco.

“Some of that is true and some of it is not true, Harry,” he said carefully. “I conceded you had no choice but to face the wild Dark; it was you or no one. And much the same thing was true of the battle at the beach. I grew angry when I believed you had made a sacrifice, when you leaped in front of your brother to take a curse or when you, as I believed, put yourself in mortal danger from Rosier to save others.”

“But he never tried to kill me,” Harry said.

Snape shook his head. “He is wild, Harry. Wild in the sense that the Dark is, or a dragon is. He cares for nothing but his own purposes, his own entertainment. Perhaps you were safe with him because he chose to honor the life debt, but at any moment he could have turned and struck at you, if he decided that was the more amusing thing. You know now that the collar he used to compel your cooperation was false. Think of everything he does as false, as changing all the time. If it had been anyone else but Rosier you went with, then I would not have been so angry.”

“And again, I didn’t know that,” said Harry, his tone noticeably cooler now. “Because you hadn’t told me about the collars, and you’ve never warned me in detail about Rosier before.”

“About the collars, I did not,” said Snape, and restrained both his impulse to lash out and his impulse to apologize for everything. This was the discussion that they had needed to have since January. He would not pretend he was sorry when he was not, and he would not show anger that would drive Harry away. “For that, I am sorry. But about Rosier, I have. I have told you again and again that he is dangerous, Harry, that we could not trust the hints that he pretended to give about the Dark Lord’s plan last year.”

“One of those hints was true,” Harry argued. “I should have been wary of the sun.”
“But he did not tell you what it meant, and he helped Voldemort restrain and torture you,” Snape said, keeping his voice to the calm, neutral tone he had sometimes used, to good effect, when arguing with Bellatrix Lestrange, in the days before she was mad. “I think you still have an amount of trust in him, Harry. You took the gamble of going with him because you believed there was a good chance that you would come back from Durmstrang alive. But there was not. There was no chance at all, no way of calculating the possibilities. Where Rosier is involved, there never is. He sends all predications into chaos.”

Harry lowered his eyes. “Yaxley said that he was the one who had told them about the wards on the school weakening,” he murmured. “And I never anticipated that he would do that, that he could.”

Snape let out a harsh breath. He wasn’t entirely sure if he’d been conscious to hear that, or had heard it and simply forgotten. At least it meant there was some chance of persuading Harry never to trust Rosier again, to never depend on him. This was information from an independent source, not Snape. “That is Evan,” he agreed. “He was Voldemort’s loyal servant, for a certain value of loyal, because Dumbledore would never have trusted him, and in those days there was no other side to which he could apply himself. And now that there is, he will do what he can to explode both your own plans and the Dark Lord’s.”

“There’s one thing I don’t understand,” said Harry. “Why would he disguise himself as Dolohov and go to Azkaban, if he wasn’t loyal to Voldemort?”

Snape curled his lip, but he did believe he had the answer to that. “Because he was interested in Dementors,” he said, with a shrug. “He said more than once that he would like to be under the thrall of one, and experience how it affected his mind. That is the only response I can give you.”

Harry shivered. “He is mad.”

Snape nodded, confident he understood now. “He is,” he said quietly, thinking of the days he had spent fighting beside Evan. The man had charmed other Death Eaters into trusting him, thinking of him as some tricky but ultimately honest rogue, and he had engineered their deaths each time. Snape had never given any sign that he noticed, lest he be Evan’s next target. “And more dangerous than ever now, since Azkaban and his ability to play two sides against each other. Never trust anything he tells you, Harry. Kill him the next time you see him.”

“I already said I would.”

Snape looked steadily at his ward. “And I know now that I cannot protect you,” he said. “No more than you can protect me. Blame yourself for not being here last night, if you wish, but it will have no more foundation than my own blame, and my own rage, that I could not protect you from going to Durmstrang, or from Digle’s knife.”

Harry’s hand clenched around his for a moment, then relaxed; Snape could feel a tremor of weakness racing up his right arm. “It has a foundation in the dreams,” he said. “I’m to blame for that part. But, about other things—you’re right. You’re right.” He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. “People are going to die in this war, and I won’t always be around to protect them. For all I know, Draco might fall from taking a curse in the back on the field of battle, or you might, or Connor.

“And you know what the problem is?” Harry smiled, though his eyes glistened with tears when he opened them. “I realized last night that I care more about you than I ever did about my parents. I care more about Draco than I do about—almost everyone else. I like to think that I’m only devoted to principle, that if I had to choose between saving Draco and saving Hermione I would at least hesitate, but I know now that I won’t. It’s not a real choice. I would save Draco.” He cocked his head at Snape. “And that’s a hell of a thing to reconcile with ‘people are going to die in this war.’”

Snape closed his eyes. “Will you allow me to help you reconcile it?” he asked. “It cannot compare, not entirely, because I am a different sort of man than you are, but I did fight Order of the Phoenix members during some battles, and then take what information I could to Dumbledore at night.” Memories burned and flashed behind his eyes—memories of days when Bellatrix had been sane, and Albus had been noble, and Lucius had been a relentless killer and torturer. And now Bellatrix and Albus were dead by the magic of the boy sitting with his hand clasped firmly in Snape’s own, and Lucius was as gentle as he would ever be, for the sake of the same person. How different we all are, or were. “It will help.”

“Yes, thank you,” said Harry, his voice coming more strongly. “In fact, any offer of help that you make me is gratefully appreciated, sir. How angry I got at you does show how much I love you, but it’s time for me to start doing other things than just getting angry.”

Snape opened his eyes. Harry was staring at him, and the tears had vanished from his eyes, and his voice was calm and sad and
steady.

“There’s going to be so much death, sir,” he said. “I wouldn’t be Pansy for anything in the world, right now. She stares at everyone, and I wonder how many of us are going to die in the war, and how, but of course I can’t ask her.

“I want to make more of them die than there are of us dying. I want to know how to become reconciled to death, even Connor’s or Draco’s death, or yours, if that’s what I need to do. I want to know when killing someone is moral and when it isn’t. I think leaving Indigena Yaxley alive was the right thing to do, but maybe leaving Rosier alive was a mistake.” He took a deep breath, and shifted forward until Snape could feel the ending of his left wrist. “I want to know how to make war without losing my soul to it.

“All of that’s a grim study to ask you to help me with. So I really do need to do other things than get angry with you.” He was looking directly into Snape’s eyes now. “So that I can make sure you understand how much I love you, and how grateful I am that you’re alive, and I can share something of life with you outside that training.”

Snape put out his free arm, shifting so that the pillows behind him took his weight, and embraced Harry, drawing him nearer. Harry at once grabbed him, as if he’d been waiting for that signal, and hugged him right back.

This is not the end, Snape thought. Of course it is not. We have not spoken of his anger at my turning his parents over to the Ministry, among other things.

But it was a beginning. And he would not have to make all the changes himself, and he would not have to walk alone on the difficult road he had spied leading beyond the Chamber of Secrets.

Nothing was settled, and nothing was easy. Snape was beginning to think that if either of those things happened around Harry, he would have to be dead.

They would continue moving, and choosing from day to day, and likely arguing until they had hammered out all the sources of Harry’s anger and distrust, and Snape’s anger and overprotectiveness, and then they would find new sources of anger and distrust and overprotectiveness.

But they had made a good start on the motion here, and on the choices, and there was no law that said they must race to the end of the track.

_*_*_*_*_*

Chapter Seventy-One: Not Since Merlin’s Time

“I just don’t see why you don’t want to keep it.”

Harry smiled as he turned the stone slowly over and over in his hand. Yes, he thought it would do. He had asked Hagrid, who ought to know, what the strongest kind of stone in the Forbidden Forest was, and the half-giant had brought him a sample. It was a simple gray color, egg-shaped like the rocks the centaurs valued, veined with gold and white. Harry didn’t think it would break easily, which was his main requirement for a vessel to store the befouled magic in.

“Because it would corrupt my own magic, Draco,” he answered Draco finally, sitting down on the bed and turning to face his boyfriend. Snape was out of the hospital wing right now, limping up and down the seventh-floor hallway to exercise his leg. He would walk with a limp for perhaps a year, Madam Pomfrey had warned him, but as long as he used the leg constantly, he ought to recover after that. Harry tossed the stone to Draco. “Here. You squeeze it, and make sure that it just doesn’t feel strong to me because my hand is still weak.” He looked at his arms and made a face. Madam Pomfrey had insisted that Harry stay “just a little longer” in the hospital wing, until she could make absolutely sure that the venom had done no damage to his arms. Since her magic revealed nothing, and the only symptoms of “damage” Harry had were trembling and weakness, he didn’t see the point, but the matron had saved Snape’s leg. He wasn’t about to argue with her.

Draco tested the stone in both hands, then shook his head and tossed it back to Harry, who caught it easily. “It’s an ordinary stone, Harry. Hard enough. It’ll work. It won’t shatter easily, which I think was the main thing you were worried about. But I say that you should keep that magic and work the foulness out of it.”

“I haven’t the least idea how,” Harry said simply. He held the stone in his hand and closed his eyes, reaching for the magic that
he’d swallowed from the Slytherin tie and from Voldemort. It had sunk into him and mingled with his own magic, but Harry still knew the difference, as easily as he could distinguish scum on the surface of a lake. The magic, hostile towards him still because of the intentions of its wielders and what they’d been doing when he swallowed it, swarmed up his arms and into the rock.

“Then find out,” said Draco, somewhere beyond the flood. “I think it would be better, Harry.” His voice was deep with dreams. “Imagine what you could do with magic like that. Can you imagine? Maybe not. Then I’ll imagine for you. Not just defeat Voldemort, though that’s a priority, of course. But force other people to listen to and respect you. Set up your own magical school if you wanted, one that would take only the best of the best students. Create new spells and artifacts that would become the stuff of legend. Breed snakes that aren’t basilisks and aren’t disgusting monsters like the ones Voldemort makes. Make——”

“And that’s precisely why I won’t keep it, Draco,” said Harry, opening his eyes and peering down at the stone. He nodded with satisfaction. The Slytherin tie had had much the same feeling as the rock did now. “I have no wish to see what I would become if I did those things.”

Draco stared at him. “I don’t understand you,” he said. “I don’t understand how in the world you got into Slytherin. You have some ambition, don’t you?”

Harry raised his eyebrows. “Of course I do. You know what it is. To change——”

“Yes, but——” Draco made a chopping motion with his hand in the air. “Not compulsion. Forget about compulsion, even the unconscious kind that you’d exude if you weren’t holding your power so tightly under control now. The sheer respect that someone would have to pay a wizard with your magic and Dumbledore’s and most of Voldemort’s is so enormous that you’d get what you wanted without much trouble, Harry. They’d accord your opinions more weight than the Minister’s. They’d agree to what you wanted for the chance to get what they wanted. That’s how politics works, Harry, especially around powerful wizards.”

“It’s the way Dumbledore made it work for him,” Harry retorted. “Why should he have had as much power as he did otherwise? He was only a Headmaster. His opinion would have mattered to parents and the board of governors, but no one else, really. It’s his magic that made them look to him. Voldemort just takes a route of terror.”

“And while Dumbledore was a bastard, some of his methods are worth adopting.” Draco said in an encouraging tone. “Why not, Harry? That’s the kind of politics that you’ll have to work at the alliance meeting. It’s the kind of politics that your allies will show up expecting. Since you’re not that old and you don’t have a powerful family at your back—though of course your Malfoy connections help make up for that——”

“And my being Black heir,” Harry reminded him sweetly.

Draco blinked, then said, “Right,” as if he’d prefer to forget about that. Harry watched in amusement as he waved a hand. “Your main political tool is your magic,” he went on in determination. “And your reputation as Boy-Who-Lived, but you haven’t tried to use that. It’s your magic that’s let you accomplish most of what you have so far. We won’t mention the clever, talented, day-saving boyfriend, since that’s self-evident.” He wore the arrogant expression which made it impossible for Harry to tell how seriously he was taking his own words.

Harry laughed in spite of himself. “I don’t disagree.”

“Then why——”

“Because I don’t want to intimidate people,” Harry interrupted. “Of course I’m going to anyway. If someone backs down from an argument with me just because I’m a Lord-level wizard, then there’s nothing I can do about that. But I won’t set out to intimidate people. And I’d do that if I kept magic that wasn’t mine sheerly as a political weapon. I’ll use the magic that accident and Voldemort and my mother’s machinations gave me.”

“It was prophecy,” said Draco. “Destiny. Merlin, Harry, don’t start thinking of it as accident. Professor Snape,” he added, turning towards the doors of the hospital wing as Snape came limping in, his face dark with pain and determination, “Harry thinks that he got his magic by accident.”

Snape sank down onto his bed before he tried to respond, massaging his right leg. His eyes were closed. Concerned, Harry started to stand and go to him, but Snape replied in a voice that showed only faint strain. “It was an accident. A bizarre magical accident that no one could have predicted beforehand would fall out like that. No one had ever survived the Killing Curse.”
Harry turned to Draco with a smile he knew was a bit vicious, then paused as Snape added, “That is what made it the cornerstone of a prophecy. Prophecies, by their very nature, predict things that do not happen in the world every day.”

Draco could outmatch Harry in the vicious smile department, and he did so now. “You were saying, Harry?”

Harry shook his head and held up the stone that contained the befouled magic. “That I won’t use this to achieve my ends until I can be sure that I know how to use it without dirtying the people around me, and I won’t use my magic to force or scare people into doing what I want.”

“What if it turns out to be the only way that you can free the magical creatures?” Draco had dropped the smile. He leaned forward and spoke with quiet intensity. “I think it might be, Harry. A powerful wizard can win them free, and in just a few years. Someone devoted to arguing won’t win them free while he still lives.”

“Then that’s what happens,” said Harry steadily. “I’m vates, and that means that I have to respect the free will of my enemies as well as my allies. The magical creatures know that. They wouldn’t advise me to do anything in a different way, lest I fall from the path and stop being vates.”

Draco sighed. “That magic is yours, Harry, if you can drain it. I think you should use it.”

“If I can clean it, I will,” said Harry. “To weave wards and heal hurts and defend people, not achieve my political ends. There have to be limits, Draco.”

“You said something like that once before,” Draco said. “That you don’t want to see what you would become if you had so much magic. What does that mean, Harry?”

Harry shot an uneasy glance at Snape, but he had his eyes closed, and if he was attending to the conversation, he didn’t show any sign of interfering. He turned back to Draco and answered, “I don’t want to become unlimited, Draco, the way I might if I took my ability to drain magic so seriously that it was the only weapon I used. I don’t want to intimidate other people with my mere existence. I want them free to argue with me, to hate me, to not fear me. And showing up to an alliance meeting blazing with power like that, most of it from other Lords, would not help me leave other people free.”

Draco folded his arms, usually a sign of huffiness with him, but his voice was sure and his look steady. “I don’t see why your will needs to be restrained for their sake, Harry. Surely your will is as important as theirs?”

“Yes,” Harry snapped. “And I’ve told you, Draco, my will is to not be that powerful, to not lose myself to my magic. I’m more than the sum of my power. I do keep saying that. I don’t know why you don’t listen.” He rose moodily to his feet and paced back and forth, but didn’t storm out of the hospital wing. For one thing, he preferred not to run from his arguments with Draco; for another, Madam Pomfrey wouldn’t like it.

“I suppose,” Draco said after a few moments, “that I can’t credit that it’s your will because it’s so different from what I want, from what I’d do with that level of magic.”

Harry shot him a quick smile of thanks, and nodded. “I know,” he said. “But it’s what I’m going to do. And I promise, if I do work out some way of cleaning this—I held up the stone “—then I can use it. Just not now.” He tucked the stone into his pocket.

Draco sighed dramatically. “And you’ll deprive me of my chance to appear in public as the boyfriend of an all-powerful wizard,” he said. “That’s just like you, Harry.”

Harry was glad to change the tone of the discussion to teasing, especially when he looked over his shoulder and saw Snape watching him far too thoughtfully.

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“Yes,” said Minerva softly, glad that she didn’t have to do this alone, that she had Godric and Rowena as well as Harry to help her. “I think that should do, Harry.” She extended her hand across the desk to him. “Take my hand, hold tight to it, and follow the lines you’ll see behind your eyes.”

Harry leaned forward from his chair, his eyes intent, but closing as he latched onto her wrist. Minerva eyed him for a moment,
then leaned back in her own chair and closed her eyes as instructed. She felt Godric’s hovering presence ease closer, to lend her strength. Rowena stood on the other side of the room, to serve as anchor and guide; the Ravenclaw Founder knew the wards better than the others, and knew where the most essential, vulnerable places in Hogwarts were, the ones that had to be most protected. She would lead. Minerva would follow, with Godric linked to her through the bond that the Founders’ spirits and the Headmistress shared, and Harry would come behind that, lending them magic to weave the wards as needed.

“Follow.” Even now, Minerva wasn’t used to Rowena’s voice, high and aloof and passionate in what Minerva could only describe as an academic way. Minerva saw a shadow move across her eyelids, as though the Ravenclaw had just thrown one arm forward, and then the world opened around them. Minerva resisted the temptation to look with her physical vision, and hoped Harry had resisted it, too, even as she heard him gasp. Two conflicting sets of visual information would be too much for them, Rowena had explained. They would not go mad, but they would be confused and unable to help in the reweaving of the wards.

This world was one of transparent, glittering stone and dancing shadows—the way that Rowena saw Hogwarts, Minerva thought, rather than the clear, diamond-struck way Godric did. Rowena was a small, dark, winged shape against all the light, probably an eagle or raven. She spread her wings and soared through a tunnel that Minerva knew wasn’t there in the physical Hogwarts, calling all the while. The sounds, whatever they might have been, burst in Minerva’s ears as one word. Ward! Ward! Ward!}

Minerva reached back to Harry and sideways to Godric, wordlessly asking for the magic to help her do this. It poured through her as more light: a flame from beside her, a sunrise from behind. She sent it reeling through the arm that pointed in the direction Rowena had gone, unable to suppress the sensation of flight even as she knew that she sat in one physical place, motionless.

Rowena’s winged shape rose and dipped ahead of her, and Minerva directed the new ward to follow. It curled through the stones, supported and held upright as no ward had been since Albus’s fall. Minerva guessed that had something to do with both the tide of magic behind her, and the fact that Harry could sense the Chamber of Secrets and keep the spell from draining downward.

Rowena led them a dance, flashing her wings here and here, and the ward followed, finding its anchors here and here. When the tunnel in the transparent stone was laden with the shimmering defensive magic, Rowena turned and flew towards Ravenclaw Tower. Concealing a chuckle—of course the Founder would think about defending her own House first—Minerva followed.

Rowena flew in a ring around the House common room and bedrooms, her voice ecstatic. Ward! Ward! Ward! Minerva tossed the ward, a glowing purple rope this time, after her, and it securely snared Ravenclaw Tower, guarding against Apparition, use of Portkeys, and any use of Dark Arts. Minerva was taking no chances, even though no other Death Eaters had been found in the House, or, indeed, anywhere in the school.

Rowena turned and circled slowly around Gryffindor Tower. Minerva felt confident enough to take the lead here, so many years had she spent sleeping in and climbing into and out of these rooms. The ward was red and gold this time, almost without her conscious choice. She could feel a moment of pure irritation from Rowena; she had wanted her own House wards in the Ravenclaw colors.

She said nothing about it, though, and pulsed downward, instinctively finding the weak places in the walls and showing them to Minerva: windows a Death Eater could fling Dark spells through, loosely fitted stones that could be more vulnerable than others to magic that manipulated the earth, small deserted rooms that no one knew about and might become targets of a Portkey. Minerva sealed them all. She expected to feel tired or empty at any moment—her usual reaction when she’d worked a great deal of magic—but the flow of power through her was as steady as ever. Godric’s delight and Harry’s stern resolve to guard the school might have been her own emotions.

Down and down and down, and they warded the Hufflepuff common room. In deference to Rowena’s feelings, Minerva made these wards orange rather than yellow and black. The bird that represented the Founder did seem more at ease as she danced delicately around the bedrooms, showing the spells the way to go.

Minerva caught a flicker of another presence as they headed towards the dungeons. She hadn’t yet met Helga Hufflepuff, but this certainly felt like a Founder’s specter—a shy one. Minerva took a moment to glance aside from the path of light and shadow Rowena opened in front of her, and nodded gravely to the brown-haired woman she saw watching them. Helga’s eyes widened, but she dipped her head, and then they flowed on towards the Slytherin common room and left her House’s territory behind.

Harry took the lead, unexpectedly, as Rowena flew in slow, mournful circles around the Snake House’s sanctuary. Minerva understood why a moment later. Godric had helped her guard their House, Rowena had led the guarding of hers, and Helga had probably lent unobtrusive support to the warding of Hufflepuff. But none of them were Slytherin, and all of them had reasons to hesitate concerning that House, either because of Salazar or because of their own personal history. Harry alone had positive
feelings towards it. If someone didn’t lend enthusiasm to its wards, then they were unlikely to hold strong.

Harry breathed life into Slytherin’s wards, making them silver and green; Minerva didn’t know if that was on purpose, or if those were simply the first colors he’d thought of. He tightened the wards, weaving them double-deep, when Rowena would have said that one flight was enough. Then he rose without having to be told, leading the way towards the Great Hall, the next vulnerable place to defend.

Minerva frowned as she followed. She would have said that she had overcome her prejudices towards Slytherin; certainly she felt no animosity towards Harry or Severus, and she treated her students from that House as she treated all the others. But the idea of Slytherin and what it represented, or once had, evidently lingered enough in her mind to poison this effort. She would have to be sterner, more careful still, to insure that she did not push a quarter of the school towards Voldemort simply because he claimed a right to their loyalty.

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“How deep would you say that Gloriana Griffinsnest’s hatred for werewolves runs, Professor?”

Snape lay on his bed in the hospital wing, absently massaging his right leg. He’d exhausted himself with walking practice yesterday—well, of course he had; it was a week since his wounding and he wanted to go back to his rooms—and Pomfrey had ordered him to stay still and rest today. Harry was pacing in front of the bed while he studied the letters he’d so far received promising attendance at the gathering on the vernal equinox. Snape was trying not to show how very much he envied his ward for being able to pace at all.

“She will never yield,” Snape said now, remembering the proud, haunted girl he’d known briefly in school. She’d been five years ahead of him, but she’d already lost her parents when he arrived at Hogwarts, and her hatred for werewolves was almost all anyone knew about her, almost all anyone was allowed to know. She appeared to have no hobbies except studying lycanthropes and how to kill them. “She carried a silver knife at the meeting last month, Harry. It was a calculated insult, when she knows how close a werewolf stands at your side. She was pushing to see how much you’d allow her to get away with. What does she say in the letter?”

Harry floated it over to him. Snape scooped up the parchment, noting absently that Harry used Levitation Charms as casually as he would a second hand now. Perhaps that was good, perhaps not. Snape would at least wait a short time before suggesting some of the ideas he had for Harry to create or find a left hand.

Snape scanned the lines quickly, and nodded. “Yes. As I thought. She won’t swear the oath not to use magic except in self-defense for ‘personal reasons.’ She’ll kill Lupin if she can, Harry, and the state the laws are in would allow her to get away with it on the flimsiest of pretexts.” He glanced up to see Harry standing still now, frowning. “And I trust that Mrs. Parkinson is attending the meeting as well?”

Harry nodded.

“Gloriana Griffinsnest is an expert at identifying werewolves,” said Snape. “She could sense and expose Mrs. Parkinson’s condition if she spent too much time with her.”

Harry winced. “I can’t let that happen,” he murmured. “Mrs. Parkinson would lose custody of Pansy, her estate, her money, probably her freedom…”

Snape nodded again, though he was of the opinion that the witch he had fought beside in the Battle of Valerian would not meekly lie back and let the Ministry walk all over her. But the whole point of negotiation, and of Harry not simply facing Scrimgeour head on, was to achieve a resolution to the werewolf problem that both the werewolves and the Ministry could live with. “Then do not accept Mrs. Griffinsnest’s response. You have a simple enough reason in her refusal to swear the oath.”

Harry called the letter back to him, and then grinned at Snape as he laid it carefully in a pile of responses he’d rejected. “Planning the other meeting would have been a lot easier with you to help me,” he muttered. “I can’t believe how much you know about most of these people.”

Snape shrugged, keeping his face relaxed and neutral. He doubted Harry would want to know most of the sources of his information. “We were both at fault there,” he said. “And there are some ways in which you know the attendees better than I do.” A smooth enough segue into a subject he’d meant to raise since Harry had mentioned, casually, whom among the Hogwarts
students had already spoken to him about attending. “Are you sure that your brother should come?”

Harry blinked at him. “Why not? He wouldn’t hurt me, you know that, and he can finish his formal Declaration to the Light in a public setting. I think he’d like that. Besides, it would help with any rumors that he resents me for being the Boy-Who-Lived when he’s not.” Harry rolled his eyes. “Stupid rumors, really. He was the one who told everyone at the trial that I’d bounced the Killing Curse back, and why would he have done that if he wanted to retain his prestige? But there are already a few articles muttering about Connor in the *Prophet*.”

“It is not his motivation I am worried about, so much as his…lack of experience,” Snape said smoothly. He would trust Harry in front of a crowd, and Draco, and a few of the other older Slytherins and Ravenclaws whose parents had trained them into calm, easy assurance in such situations. Even Zacharias Smith, though Snape disliked the boy for his arrogance, knew how to handle public speaking; his family would not have allowed him to assume full adult rights as heir if he didn’t. But Connor Potter did not. His honesty had served at the trial. Snape could imagine dozens of ways it would hurt Harry if he stood up and spoke whatever nonsense came into his Gryffindor head on the equinox. He would be *sincere*—blindingly, painfully sincere. But only Harry, or someone of his power, could get away with that kind of honesty at a gathering like this. Half-truths would be the least of the political tricks on stage.

Harry shook his head. “He wants to come, Professor, and he can add valuable testimony if someone asks about Voldemort. He’s faced him four times, after all, five if you count his being a baby during the first attack. He’s been possessed by him, and he can tell them what that’s like. And he’s my brother, and heir of a Light pureblood family. Yes, I want him with me.”

Snape stared into Harry’s eyes, and Harry stared back, with that slight, stubborn lift of his chin that told Snape he was not going to win this one. Snape narrowed his eyes and gave what concession he could. “So long as you keep him away from any lengthy and detailed speeches.”

“He did well at the trial.”

This, Snape could counter. “He was speaking on a subject he knew well, in front of an audience sympathetic to his message. Do you think that will be the case here?”

Harry lowered his eyes. “No.”

*Is he seeing sense, or simply giving in to me?* Without more proof, though, Snape could hardly accuse him of the last. “Then do not allow him to make speeches unless you are outmaneuvered and forced into doing so,” he said. “Or unless the subject is Gryffindor lack of tact,” he added, thoughtfully. “That, he could give an excellent example of it a hundred words or less.”

Harry laughed, voice low and delighted, and Snape had to resist the urge to say something entirely inconsistent with even his new relationship with Harry about how glad he was to hear the sound. Instead, he turned to a subject he thought he might get an answer out of Harry on, now that he was relaxed. “Why do you resist having power so mightily, Harry?” he asked. “Do you truly fear that you will lose yourself to the temptation?”

Harry stiffened in surprise, then nodded. “Yes, I do,” he said. “Dumbledore did.”

“You are a very different person than Dumbledore ever was,” said Snape, thinking, for one wistful moment, of what it would have been like if Harry had been alive fifteen years ago and leading the First War.

“But he was noble, wasn’t he, professor?” Harry stared intently at him. “Once upon a time. I can’t see you following him if he wasn’t. I can’t see Peter agreeing to become a sacrifice on compulsion alone. Even Sirius, though he owed Dumbledore more than anyone else, probably—I can’t see him just giving in and following a leader who was an ignoble hypocrite from the time he met him.”

Snape inclined his head stiffly. “He was noble, Harry, but he had already begun his fall by the time I turned to him for protection. That is clear, now.” When he had come to Dumbledore in the summer of 1980, he had already heard the prophecy. Dumbledore must have been planning how and who to sacrifice to insure it came true. “I do not think you need to worry about the desire for power overcoming you.”

Harry shrugged. “Perhaps not, but why take chances? I’ve felt the temptation to compel people, and I made Greyback cease to exist simply because I was angry. If something like that happened and I had still more magic than I have now—” He shook his head. “Until I can learn to control it, this way is better.”
Snape raised his eyebrows, masking his surprise that Harry thought he needed more lessons in self-control. “I can help you in learning to control it. If, that is, you think the problem is one of temperament.”

Harry shook his head again. “What else would it be?”

Snape did not have a satisfactory answer for that himself—except one that would consist of Harry being able to wield any amount of magic perfectly well—so he let it go for now, and nodded to the letter that Harry held. “And this one is from?”

“Compton Belville.” Harry laughed again at the face Snape pulled.

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“Potter—I mean, Harry?” The voice was vaguely familiar, but Harry was sure that he’d never heard it so soft and uncertain. He felt Blaise and Millicent tense up on either side of him, and turned around to face the speaker.

When he saw her, Harry was glad that Draco had become too involved in his latest argument-by-letter with his father to come to dinner early. Marietta Edgecombe, the Ravenclaw girl who had cast the Blood Whip curse at him in October, stood behind him, biting her lip.

“What is it, Edgecombe?” Harry made sure that his voice was perfectly neutral. If she wanted to flinch at it—and she did—that was her affair. She certainly wouldn’t have trusted him if he’d offered her a warm smile and a congratulatory handshake, Harry thought.

“I’ve,” said Marietta, and stopped. Then she took a deep breath and started again. “I just wanted you to know that I have no animosity towards you. None. I never knew Gilbert was a Death Eater, either. I swear I didn’t.”

It took Harry a moment to remember that Gilbert was the first name of Rovenan, the Death Eater boy who’d cast the Entrail-Expelling Curse at him, and that Marietta had been his girlfriend. He nodded at her. “I believe you.”

Marietta paused for a moment, then added in a high, nervous tone, “And Madam Pomfrey told me when she finally managed to undo the spells on me that you’d killed Dumbledore.”

Harry eyed her wearily. Am I going to have to endure another suicidal charge?

“Yes. He’d been using a Dark Arts spell called Capto Horrifer on the people in the Ministry. By the time I killed him, he deserved it. Believe me.”

“I do believe you!” Marietta clasped her hands before her as if she were about to fall on her knees at any moment. Harry wished she wouldn’t. Gestures of humiliation made him uncomfortable in the way that stares had almost ceased to do. “I was just going to say that I’m sorry, and I hope that you’ll accept my presence at the gathering you’re having on the vernal equinox.”

Blaise gave a sharp laugh. “Are you mad, Edgecombe? You try to kill our vates, and you think you can just count yourself as one of his allies as if nothing had ever happened?” Harry stared at him, frowning slightly. Blaise had never claimed himself as one of Harry’s allies in public before; informal guard duty was one thing, and this was something else. And he’d certainly given no indication that he thought of Harry as vates.

“I didn’t know what I was doing!” Marietta looked half-desperate. “I didn’t, I swear. I wasn’t myself during those months. Please, let me have another chance.” She nodded to Harry, and her face shifted further, towards an expression that Harry had often worn himself. She’d do whatever she thought necessary to survive, and for some reason, she had decided that survival lay with him. “Look, Harry, I’ll be blunt. I think you’re going to win this war, and even if I didn’t think that, You-Know-Who is an idiot and a madman. I’ve never wanted to serve him. I want to join you.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. “You’re still in school. Don’t you need your parents’ permission? And you could stay neutral, you know. I’m not Light, either.”

“Harry!” Blaise hissed. “You would let her join us?”

“What’s this us?” Harry asked, voice low enough that Marietta didn’t hear. Blaise only frowned, as if he didn’t know what Harry was talking about. Harry shook his head and faced Marietta again. “You’re welcome at the alliance meeting if you think about it some more,” he said. “Ask your parents’ permission, or attend with them. And you’ll need to swear an oath that you won’t use
magic against someone else except in self-defense.”

“Thank you,” Marietta whispered. “I promise. They’ll want to come. They’ll swear the oath, too. This is—you don’t know what this means to us, Harry.” For one horrible moment, Harry thought she was going to kiss his hand, or, even more embarrassing, stoop and kiss the hem of his robes. But instead she bobbed a curtsey, then hurried away.

Harry turned back to his food, certain his face was as red as a Weasley’s.

“Would you really let someone so close to your back who once tried to slice it open?” Blaise hissed at him.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Millicent, in the calm, settled tone that she used when a conversation was shut. “She won’t get the chance. We’re going to be there, Blaise, and my father in particular has no interest in seeing his ally get hurt again.” She smiled at Harry, a not particularly pleasant smile. “We’ll obey the oath, Harry, but if someone casts a curse at you, we won’t consider it binding. Defense of you is defense of ourselves.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “Thank you, Millicent,” he chirped. “And if you cross the line and hex someone before they show lethal intent towards me, I hope you realize what it would cost your family.”

Millicent grinned. “There it is,” she said. “That is what we wanted to see, Harry, some indication that our vates is taking his safety as seriously as we are.”

“Would you please not say the word in that tone?” Harry complained. “It sounds like a title when you say it.”

Millicent hummed under her breath, and went back to eating. Unwilling to cause more of a scene than he had already, Harry joined her, but added that particular concern to the list already taking form in his mind: that his Dark pureblood allies seemed determined to serve as bodyguards. Very jumpy bodyguards.

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“I must admit,” Regulus murmured into Harry’s ear, “this is a wonderful place to have the alliance meeting.”

“Isn’t it?” Harry gently removed the wards above the valley. “We’ll have more than enough room for everyone, and it doesn’t hurt at all that this place has such impressive natural magic.”

He and Regulus nudged their brooms forward when the wards were gone, lowering themselves into the Woodhouse valley. Harry had time to be awed, in a way he hadn’t been during the battle, by the sheer power brewing in the valley. It wasn’t an aura, exactly, but a current, patrolling the valley’s sides and the entrance in the woods that Hawthorn and the other werewolves had used during the battle, and never going beyond them. The closest analogy Harry could find for it was the pool of wind in Silver-Mirror.

He didn’t know very much about place magic, he had to admit as he and Regulus touched down gently in grass still wet with rain and stiff with frost. Most wizards no longer studied it due to its inherent limitations; wands were portable, while place magic couldn’t be drawn on outside of the valley or house or room in which it existed. But Harry remembered reading in the long letters of information Paton had sent him that some of the Opallines had made an attempt to recapture place magic through studying the druidic arts. Harry planned to corner some of them during the alliance gathering and ask about it if he could. Paton’s latest communication had made it sound as if half the attendees would be Opallines.

Woodhouse answered to no master. Harry could feel the current of magic ignoring him entirely. When he studied it, though, he could see that it centered on the quadrangle from which the Death Eaters had conducted their ambush during the battle here on October’s full moon. The giant wooden house in the middle of the stone buildings fed the current and ate the current when it circled back around again. Wards so ancient had settled there that Harry couldn’t decipher which spells underlay them. The most prominent, however, would do inventively nasty things to anyone who tried to burn the house. Harry made a mental note to warn Ignifer to be careful, again.

“Impressive,” Regulus murmured, picking up on the last thing Harry had said. Harry glanced at him curiously. Regulus had agreed to come with him today without pause—Draco was with his parents, Snape wasn’t cleared by Madam Pomfrey to fly a broom or Apparate yet, and Remus was remonstrating with several impulsive second-year Gryffindors—but Harry had thought it was solely because he wanted to spend time in Harry’s company. Now, he had a look on his face that made it clear he wanted to say something more. Harry resigned himself to waiting until such time as Regulus wanted to speak.
“Impressive,” said Regulus again, and then batted irritably at a load of water that the tree they were walking under had dumped down his neck. “Yes, Harry, you’ll have to appear impressive during the gathering.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. “I know that.”

“Remember to keep it on your own terms,” Regulus continued. “If they want you to speak on a certain topic, consider it carefully before you agree. And, well, I know you want to be honest, but a little diplomatic lying never hurt anyone.” He smiled, but the expression was abstracted, and his gaze was on the far side of the valley. Harry looked in that direction, but saw only the rising Welsh hills, cresting waves of brown and gray and green.

“You’re talking as if you won’t be there,” he said, to try and lighten the mood.

“I will,” said Regulus firmly. “But—after that, I’ll be around for only a short time, and I want you to remember the lessons to tackle other political situations.”

Harry stopped. “Why?” he asked, more sharply than he’d intended. His mind was playing over Regulus’s insistence on his being Black heir in a different light now. He narrowed his eyes and stared hard at Regulus. “Are you sick?”

Regulus blanched for half a second, then laughed. The laughter sounded forced, however. “No, Harry. Of course not. Where would you get such a silly idea?” His hand briefly rubbed along his left arm.

Harry snapped his fingers, and his magic pulled up the sleeve of Regulus’s robe before he could think to yank it back down. Harry stared in silence at what the disturbed garment revealed. The Dark Mark was clearer and blacker than he’d ever seen it, and was surrounded by raised, angry red-white flesh. Harry knew that Snape’s Dark Mark didn’t look like that.

He raised his eyes to Regulus’s face, and waited for some sort of explanation.

Regulus winced. “The Dark Lord’s laid traps in my Mark,” he admitted, his hand hovering above the symbol as if he didn’t actually dare to touch it. “We don’t know what they do yet—”

“We?”

“Severus and I.”

Harry scowled.

“We didn’t see any reason to worry you,” said Regulus defensively. “The traps won’t activate unless someone tries to use my Mark to contact me. But now, this has happened.” He nodded to the red flesh around the Mark. “I need to find a cure for it. I’m going into one of the portraits from Silver-Mirror. It leads me to a world where several of my ancestors discovered healing for sicknesses or wounds that were destroying them in the past.” He brightened briefly. “Cousin Arcturus, who built Wayhouse, used it once for an incurable bee-sting,” he added.

Harry’s mind had shifted into a different path. “Do you think you can wait until the meeting is over, then?”

“Yes,” said Regulus. “The redness is advancing slowly, swelling a little more each week. I can wait until the equinox. And then I’ll enter the portrait. Time slows down in that world. The swelling won’t advance any more once I’m inside, I think.”

“You think,” said Harry.

“This is the Dark Lord, Harry,” said Regulus gently. “Nothing is certain with him. But yes, I think so. And I want to stay here until the alliance meeting, and you can’t stop me from doing that. Not without being a hypocrite yourself.” He raised his head and challenged Harry with his eyes to deny that he’d often hidden his own pain and his own wounds because he didn’t want other people to worry.

Harry sighed and glanced the other way. “If you’re sure—”

“I’m sure.”
Harry nodded miserably. He didn’t like this. He wished Regulus had told him beforehand so that he could try to heal him. On the other hand, touching or healing the Dark Mark at all might activate the traps hidden in it. Perhaps it was best that he hadn’t known about it and had time to convince himself that he could do something to speed up the healing.

“Now,” said Regulus, with forced lightness, “shall we readjust the wards?”

Harry nodded, and turned to face the valley, forcing lightness on himself, too. If he didn’t alter the wards about the valley, then no one would be able to enter or find it except himself. Harry had to insure that anyone who’d sworn the oath could enter. A fine thing if the alliance meeting failed because people were bouncing off his defensive spells.

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A week later, it was the first day of spring, the time of the balance of Dark and Light, and Harry stood on the high northern side of Woodhouse and looked down at a sight supposedly not seen since Merlin’s time.

Tents crowded Woodhouse, shimmering with spells to counteract the cold and the unpleasant ground, which had less frost than during Harry’s last visit, but more mud. The current of magic rushing around the valley had altered when it felt the first spells cast, but to Harry’s relief, none of them had triggered a defensive reaction. Now the current was ignoring the tents again, as if wizards were not worth its time.

The tents shimmered in various colors, sometimes the hues of various family crests—Lucius had a pompous blue-gray tent that covered a lavish spread of land, and the Oppalines’ tent blazed with the blue and gold of the sea and the sun—but more often deep green or gold in celebration of both spring and their occupants’ allegiance. All the tents flew flags depicting old family symbols, however. There were far more attendees than Harry had thought there would be at first, nearly five hundred.

Harry let his gaze travel from the Dark pureblood tents just beneath him to the brilliant golden ones clustered near the forest choking Woodhouse’s one ground entrance. Those were the Irish Light pureblood families. Cupressus Apollonis, Ignifer’s father, had written requesting to come, and along with him had come most of his allies. Harry hadn’t yet met the Apollonis patriarch face to face, and was reserving judgment until he did. It was his unbiased opinion, however, based on the infertility curse he had cast on his daughter, that Cupressus was a bastard.

South from the golden tents was the Oppaline gathering, which looked more like a refugee camp with the number of children running around and shouting in both Manx and English. Harry smiled as he watched one of them tackle another and send her sprawling with a loud, inelegant cry. Someone who might have been Calibrid herself, from the long fall of pale hair, stooped down and began untangling them.

Next to the Oppalines, as if trying to prove something, the Bulstrodes had set their tent, huge and dark and imposing. Their pennant was a black stone on a white field, and the motto Duramus. The Parkinson pavilion was small next to it, a deep green streaked with gold, their pennant a flower; Harry couldn’t make out the motto from here, as the letters were too small. Both Hawthorn and Pansy were attending, though Pansy had withdrawn so far from the rest of the world in the last few weeks that Harry was privately surprised she had chosen to do so.

Starrise’s circle of sun and stars flapped near them, and Harry frowned a little. He’d seen Augustus already, carrying an enormous staff of white wood bound with gold that Harry remembered from the trial. The staff had sparked with magic that Harry instinctively distrusted. With him was a pale young man Harry hadn’t met before—Tybalt’s brother, he supposed, the heir, Pharos. And there was a gull continually wheeling over his tent, which Harry didn’t like at all.

The tent next to that one made him smile. Connor had contacted the Potter solicitor, Proudfoot, and assigned him to figure out what colors the Potter tent and flag were supposed to be. As a result, there was now a garish white-gold tent standing proudly among the others, and the flag depicted a—thing. Harry hadn’t figured out whether it was supposed to be a crown, or a set of antlers, or a thorn tree. It was larger than it strictly needed to be to contain Connor, but that was all right. Most of the other Gryffindor students who’d come were staying there with him, including all four of the younger Weasleys. Fred and George were the main reason that Harry wished their tent was further away from the Starrise one.

Draco and Harry and Snape had argued over a tent for him, until Harry put his foot down on any finery. Snape had grudgingly agreed that Harry could share his own small, dark, and utterly unassuming tent. Draco had carried on longer, until Harry pointed out that he couldn’t use the Black colors because he didn’t carry that name, and he couldn’t stay in the Malfoy pavilion without everyone assuming that Lucius controlled him, and he couldn’t create his own crest because he had no surname chosen and no ideas for a symbol that wouldn’t look ridiculous.
Besides, along with the value of impressing people, there was the value of encouraging them to underestimate him. Harry was all for the latter. Even though he had taken Snape’s advice and eliminated anyone from the gathering who seemed to want to come only to cause trouble, he knew there were people here who wished him less than well.

He took a deep breath and shook his shoulders, letting some of the tension fall away from them. Whatever happened now, this was still an achievement, to have this many Light and Dark families in the same place without a war to cause it. He could be proud of that.

He took up his Firebolt and flew down towards the valley, ready to begin.

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“They look fine,” said Narcissa, gently settling the dark blue robes around Draco’s shoulders. “Don’t they, dear?”

Lucius didn’t look up from writing invitations at the table in the corner of their tent. “You chose them, Narcissa,” he said. “I will know who to blame if anything goes wrong.”

Draco put his shoulders back and made a face at the expression in the conjured full-length mirror. The dark blue robes weren’t the best color for him, but he had little choice as to their shade. Lucius was writing invitations for a festival to be held on his sixteenth birthday, which would formally celebrate Draco’s elevation as Malfoy magical heir. Between then and now, in such a public gathering as this, he couldn’t wear plain robes, because he was, technically, the heir, and he couldn’t wear any color that would indicate he’d been acknowledged to everyone already. That eliminated a surprising number of hues. Dark blue was the only acceptable one of those left.

Besides, Draco had to admit, the robes did fit. His mother had been very careful about that.

Narcissa bent down to kiss the back of his head. “You have grown, Draco,” she said softly.

Draco nodded. He didn’t entirely recognize himself, but that wasn’t entirely a bad thing, either. The robes made him look paler than normal, and made his blond hair stand out like a coronet on his head. Fastening it back was a band of beaten silver, worked into the Malfoy crest and set with small blue-gray stones that Draco didn’t know. He looked adult, stern, responsible.

“Draco.”

He blinked and met his mother’s eyes in the mirror again. Narcissa’s hands were pressing on his shoulders, and her face was unusually set.

“Do not let Harry overwhelm you in this meeting,” she murmured. “All eyes will be on him—that’s hardly avoidable—but those in the know will be looking at you as well. Do honor to your family, your name, and your power.” She stepped back, but didn’t yield his gaze. “I care for Harry, but it is more difficult to appear to advantage when your consort is so much more powerful than you are.”

Draco nodded, his heartbeat slowing again. He’d thought for a moment that Narcissa had a much sterner message to deliver. “I’d thought of that, Mother. Don’t worry. Everyone who sees me will know that I’m a Malfoy.” He lifted his head, and found his expression working into the haughty defiance he’d seen on many of his ancestors’ faces in the confirmation ritual.

“Good,” Narcissa murmured, smiling again. “And, Draco, that reminds me. Has Harry agreed to the courting ritual yet?”

Draco sighed. “No. He hasn’t.” It had been almost two months since his initial question, as this was the twentieth of March, but other than reminding Harry gently about it, he hadn’t wanted to press it. Harry had had politics to deal with, and then Snape and Voldemort, and then politics again. Besides, if Harry meant to refuse, Draco was sure he would have done it by now.

It was far more likely that Harry just didn’t think about it often. Draco made a rueful face, and caught his mother’s eye again.

“It might not be a bad idea to ask for a commitment by the end of the gathering,” said Narcissa calmly. “I do think that Harry will accept you, Draco, but the sooner you start courting him, the better it will suit your own impatience, the fortunes of our family, and Harry himself.”
Draco nodded, his resolve steeling. He could do that. He’d seen Harry that morning before they flew to Woodhouse, the way his eyes were focused and his mind was racing. His determination beat off him like another form of magic. In such a mood, he thought better, and Draco was confident that he could make a clear-headed decision.

And, of course, a gathering like this would show Harry off to advantage to a great many pureblood families. It would be no bad thing to make sure that most people knew that the rumors of Harry undergoing a courting ritual were not just rumors, but had a solid basis in reality, and he was not, therefore, a suitable target for marriage or joining proposals.

*And I want it*, Draco admitted to himself, and that sealed the matter as far as he was concerned.

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“Are you ready, Millicent?”

Millicent stepped back and critically examined herself in the mirror that her mother had conjured. Then she nodded. The formal dress robes would hang no better on her than this, and if she lingered much longer, then she might cause her family to miss the start of the meeting. She didn’t want to do that. Most of the wizards and witches here were meeting Harry for the first time. It would be seen that the Bulstrode family stood at his side, and was honored with a place in his inner circle.

Millicent shook her head for a moment, amused at herself. She was capable of thinking in two modes at once—of Harry as a political leader who had the ability to influence the Bulstrode luck, for better or worse, and of Harry as the fellow Slytherin she had to scold out of wounding himself for the sake of practicing healing magic. She had tried before to catch herself in a contradiction, to find the impulse to forgive him for being an idiot or despise him when he was acting like a leader, and she couldn’t do it. That pleased her. From what her father said, many of the people the Dark Lord had attended school with had not been able to pull themselves out of seeing him as one or the other. But Millicent had two more years in Hogwarts with Harry, and Merlin knew how much time as someone who followed him in politics, or war, or both. She needed that mental flexibility.

Her father swept towards her, studying her for one moment with intent dark eyes. Millicent stood straight and proud under his gaze. She was taller than most of the boys in school, and had features that kind people described as “strong.” She found that she didn’t really care when he looked at her like that. She was his heir, and that was all that had ever mattered.

“I have heard some rumors that disturb me, Millicent,” said her father gently. “It seems that there may be at least one agent of the Dark Lord in the crowd, sent to assassinate or maim Harry. And though of course no one knows who this agent might be, I have heard it repeated so many times to make me think the gossip has no foundation.” He cocked his head. “It disturbs me,” he repeated, “to think that some people do not have the proper respect for the *vates* the Bulstrodes have allied themselves with.”

Millicent’s eyes widened as she caught a flicker of darkness traveling around the outside of her father’s hand. It was rare that he allowed his magic to manifest like that at all, never mind in one of the abilities their family kept mostly secret. He had once told Millicent that the only people who knew what Bulstrode blackfire looked like were either of their blood or dead.

“I gave you permission once to use your gifts to defend Harry,” said Adalrico, catching her gaze. “I give it to you again. And if you are closer to him than I am when the assassin moves, and it does not seem likely that he will notice it himself, then do not hesitate to wield the blackfire.”

Millicent blinked and nodded. “We are losing our secrecy, then, Father?” she asked.

Her father chuckled. “Do not say that we are losing it, Millicent, but…gaining respect. Perhaps it’s time to emerge from hiding beneath our stone.”

Millicent bobbed a curtsey, and her father’s hand briefly traced through her thick, heavy brown hair. Then she stood up, and they turned to face Elfrida.

Millicent thought her mother looked lovely. For one thing, she wore robes covered with the pale silver filigree that denoted *puellaris* training; for another, she held Marian in her arms, since it was only right that both the family’s magical heirs attended a gathering like this. Marian was over a year old now, and she was reaching towards the blackfire around her father’s hands with no sign of fear. Elfrida gave her a fierce, adoring smile which she widened a moment later to include her husband and older daughter.

“We should give them a show,” she said quietly, and then turned and stepped to the entrance of the tent.
Millicent let a spark of blackfire flare on her fist in answer to her father’s gaze, and then followed.

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Are you certain that you wish to go through with this?

Hawthorn used her hands to ask Pansy the question. They both knew the necromancers’ sign language well enough, since Dragonsbane had used it to communicate with Pansy since she was born, and with his wife before that. But Hawthorn had never really imagined using it with her daughter.

She found she was startled by the changes in Pansy, and disturbed, despite her pride in her daughter for following this path. Pansy wore robes that completely concealed her body now, except for her hands, flashing quick responses to her mother’s concern. Now and then, Hawthorn saw one of her sleeves flutter in the tug of no mortal wind. And she wore a ring with an enormous red stone on her left hand, though Hawthorn knew their family had never owned such a ring, and it had not belonged to Dragonsbane, either. She was beginning to believe that the spirits of the dead spontaneously formed such jewelry for those who chose to talk with them.

I’m all right, Mother. The crowd in Hogwarts’s Great Hall is smaller than this, and I’ve got used to seeing their deaths. The visions here will be new, but after a few hours, I’ll have my balance.

Hawthorn nodded slowly. Then she sneezed. Someone was walking past the tent draped in coils of perfume that irritated her sensitive werewolf nose. She shook her head and embraced Pansy for a moment.

“Leave at any moment you need to,” she whispered. “I would never think less of you for that, you know.”

I know, Mother.

Pansy hid her face even from her mother, now, but she had a way of tilting her head to the side when she smiled that she still retained, and that Hawthorn could make out even under her shapeless hood. She did it now, and then turned and walked forward calmly into the world outside the tent.

Hawthorn followed, slowly. She had loved Dragonsbane since the last days of his training in necromancy, and had accepted then that she might lose him someday soon, and he wouldn’t be able to tell her beforehand when that day was, though he knew it himself. She should not have such a problem becoming reconciled to the knowledge that Pansy, too, carried the date of her death in her head now, and had to have accepted it, or the dead would not have let her advance in her studies.

If Pansy had made the sacrifice willingly, and Hawthorn had already lived through the love and loss of one necromancer, why did it bother her so much to think that Pansy might die next year, or the year after that, or in a few years?

Because it has nothing to do with the path she follows. No mother should have to bury her child.

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Harry strode rapidly towards the dais that he and Regulus had shifted rocks from the valley’s sides to build at the southern end. There was plenty of open ground there, not crowded with tents, and people would be able to see him when he stood on it. Besides, it was almost three o’clock, the time when Harry had said he would make a welcoming speech. He did not particularly want to make a welcoming speech, but it would let him get a sense of the audience response to him, and perhaps he could get some of the sillier questions—whether he would ever consent to Declare himself a Lord, for example—out of the way at once.

His mind was rushing forward, and for a long moment he did not notice that someone was walking beside him, matching his pace, instead of flowing sluggishly towards the stage like the rest of the crowd. He looked sideways, and found Ignifer Apollonis there, her yellow eyes still. Flames leaped up through her palms and cracked briefly. Harry wondered how he had made her so angry, and then realized the real target of the flames when Ignifer inclined her head towards the man walking on her other side.

“Harry,” she said, “vates, leader of my alliance and the holder of my soul, I would like to introduce my father, Cupressus Apollonis.”

Harry nodded, as if he had expected the elaborate series of titles she’d given him, and then wheeled to the side so that he could see the man who’d cursed his daughter and magical heir to be infertile for as long as she remained dedicated to the Dark.
Cupressus was older than Harry had expected, definitely in his sixties; of course, Ignifer herself was in her thirties, so Harry supposed that wasn’t a surprise. He had golden hair touched with so much white that it appeared almost the color of a Malfoy’s or an Opalline’s. His yellow eyes shone like a hawk’s. Harry saw magic pulsing and shivering in the web of silver rings on his hands, each set with a different stone. His eyes narrowed briefly as he realized that there were twelve rings, twelve stones. Cupressus had six fingers on either hand.

“I am quite glad to meet you, Mr. Potter,” said Cupressus, his voice deep and strong, a good singing voice. He inclined his head to Harry.

“Harry,” said Ignifer, voice light and perfect with rage. “I introduced him to you as Harry for a reason, Sir Apollonis. He has forsaken his surname.”

“So sorry,” said Cupressus, inclining his head further. “Of course. I should not have forgotten. When such shame as your parents’ has been spread far and wide, it is a dishonor to your own sacrifice to forget your disassociating yourself from it.” He produced a polite smile he seemed to have hidden under a handkerchief, like a stage magician’s egg.

Harry understood the reason behind Cupressus’s “forgetfulness” then. He’d wanted to insult his daughter more than he’d wanted to either insult Harry or get into his good graces. He revised his earlier judgment to one closer to the truth. Cupressus Apollonis was not just a bastard, but an unmitigated bastard.

“Mr. Apollonis,” he said, and inclined his head. “Ignifer has told me almost nothing about you, and now I see why. I know you already. All the best parts of yourself are reflected in your daughter.”

Cupressus’s face assumed a complex expression. “Is that true?” he murmured. “I would have said that you knew only a distorted reflection of me, Harry, as she is without the Light to make those characteristics shine.”

“She has given her loyalty to me, and saved my life,” said Harry, with an elaborate shrug. “So I see her by that light.”

Cupressus sighed. “And thus I must apologize to you, Harry. She would have brought you honor had you known her fifteen years ago. Now, though she still carries the name Apollonis, she carries a taint, also, within her, given her Declaration. Any loyalty she brings you is stained, any motive she might have for saving your life an ulterior one. I feel compelled to warn you of this, since you do not seem to realize what being Declared Dark means.”

“Father.”

Harry could feel the heat billowing up behind him. He turned his head, and saw Ignifer wreathed with flames. She spat something in Latin, too quick for him to follow. It wasn’t a spell, though, or Harry would have had to defend Cupressus. He remembered, a moment later, that the Apollonis family taught its children to speak Latin as a first language.

Cupressus responded, voice gentle and tolerant. Ignifer said something else, and this time Harry caught “magic of the Dark.”

He shook his head, marveling at the spectacle of a father who hated his daughter enough to try to humiliate her and get her punished in the middle of an alliance meeting, and stepped more firmly between Ignifer and her father. “I know Ignifer,” he told Cupressus. “And Light and Dark both mean less to me than how a wizard or witch acts. At the moment, sir, I hope to have better acquaintance with other Light wizards. If I allowed your actions to represent them all to me, then I would send them out of the meeting at once.”

He turned his back, and grasped Ignifer’s elbow. He had grown enough to make his escorting her look less than ridiculous. He wouldn’t stay here or let her stay here, because Cupressus would only have another retort, and he would try to make Ignifer break her oath to use magic only in self-defense. “My lady?” he asked, purposely using a title that Ignifer’s outcasting from her family said she shouldn’t receive. “Will you honor me with your presence on my journey to the stage?”

Ignifer nodded stiffly, once, and walked quickly off. Harry walked more slowly, forcing her to slow as well, and she let out several harsh breaths before saying, “You see how he is. I’m sorry, but I thought you should meet him that way, rather than in the crowd before the stage. Once allow him to speak, and he won’t hush. And of course all of his questions will be so reasonable that no one could forbid them without looking dangerous or outrageous.” Her voice creaked and cracked and ran with poison.

Harry nodded. “Thank you for letting me know.”
Ignifer glanced sideways at him. “Are you still going to let him be part of the alliance?”

Harry stared at her in turn. “Are you all right?” he asked, wondering if her father had cast a compulsion spell on her. It sounded like something Cupressus would do, and it would explain her temper—though so would hatred of her father. “Of course not, Ignifer. He insulted you.”

“He’s my father,” Ignifer said, biting off the words. “That’s what he does. I don’t want you to lose a powerful ally just because of me.”

“It would be because of him, not you,” said Harry firmly, guiding her around the first rows of seated witches and wizards. Some had conjured chairs; others had Transfigured stones or logs or humps of grass. He could feel eyes boring into him, lingering on him, coming at him in sidelong glances. He didn’t care. Reassuring Ignifer was more important. “Quite apart from any insults he offered you, he’s a fanatic for the Light. I know the type,” he added dryly, thinking of Marietta Edgecombe as she had been, of the Order of the Phoenix members, of Dumbledore, of his mother. “He won’t get along with my Dark allies. That means that I’m going to reject his further participation in the alliance out of hand. He’s already doomed himself. I hope he enjoyed the fight with you, since it cost him so much.”


Harry squeezed her hand back, then parted from her at the end of the third row of seats from the stage. Ignifer sat down next to Honoria Pemberley, whose face lit up at once when she saw her. She leaned closer to Ignifer and whispered something. Ignifer gave her a look that combined weariness and wariness. Honoria laughed and laid a gentle hand on Ignifer’s arm. Harry turned away to hide his smile at Ignifer’s confused look.

He climbed up the steps to the stage, piled boulders fitted close to each other with a mortar spell that Peter knew, and turned to survey the crowd. Hundreds of expectant faces stared back at him. Harry gave a small nod when he recognized someone. He couldn’t restrain a smile when he saw Draco, Millicent, Pansy, and Connor, and again when he caught sight of Paton Opalline with a child on his shoulders, waving solemnly at him. He knew the smiles were being taken note of and remarked upon, but he couldn’t care about that. There were certain things he saw no reason to hide.

He settled himself with a shake of his shoulders, as he had on the ridge above the valley, and then turned towards the forest at the western edge, behind the rows of seats. If he had calculated the time correctly, then a slight surprise, and one of the most blatant points he could make, was about to arrive.

Yes. He had cast a spell already to make himself sensitive to slight vibrations in the earth, and he felt them now. They were coming.

He whispered the spell he had used in the press conference in December, the one that let him sound as if he were speaking directly into the ears of each person. “Welcome,” he said clearly, “to Woodhouse. I wish to give wizards and witches, purebloods and Muggleborns and halfbloods like myself, those of Dark and those of Light, my acknowledgment and my thanks for coming, but we are not quite complete. A moment—ah!”

By now, the sound of hoofbeats was audible to everyone. Harry smiled slightly as a group of centaurs, twenty strong, cantered out of the woods and towards the stage. The audience turned to stare, and murmurs rose like high tide. Harry bowed to the lead centaur, whose name was Magorian, and he slid to his knees in return. The rest of the centaurs likewise bowed in a rippling flourish, dipping and rising so quickly that one was upright again almost before the next was down, and only those wizards and witches who sat to the sides of the wide central aisle could get the full effect.

“Now,” said Harry, lifting his head and letting the other wizards and witches see his wide, benign smile as the centaurs took their places near the front, “we are—”

A roar interrupted him. Harry wheeled, and saw a blazing shape looming into view behind him. The scales shone iridescent, and fractured the sun into rainbows. The dragon, an Antipodean Opaleye, flew with swift grace towards the stage, and came down beside it in a landing so neat that her wings barely raised a wind. Nor had the wizards and witches in the crowd done much stirring. Harry supposed some of them were shocked senseless, but the dragon’s speed had prevented it, too.

A cloaked figure leaped from the dragon’s back. Harry recognized Acies’s smell of smoke and fire before she bowed to him and caught his eye for one intense, wild moment.
“The Singers greet you,” she said, pitching her voice into a roar that everyone in the audience could hear, “Harry, vates.”

Harry could not have asked for a more dramatic gesture. Yes, there was fear in some of the eyes that watched him, but more awe. It didn’t hurt that Opaleyes were the most beautiful of the dragons, or that this one had settled down beside the stage, immovable, displaying no interest in the wizards and witches as snacks.

And he needed no lessons in how to take advantage of something like this.

“Now,” he announced, turning back to the gathering with a smile more serene than before, “we are all here, and can begin.”

Chapter Seventy-Two: A Path of Green and Gold

Harry could feel the temper in the valley changing almost from moment to moment. His coming to the stage had begun the alteration; the centaurs had changed it, and the entrance of Acies with the dragon had changed it yet again. He wanted to speak now, while it held overtones of both fear and awe, rather than wait.

“Most of you know me, by reputation if not by sight,” he began. “My name is Harry—I was born Harry Potter, but I have permanently severed myself from that last name, due to the actions of the witch who bore me and the wizard who sired me. My brother still carries it, and I have no wish to sever that particular bond.” He gave a little bow in Connor’s direction. Connor stood up and bowed back. He was enjoying this, from the wide grin on his face. Harry relaxed. See, Snape, he’s not going to embarrass me. Just in case, though, I won’t give him any speeches to make. “I also am becoming vates, the wizard who tries to free the magical creatures from their webs and encourage them to coexist with wizards while making sure that neither their wills nor anyone else’s is impinged upon.”

A hand rose in the crowd. Harry smiled when he saw that it came from a cluster of wizards in golden robes, indicating their devotion to the Light. “Yes?” he asked. Truly, almost anyone else was welcome to speak at the moment, as long as it wasn’t Cupressus Apollonis.

“What do you mean by becoming this vates thing?” asked an unfamiliar voice, which sounded like an older witch’s. “I thought you had already achieved that title.”

Harry shook his head. “It is not a title that a wizard or witch can achieve and then keep,” he said calmly. “It is a task I must always be proving my claim to. If I use compulsion or impinge on the free will of another, such as by setting house elves free without consulting their owners or not working for their freedom once I know about their webs, I fall from the path. And it is not a title, not the way that Lord or Lady might be said to be. I must keep changing, moving forward all the time.” He smiled at the disconcerted expression on the witch’s face, and then turned back to the crowd. “Are there any other questions about what a vates is meant to achieve?”

There seemed to be none for now. Harry nodded. “I am other things, some of which you already know. For example, I am a Lord-level wizard, but not a Lord. I do not plan to Declare, ever.” He hoped that might get rid of stupid questions about Declarations for Light or Dark, and if anyone intended to try to force him to those Declarations, they would know that it was useless. “I am also the heir of the Black family, thanks to the graciousness of Regulus Black.”

“Do you claim the surname Black?” That was probably Edward Burke, his voice nasal and irritating.

“No,” said Harry easily. “I have not yet chosen the surname I will wear, if any. As I am legal heir to the Black family, I was not required to take their name.”

“Is it true that you’ve sworn an oath to fight for the rights of werewolves?” asked someone else. Harry had the feeling that he knew the voice, that it might have been someone who was in the meeting in February. He could not identify it at once. “And that the blood took the form of the Black crest when you made it?”

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“Both are true,” Harry confirmed calmly. “But the blood took the form of the Black crest because I used the Black oath-taking knife. And the oath to fight for the rights of werewolves does not mean I will invade the Ministry and demand that they follow my will. I think Minister Scrimgeour might have something to say about that.” He smiled as a few people chuckled. “I intend to find a solution to the problem that both sides can accept, and that will involve persuasion, politics, speaking to the Wizengamot,
petitions, and likely making common cause with people who want similar things. It will not involve use of magic to overwhelm someone else’s will.”

“What do you want to accomplish with this alliance, exactly, Harry?” That was Lucius’s voice, and Harry nodded to him, grateful for the opportunity to lay out his goals.

“I intend to change life in the ways that I have said I would,” Harry said. “I think the treatment of most magical creatures is a blemish on the honor of the wizarding world. The web that confines house elves to their service is particularly so, since it makes them long to serve instead of simply live under their web with self-knowledge, the way that the centaurs and the unicorns have done. I intend to unbind those webs once I have knowledge and opportunity to do so and once everyone involved in them has agreed to it.”

“What is the benefit for your allies in this?” Adalrico’s voice was near the stage, nearer than Harry had expected him to be. Of course, he might want the other spectators to see how close the Bulstrode family stood to Harry.

“In knowing they have done the honorable thing, of course,” said Harry, and then laughed when he saw the looks of dismay on many faces. “And in accomplishing more of their own magic and furnishing more of their own lives,” he continued. “We can perform simple cleaning and cooking charms to sustain ourselves, but most of us prefer to rely on house elves, for no reason except that we have always done it. We will have new business opportunities as well, since the magical creatures who choose to mingle their lives in the wizarding world will need help, advice, and special magic.” He met Magorian’s eyes as the crowd reacted to that. The lead centaur scraped his hoof slowly on the ground, as if he were considering this. In truth, he and Harry had discussed this in the last few weeks, and he had agreed that Harry could say this, though of course there was no guarantee that a centaur traveling among wizards would choose to rely on wizards for what he needed. Harry nodded once, and then turned back to the crowd.

“I admit it might sound like a great sacrifice for very little. But we have walked in a secure world that has nearly nothing to do with reality. Our house elves are not willing, natural servants, but slaves constrained to like their service with ancient magic. Werewolves are not evil beasts who chose their curses, but victims of a web that transfers itself through the bite. When we shun them and push them out of our society, we are doing what Voldemort, among others, wants us to do.” Some people actually covered their ears, Harry saw, as if they couldn’t bear to hear the Dark Lord’s name spoken. “He used one of his werewolves, Fenrir Greyback, as a tool for political intimidation, and we do nothing but oblige him when we give up on those wizards and witches who suffer from lycanthropy. Currently, werewolves cannot hold paying jobs, and cannot have custody of their children, even when they are related by blood. Is it any wonder that many of them become desperate and cruel, trying to survive? This is an entirely avoidable problem, now that we have the Wolfsbane Potion to insure that werewolves can survive the full moon nights with their minds intact. We are the ones being cruel in the first place. And if a werewolf bites one of our children in vengeance for his treatment, then we are the ones to blame.”

“Does the Wolfsbane Potion actually work?” someone asked from a section of the crowd containing mostly Dark wizards. “I’ve heard rumors that it didn’t.”

“Yes, it does.” Harry scanned the crowd slowly, though he had already spotted Remus during his initial gazing. Showing himself apparently a bit less observant than he really was had its advantages. “Professor Lupin, will you come here, please?” he added. Remus strode easily out of the crowd and towards the stage. Harry could feel their eyes raking him, trying to see an aura of evil fluttering above him. But with his back turned, he had few identifying features, and even when he turned, only the people sitting close to the stage could make out his amber eyes and the gray streaks in his hair. He nodded at them, as if amused, and then looked at Harry.

“Will you tell us about the effects of Wolfsbane Potion?” Harry stepped back, sweeping a bow as he deferred to an expert. He wondered how many people in the crowd would realize that he was granting Remus a chance to speak that he would never have had in a normal gathering. Werewolves couldn’t legally testify at trials, or even talk to informal public gatherings without fear of persecution, as long as most people knew they had lycanthropy.

“Of course.” Remus faced the crowd with his usual mild gaze that hid the strength of the will he’d developed after his year at the Sanctuary. “My name is Remus Lupin,” he said, as Harry whispered the spell that would carry his voice into the spectators’ ears as well. “I have been a werewolf since I was a child, a victim of Fenrir Greyback’s bite. I am also the godfather of Connor Potter, and watched over both him and Harry as they grew. I was Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry for the 1993-1994 school year, and I currently hold the post of Gryffindor Head of House there.”
“How can the Headmistress have hired you?” demanded Augustus Starrise. Harry rolled his eyes, glad that he stood behind Remus’s shoulder and Augustus couldn’t see him do it.

“She does not pay me a salary, but gives me room and board, to cooperate with the laws,” said Remus peacefully. He paused, then glanced at Harry. Harry understood what he was asking permission to refer to, and nodded. Most of the people in the crowd would probably have heard of it anyway.

“Also, Harry has been kind enough to create a Gringotts account for me, which contains enough gold from the Black vaults to keep me happy for some time,” said Remus, almost carelessly.

The gazes swept back to Harry. Harry concealed his chuckle at the amount of shock in them. Have they not heard, or did they not take the rumor seriously? He lifted his shoulders in an elaborate shrug. “Professor Lupin has been kind to me,” he said, “and he made my childhood the richer for having known him. Of course I would wish to establish an account for him, since the Ministry is not currently enlightened enough to let him work for his keep.”

“The effects of Wolfsbane Potion,” said Snape’s voice. Harry had to bite his lip to hold back his grin. The voice was deeply cold, as though Snape were a random stranger annoyed by the introduction of another topic on the stage, rather than someone, like Harry and Lupin, adding his touch to keep the dance under their control. “You were going to discuss the effects of the Potion, Lupin.”

“So I was,” said Remus, with a smile that said he knew perfectly well who the voice belonged to. “Under the Potion, I do indeed retain my own mind, so long as I swallow it before the moon rises. I transform, but I am in control of my actions. I can run through the Forbidden Forest and prowl Hogwarts’s grounds in defense against intruders, or I can curl up in my office and sleep if I like. The Potion has given me my choices back again.” Remus’s head tilted, and Harry saw a hint of the werewolf in his narrowing eyes and flaring nostrils. “It is a precious thing, since in so much of wizarding society I have no choices at all.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. He and Remus hadn’t discussed his saying that, but what good was inviting Remus to speak if he stuck to a prepared script? Harry could not, in one sense at least, speak for him, since he wasn’t a werewolf. Nothing could substitute for the words of one who suffered the curse openly and was willing to speak for those who couldn’t reveal themselves.

“Do you deny,” said a ponderous, wheezing voice, “that werewolves have done great harm and damage to ordinary wizards and witches? Would it not be better to avoid that?”

“I do not,” said Remus. “Do you deny that the wars of Light and Dark have done incredible damage to the wizarding world? Would it not be better to avoid those? Perhaps we should ban anyone from Declaring for either allegiance.” His muscles were poised and sharp, on the edge of trembling. Harry saw it and wondered whether to ache for him or exult. Though this had to hurt Remus, he was at last, at least, getting the chance to speak.

“The free choice of wizards and witches has determined the nature and extent of our wars,” said a far-too-cultured voice. Harry narrowed his eyes and looked, and was sure a moment later that the speaker was Mortimer Belville. “Werewolves, on the other hand—or paw, begging your pardon, Mr. Lupin—had the chance to object to the laws as they were being formed, and yet never did so.”

Remus laughed. Harry heard the edge of a bark to it, and was momentarily glad that this wasn’t a full moon night.

“Of course we did not,” said Remus. “We were barred from making any appeals to the Wizengamot as they decided upon the laws. This was under Minister Fudge, but since it was the first of the anti-werewolf laws passed, it determined all the others. They passed with our apparent silence and complicity because we could not break that silence unless we wanted to be arrested.”

“How can you possibly know that?” Belville demanded. “Those are secret Wizengamot proceedings—“

“Then how would we have had the chance to object to them?” Remus asked, with a shrug. “Answer me that, my lord.” The flat contempt in his voice made Belville’s face flush. “But I do know,” Remus added. “Conspirators should not think their secrets can remain secrets forever.”

Harry stepped in then. Remus was angry enough that he might reveal secrets that weren’t his to reveal, like the existence of Auror Wilmot, the werewolf Harry was certain had told Remus about the Wizengamot’s debate. “They should not,” he added, drawing attention back to himself. “Those ancient wizards who wove the webs to contain house elves, centaurs, unicorns, and almost every other magical species I’ve talked to didn’t pass the knowledge on to their descendants. How many of us believed that house elves
were naturally servile?” He saw guilt people wouldn’t admit in most of the faces turned towards him, and nodded. “So did I, when I gave it any thought at all. But now that we know about it, we have no excuse for not acting.”

“I don’t see why,” said a witch, whose bells braided into her hair indicated she’d had war training. “We could leave things as they are. It would be the easier course.”

“And a wrong one,” said Harry quietly. “I, at least, will not leave things as they are. The reason I accepted your requests to come today is that I thought there was at least a chance you might be interested in helping me with this.”

“I still have seen very little of what you offer those who follow you,” said Cupressus Apollonis, his voice gentle and grave and utterly reasonable, “other than hardship and struggle that cannot be completed in their lifetimes. Even you, my lord Harry, young as you are, will be hard put to free all the magical species before you die. Why should we follow this path? What is in it for us?”

Harry could practically feel Ignifer’s nervousness; now that her father had made an inroad, she must be afraid that he would dominate the conversation. But Harry had the counter to this one, given Cupressus’s claimed allegiance. He smiled at him. “Sir Apollonis,” he said, choosing the sarcastic title Ignifer had used, “how can you ask such a thing? The Light is fair. The Light is noble-minded. And you serve the Light. Surely you should wish to free the house elves and others because it is the right thing to do?” He cocked his head to the side and assumed a confused expression. “Of course, that is if you serve the Light. As you reminded me before the meeting, I do not know you at all. Perhaps the Dark is actually your preferred allegiance.”

Cupressus’s face wavered, as if a curtain were briefly pulled off a stage. The ugliness Harry saw behind the curtain made him wince. Here was an opponent who would sacrifice even his own advantage for the sake of seeing his enemies suffer. But he lifted his head and held the man’s eyes. He would not back down. He had faced far greater threats than Cupressus Apollonis.

“I assure you, Harry,” said Adalrico Bulstrode’s voice, “that not all Dark wizards are committed to those outworn ideals that pretend to separate our two allegiances.”

Harry turned to look at him, and saw the hope in his face. Adalrico wanted to be distinguished, to have those who might not know see that his family stood close to Harry’s side. Well, why not? It was the truth, after all.

“I know that, Mr. Bulstrode,” said Harry, bowing his head. “If you will come on stage, we can show those who might doubt us living examples of wizards who care more about actions than Declarations.”

Adalrico brought his whole family, of course. Harry would not have expected less. He turned his head, seeking out and beckoning the Parkinsons, the Malfoys, and Arabella Zabini with his eyes. They came up to join him as if they’d been expecting this. Harry grinned and glanced at Acies, wondering if she wanted to be introduced as well. Acies held still for a long moment, then inclined her head so suddenly that Harry jumped.

_I hope we aren’t about to cost the Headmistress her Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. On the other hand, if Acies chooses to acknowledge who and what she is, I don’t think McGonagall should necessarily have a say._

Harry faced the crowd again, and murmured, “May I introduce the Bulstodes—a Dark pureblood family, sworn to me in a formal family alliance, and the lucky parents of two magical heirs.” Millicent lifted her chin. Marian stood with fortunate solemnity at her mother’s side. Harry knew he wasn’t imagining that some of the gazes from the crowd sharpened, with envy and admiration both. He supposed he might be the instrument of the Bulstodes getting more offers of alliance, perhaps even of marriage for Millicent, which was no bad thing. “May I introduce the Parkinsons—also a Dark pureblood family, sworn to me in a formal family alliance. Hawthorn’s husband and Pansy’s father, Dragonsbane Parkinson, died for me in the graveyard where Voldemort resurrected himself.” He met Hawthorn’s eyes, and saw more than a tinge of gratitude in them. He couldn’t see Pansy’s face, but she gave him a small nod.

“This is Arabella Zabini, a Songstress and an ally I am fortunate to have,” said Harry, inclining his head to Arabella, who nodded back. She was beautiful in the sunlight, her black skin perhaps accented with cosmetics spells, Harry thought. He did notice that Blaise hadn’t come to the stage with her. “And Acies Lestrange, who currently teaches Defense Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts under the name of Acies Merryweather.”

More than one gasp came from the crowd at that. Harry saw some Hogwarts students shaking their heads. They would be wondering how they hadn’t recognized their professor in the cloaked woman who had ridden the dragon to stage, Harry supposed.
“And, last but far from least,” said Harry, wheeling to face Lucius, Narcissa, and Draco, “the Malfoys. Lucius Malfoy has graced us with a truce-dance with me.” Lucius nodded, his face blank, his eyes the color of steel. “Narcissa Malfoy is a large part of the reason so many other allies have gathered to me, since she is an accomplished dancer.” Narcissa gave a smile like winter sunlight. “And Draco Malfoy,” Harry said, meeting Draco’s eyes, “my first friend other than my brother, the first student to welcome me to Slytherin House, and—“

For a moment, he nearly faltered. Then he pushed himself forward. He could do this. He had planned to do this, to show Draco how serious he was. It was and wasn’t a dramatic gesture. It would look like that to most people who weren’t standing on the stage, but Draco was standing close enough to see Harry’s eyes and hear the slight shake in his voice.

“And the man I currently plan to enter into a formal courting ritual with, once Walpurgis comes,” Harry finished firmly.

Draco’s eyes widened, but he controlled himself almost at once. It was doubtful that even Millicent or Pansy had noticed that he hadn’t expected that. He extended a hand, and after one panicked moment when he couldn’t remember the correct positioning of his own hand, Harry accepted his wrist. Draco bowed his head and kissed Harry’s pulse point. Harry returned the gesture the moment Draco straightened enough for him to do so.

*Life to life*, Harry had read about a formal public acknowledgement of the ritual. *Heartbeat to heartbeat. It is a remnant of an older gesture in which both lovers were required to strip and touch their hearts to each other’s, in order that their parents might check them for glamour and deformities.*

Harry was grateful that the kissing of pulse points had substituted for that. He held Draco’s eyes for a long moment, hoping that was enough to show how much he loved him. He was willing love to show in his own eyes, but he didn’t know if it worked. It wasn’t an emotion he had practice expressing in that form. *I can be a brother, I can be a godson and a simulacrum of a son, but I’ve never been a lover. I want this to work.*

Draco’s own eyes held his love, Harry could not doubt that, and a kind of wild, tender pride. Harry wasn’t sure whether that was simply because Harry had accepted his proposal, or if the public nature of the acceptance had something to do with it.

Draco placed a hand beneath Harry’s chin a moment later and draw him nearer, asking and daring him with his eyes both at once. Harry hadn’t planned beyond this moment, because he hadn’t known how Draco would respond to him. But his own courage was up, and it would be stupid to back out now. He took a deep breath and leaned nearer before Draco could complete the gesture, kissing him strongly.

Draco made a little muffled sound in the back of his throat. Harry took advantage of that, and continued the kiss at a leisurely pace for several moments, then drew back and looked at Draco with a lazy smile. “And why didn’t you anticipate that, hmmm?” he whispered. “Surely a Malfoy always anticipates everything.”

Narcissa had something as close to an idiotic grin on her face as Harry suspected he would ever see. Lucius looked as if he couldn’t decide between a smug “I knew it all along” expression and an abstracted “Let me calculate how this will affect my political fortunes” expression. And Draco…

Draco had recovered remarkably quickly. Anticipation of more and delight and affection and appreciation and possessiveness mingled in his face as he answered, “I always knew you were going to be mine, Harry. I just didn’t anticipate the timing, that’s all.”

“Well, do keep up,” Harry retorted, feeling his own grin stretch his cheeks wide, and turned to face the crowd again, Draco’s arm settling around his waist.

Most of the spectators were appropriately stunned. Harry paused to savor that for a moment, then continued smoothly. “I am able, I hope, to provide my political allies with more than just the satisfaction of doing the right thing, strong as that motive is.” He threw a little half-glance at Lucius, and saw people follow his gaze and realize that Lucius Malfoy, surely, would never enter into an alliance solely for “the satisfaction of doing the right thing.” “But for myself, that is and will remain the strongest motive.

“I was raised in the knowledge of Dark pureblood rituals, though neither of my parents was a Dark pureblood. I have a deep love of the wizarding world and what it has accomplished—its dances, its arts, its sports, its history. But I will love it more, allies and potential allies and friends, when its foundation of slavery and suffering has been destroyed.”
“How can you say that it is built on a foundation of suffering and slavery?” Cupressus Apollonis asked, his voice as smooth as if Harry’s public declaration of his joining hadn’t fazed him at all. “What have our dances to do with the supposed suffering of house elves? I must confess I do not see the connection.”

“Because so many of our achievements are the result of time and leisure,” said Harry, feeling passion enter his voice. He hadn’t planned to say this, at least in these exact words, but perhaps Draco’s acceptance of his acceptance had given him the courage. “Our artworks came about only because our ancestors were freed from caring for themselves by house elves.

“We pride ourselves on our fortunes. But we do not guard our own money, and we do not watch over it, and we do not mint it.” Harry fought to conceal a smile then as he thought of what would happen when the southern goblins chose to reveal their freedom. The fact that they could destabilize the currency of wizarding Britain if they chose should be a good reason for humans to listen to them. “I would argue that that does not really make our fortunes ours.

“Our dances, beautiful as they are, enshrine vengeance instead of reconciliation, pride instead of forgiveness, separation rather than a common cause. I think that is directly connected to the fact that, when wizards did encounter those who challenged their beliefs and sympathies, they responded with webs. Rather than find some way to live with them, they pushed them away. The Muggles are the only strangers we have ever encountered strong enough to overwhelm us, so instead we hide ourselves and wield our magic against them if they show any sign of intruding into our tiny world.”

“Very well said!” Harry wasn’t surprised that it was Calibrid Opalline who’d called that. Her eyes were as brilliant as her family’s blue and gold colors.

“I want to change that,” Harry said, feeling fire rising and racing through him. “I want to have the beauty of our world built on a foundation of beauty. I want the façade to match what’s beneath. I want to find a way to evaluate what we have built. Some traditions are worth keeping. Others are not.”

“You are speaking of revolution,” said Laura Gloryflower. Harry could not make out the tone in her voice, but he thought it was one of wonder.

Harry bowed his head. “I am.”

“But we can’t change that much!” objected Mortimer Belville, his face turning downwards in a frown. “How can we? We’ll lose our identity. We’re already doing that with the flood of Muggleborns into our world. We’re threatened on all sides, and you want us to lower the walls?”

Harry couldn’t help snorting. “We have tended to overestimate our own persecution,” he said dryly. “We are the ones who placed webs on the magical creatures, not the other way around. And as for Muggleborns, Belville, I must ask you: what do you think separates a Muggleborn from a pureblood?” He could feel Draco’s arm tighten around his waist, but he wasn’t sure if it was in amusement or an attempt to caution him.

“Their blood,” said Belville. “Their customs. Their view of the world. Their magic. Everything.” There was genuine revulsion in his voice. Harry tried to conceal a wince as he thought of Hermione and John Smythe-Blyton sitting in the crowd, listening to this spew.

“I hope, in time,” said Harry, “to show you that the majority of those things are pureblood perception, not reality, and the barriers that are real can be overcome.” Hermione, he knew, had learned enough pureblood rituals to surprise Zacharias. He wondered what the spectators would make of her at the festival that would follow this first part of the meeting. “I know it will take time. I will not force you to give up those beliefs any more than I would force you to free house elves before you believe that they belong free. But if you wish to be part of the alliance, then you should know that I consider the rights of Muggleborns as important as the rights of purebloods, and I will fight beside them and for them equally.”

“How can you, when you say that you were raised as a Dark pureblood?” someone he didn’t know inquired.

“A Dark pureblood with a Muggleborn mother,” said Harry, and smiled as he saw uneasy shifting in the crowd. How many of them forgot that already? It’s the behavior that matters to most of them. I would wager half my fortune, and when someone acts the part well enough, they forget about the blood. Which just goes to show how many of their prejudices are nonsense. Hard-to-overcome nonsense, I’ll grant that, but nonsense at the bottom. “I am both, in this case. And I see no contradiction in the union of those opposites. I am more interested in reconciliation than vengeance, in forgiveness than pride, in a common cause than a separation. Those I plan to leave out of this alliance are those who will exile themselves.” He caught and held the eyes of
Cupressus Apollonis then. “They would not wish to work with me in any case, given what they believe.”

Cupressus’s face was a study. He had apparently believed that Harry would accept him even after he’d insulted Ignifer. Harry supposed he might have been overestimating Harry’s investment in forgiveness, or perhaps he had thought he was powerful enough that there would be no choice about it.

Harry gave him a sweet, envenomed smile. Revolution can come a little later to Ireland, that’s all. He turned away from Cupressus and said, “Understand. I intend to fight beside anyone who wishes to join me. But to do that, they must have the intention of striving for more than just the defeat of Voldemort, though that’s part of the goal for the alliance. I won’t allow this war to dominate my life, because peace is worth more than war. Prophecy supposedly marks me as the defeater of Voldemort—” and he saw many people in the crowd lean forward “—but nothing marks me as vates but my own free will. My dedication to the same possibility in other people is what drives me forward. If I Declare for any belief, it is that one.”

He let his eyes roam the crowd for a moment, then bowed his head. “It is true that this will require work,” he said quietly. “I expect to die in the work. By then, however, I hope to have invested enough other people with my ideals that they will continue with the revolution for its own sake.”

There. Introduce it quietly, at first—the notion of them following a set of principles, rather than a name or a person. Not all of them will accept, at first, that I don’t intend to be a substitute Dumbledore. But I’ll continue to emphasize that until they learn. This is the cause of the magical creatures and change and peace and free will and dozens of other things, not the cause of Harry.

“Does anyone have anything else to say?” he asked, into the profound silence that followed his statement.

The Antipodean Opaleye swung her head towards Harry and uttered a deafening cry. Acies translated it a moment later, in the shock of the echoes. “This Singer says that she has chosen to come because she wishes her children to escape being hunted and tormented by wizards. The vates provides the best chance for that.”

Magorian reared and then came down with his forehooves hard enough to make a distinctive thump, calling all eyes to him. “And we say that we will stand beside our vates in war, because he has freed us from both our web and the compulsion to rape that once would have followed our freedom,” he said calmly. “He pursued the road of blood and willing sacrifice in order to do so. If he can walk such a hard road, we will follow him down this broad and easy path.”

“And we will stand beside Harry because we have chosen to do so, and we honor our word.”

Hawthorn, Adalrico, and Lucius all said that at the same time. Harry refused to believe it wasn’t practiced. But it gave the necessary impression of his allies’ unity, and no one else did have any other questions or remarks after that.

Harry nodded, then lifted his hand. Magic poured forth from it and swirled lazily above everyone’s heads, then dived into the middle of the large clear area behind their seats. Harry willed and molded the power, and it became a large dark green tent streaked with gold on the sides, the colors of his soul, or mingled Dark and Light.

“There will be festivities now,” Harry said, enjoying the shocked stares immensely. “Some of my allies have graciously agreed to provide food and drink, and others music.” He glanced at Arabella Zabini, who nodded, eyes amused. Some people would go out of their way to avoid listening to her now that they knew she was a Songstress. “I intend to wander myself. If you wish to speak to me, search me out.” He stepped gently away from Draco’s half-embrace and towards the edge of the stage.

Draco caught his left wrist. “I think we need to talk, Harry,” he said, his eyes intent.

Harry coughed, feeling his cheeks flush. “In a while, Draco,” he said, with as much dignity as he could muster. “First, I need to mingle.”

Draco nodded. “Then I’ll search you out when I want to speak to you,” he said, and smiled with a force that took Harry’s breath away, and walked towards the steps off the stage himself.

Harry shook his head dazedly, and then turned to make sure the centaurs were comfortable, trying to control the wild beating of his heart. That had not gone too badly, any of it, and it made a marvelous beginning.

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Falco Parkinson took a delicate step backward, testing the strength of the magic-made tent’s roof against a sea eagle’s weight. It held. It was truly remarkable that Potter could raise a creation like this on a moment’s notice, and that the magic that made it would feel so much like cloth.

Remarkable—and unnatural.

The longer Falco observed Potter, the more he grew disturbed and unnerved at what he saw. He had known many Lords and Ladies in the past. He had watched them all Declare, and stand or fall in the wars of Light and Dark, and he had valued them even as he despised them for their weakness in having to Declare. Those Declarations helped to balance the world. They were part of the reason that he could speak of magic, and the wizarding world he guarded, as stable. Powerful wizards and witches could divide people, split them into two equal factions, or lure the wavering and the neutral in their direction. Thus Falco had felt happy enough retreating from the world fifty years ago. Albus was a Light Lord, but he would face a wizard strong in the Dark soon enough. And he was as committed to ideals of balance and unchanging calm as someone with an allegiance could be.

Now here was a powerful wizard who refused to Declare. Falco would have been intrigued, interested in, proud of Potter if he had the sense that the boy was someone like himself—one who had decided to remain alive as a guardian on the world’s balance by tricking both Dark and Light into extending his years in the hopes that, someday, he might Declare.

But instead, Potter used both Dark and Light magic with no regard for the inner consistency and principles of either. He used the magic that fit the situation at the time. He rejected power when it grew beyond a certain limit, but never seemed to consider that, to not be a hypocrite, he really ought to give up all his magic and become a Squib. And he aspired to an impossible path, the vates, and to destroying and altering many old institutions of the wizarding world merely to suit himself.

He was a relativist. Falco had never been comfortable with them. He might do anything, and manage to justify it to himself.

And he was considering changing, altering, the whole world without a thought for what it would look like a hundred years hence.

Falco had found Tom Riddle exactly as he expected to find him: he was a Dark Lord, and good at it, maintaining one side of the balance as it should be maintained. Falco was growing increasingly concerned, however, that Harry would not Declare for Light, and that he had been able to drain so much of Tom’s magic. Even nearly a month after their catastrophic encounter in the Chamber of Secrets, Tom was wounded, dazed, hurting, barely able to swallow the magic that would eventually restore his own power.

All these concerns tumbled in his mind as he sat on the tent’s roof, a bird no one paid much attention to, and he saw, clearly, the path that he would have to tread if he couldn’t convince Harry to Declare.

He sighed. Well, I value the balance of the world more than my own life. I always did. He raised his wings and circled down so that he could observe the people clustered in the tent. Perhaps he would yet see something that would convince him Harry was not, as he appeared, a powerful, irresponsible child.

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Augustus shook his head and smiled. He did enjoy verbally sparring with Cupressus Apollonis, who could never resist the temptation to test him. They had been comrades and enemies for decades, since one was the leader of the Light families in Northern England and the other the leader of the Light families in Ireland. They believed the same things, but never approached them in the same way.

Currently, Cupressus was trying to find out—with extreme tact and politeness, of course—how Augustus had managed to get Harry to accept his alliance.

“But what was he like at his parents’ trial?” Cupressus coaxed him.

Augustus sipped at a cup of wine, which, he had to admit, was quite good even if it had come from the cellar of a Dark wizard. “He was graceful,” he responded. “Strong, like a young tree. He made a speech that still stirs tears in my eyes when I think of it, about why his parents had done what they had.”

“And you heard the details of their crimes?” Cupressus asked, his nose delicately wrinkling. “I glanced over the newspaper articles, but did not pay them much attention.” Implicit in that statement was the one that only a cretin would read the Prophet, much less give credence to what it said.
“I did,” said Augustus. “One can see the way those crimes have shaped young Harry. He tends, for example, to hate compulsion and any attempt at controlling others’ wills, though he will restrain himself for the sake of others—as if he has turned the hatred that properly belongs to his parents’ treatment of him on other wizards. And he takes a very poor opinion of feuds in families.”

Cupressus’s face flickered the slightest bit. Augustus hid his smile in the rim of his goblet. They had shared situations where they were matched, situations where Cupressus had the mastery, and ones like this, where Augustus held the higher ground. He liked the third kind best.

“Then he must have been upset about the rift between you and Tybalt,” Cupressus murmured.

Augustus restrained his own scowl now with difficulty. He still remembered the day he had first heard of Tybalt’s involvement with the Muggleborn wizard, and demanded, in a firecall, that Tybalt drop him at once, or consider himself as no longer heir of the Starrise family.

He’d received an owl the next day. Rather than an apologetic letter, it contained a copy of Tybalt and Smythe-Blyton’s joining papers.

Augustus had altered his will that same afternoon. Since Pharos was also of his blood, and Tybalt hadn’t been his magical heir, there had been no great barrier to doing so—except that Tybalt’s stubbornness burned in the back of Augustus’s mind like a hot coal.

“He was,” Augustus said, recovering himself. “But he did make an attempt to reconcile us.” There. Let him think how unlikely that is to happen between him and his obstinate bitch of a daughter. “And he understands the cause of the disagreement between us. He knows, for example, that Tybalt was in Gryffindor, while the rest of our family is traditionally Hufflepuff.” He lowered his voice. “Meanwhile, Ignifer was raised and educated at your house alone, wasn’t she, Cupressus?” He didn’t need to say, aloud, that Cupressus bore the whole burden of not insuring his daughter wasn’t Light through and through.

“She was,” said Cupressus, his face gone smooth again. “And I should remind her of that, as she seems to have forgotten it herself. Thank you for your time, Augustus.” He turned and melted into the crowd.

Augustus shook his head and finished his wine. He planned to retire early, after just a few more hours of watching the people circulating through the tent. Harry had said nothing unexpected in his speech, after all. And Augustus had made no progress on his own personal quest that day. The white staff had buzzed with such unhappiness he’d left it in his own tent. There was no telling whom Alba’s spirit might have meant to signal out in this mass of Dark wizards.

But tomorrow, he would bring the staff forth again. Perhaps it might sense one of her murderers, and then he could achieve vengeance for his twin at last.

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Ignifer liked things to make sense. For example, the enmity between her father and herself, though encrusted with hatreds and insults and refusals to apologize on both sides, made sense at bottom, because it was a simple matter. She had Declared for the Dark after it saved her life. He had said that he would cast her out of the family and perform an infertility curse on her unless she changed her allegiance back. Ignifer had refused, her father had performed the outcasting and the curse, and that was that.

Honoria Pemberley did not make sense. She knew that Ignifer didn’t like her much. She knew that Ignifer did not think illusions and glamours were funny. She knew that Ignifer had Declared Dark for a serious reason, not because it sounded like a good idea at the time, which seemed to be Honoria’s whole reason for doing so. She knew that Ignifer was eleven years older than she was, and she knew that Ignifer had had no lovers, male or female, since her reversed Declaration; that had been in the gossip pages of the Rookwood, and Ignifer saw no reason to deny the truth. So Honoria Pemberley flirting with her, fetching drinks for her, and trying to cheer her up made no sense at all.

“Go away,” Ignifer tried when Honoria brought her a second glass of wine, because all her less direct means of dismissal, including haughty stares, had brought forth a flood of bright chatter instead.

“Why?” Honoria made a small phoenix perch on the edge of the cup and sing until Ignifer took it in embarrassment; people were starting to stare. The phoenix vanished as Honoria smiled up at her. She had done her red-gold hair up in some elaborate style that Ignifer didn’t recognize, and her blue eyes matched the shade of her robes, or at least one of their shades. She wore a glittering ton
of jewelry, but Ignifer had no way of telling how much of it was real and how much an illusion. She seemed to have no idea how much of a spectacle she was making of herself. Or perhaps she did and enjoyed it, Ignifer thought. It would be like her. “I like you, and it’s not like you hate me or have anyone who would try to hex me if I pursue you.”

“It makes no sense,” said Ignifer patiently.

“Yes, it does,” said Honoria, her eyes reflecting honest surprise for a moment—unless that was a glamour, too. “You’re beautiful and intelligent and powerful and very stubborn—everything I like in a woman. Add to it that you’re fighting on the same side as I am, and I think it’s inevitable.”

Ignifer listed the reasons she’d thought of. Honoria listened to all of them, then shrugged, said, “Don’t care,” and made a small row of tap-dancing lions appear above her head, sticking their tongues out at Ignifer. Ignifer shook her head.

“Daughter.”

The voice spoke in Latin, and that alone would have made Ignifer know who it was, even without the tone. She stiffened and turned just her head to look over her shoulder. It was Cupressus, of course it was, but now Ignifer’s mother, Artemis, hovered anxiously at his side.

“Father,” Ignifer said, also in Latin. If he was going to stage a public confrontation like this, at least he’d had the grace to do it in a different language.

“I am sadly disappointed in you, daughter,” Cupressus chided her. “Why have you soiled this gathering with your presence? At least the other Dark wizards around you were misguided from birth; they knew no other way. But you—you knew better, you had the best raising, and still you chose the path of damnation. You should depart at once, Ignifer. The stars are ashamed to look down upon you.”

Ignifer tensed her shoulders. This was no worse than many other arguments they’d had. Yes, it was in public, which made it worse inevitably, but in content and tone it wasn’t new, and she thought that if she deserved damnation for anything, it was in letting the words go to her heart still.

She knew why they did. She’d been raised knowing her place: her father’s magical heir, and future leader of the most prominent Light pureblood family in Ireland, and daughter of a magnificent legacy. And since she’d destroyed it, she’d been scrambling to find another place. She had found one with Harry, but it would never give her the security, the confidence, the absolute poise, that her father’s did him.

And that confidence always made her wonder, a tiny niggling worry, about whether she’d been wrong after all, and should go back.

“Pardon me.”

Ignifer started. She had forgotten Honoria was there. The smaller witch worked her way around between Ignifer and Cupressus now, her smile fixed and glares of roaring lions on her shoulders.

“You are an arrogant son of shit,” Honoria told Cupressus in flawless Latin. Ignifer stared at her. Cupressus and Artemis stared at her. Honoria didn’t appear to care. “Your veins flow with it, far more than mine, Muggle mother and all. I would check your family legacy, and make sure that one of your ancestors didn’t fuck in a cesspit along the way. That’s the only thing that could explain your behavior, unless you have daily meals of shit. I wouldn’t put it past you, blind as you are.” She arched an eyebrow, and Cupressus’s face became smeared with a glamour of feces, looking—and stinking—impressively like the real thing.

She extended a hand to Ignifer, and Ignifer accepted it and let Honoria lead her away in a daze. Honoria walked until they were next to a table full of food; then she turned and stared at Ignifer, eyes bright with concern.

“Are you all right?” she whispered in English.

Ignifer nodded. “I—thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” said Honoria, and brightened. “But I think I deserve a kiss for that, at least.”
Ignifer thought of the shit smearing her father’s face, and had to agree. She bent and lightly kissed Honoria, noting that her breath smelled of wine, and faintly of peppermint. When Honoria tried to deepen the kiss into a full-blown snog, however, Ignifer drew back with a headshake. “That was only worth one kiss,” she said. “You have to earn more.”

Honoria’s eyes lit with a passion that rivaled the glow she showed in battle. “I can do that. Do you have any siblings who listen to your father’s shit?”

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“Zacharias! How nice to see you again. And who is your young lady?”

Hermione turned and dipped into a deep curtsey on seeing the witch who’d accosted her boyfriend, spreading her deep green robes around her. She knew it was the right gesture to make, because the woman was both old and in possession of a silver widow’s ring. Whether or not her family was distinguished, she deserved respect from a girl of Hermione’s age.

The witch smiled. Her eyes were brown and her hair blonde, but Hermione didn’t think she was Zacharias’s relation. He wouldn’t have been quite so haughty if he were presenting her with an aunt or cousin or great-aunt, she thought as he first bowed and then extended his hand along Hermione’s arm.

“Helena Deeping, this is my girlfriend, Hermione Granger. Hermione,” he added in a side-tone, “Mrs. Deeping is currently next in line to head the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.”

Mrs. Deeping blushed and said, “Oh, Zacharias, you make it sound as if it’s going to happen next month! It might not, you know. Or the Ministry might shuffle me somewhere else. Minister Scrimgeour does give those people who might head Departments under him a most uncomfortable level of scrutiny.”

“I wish you success, Mrs. Deeping,” Hermione murmured, peering at the woman from beneath lowered lashes. With luck, this would turn out to be her third surprised witch of the evening. “The Light ought to favor someone who keeps to the old customs.”

The witch glanced at her. “And how do you know I keep to the old customs, my dear?”

Hermione nodded to the snowflake design around the wrists of her robes, melting into twined flowers on the bottom of the sleeve. “Because you honor the seasons, ma’am. Today is the day winter becomes spring, and you’ve worn robes that reflect that.”

Mrs. Deeping’s face flushed even more with pleasure. “Miss Granger,” she said, “you’re a credit to your young man. I’m ashamed to say that I don’t recognize your family name.”

Hermione flashed a sweet smile. She loved this part. “Oh, you wouldn’t, Mrs. Deeping,” she said. “I’m Muggleborn.”

She savored the expression of stunned surprise on Helena Deeping’s face for a long moment, and then turned and swept towards the far side of the tent on Zacharias’s arm.

“There’s more to being a pureblood than confounding other purebloods, you know,” Zacharias murmured in her ear. Hermione heard the touch of breathlessness to his voice and knew he’d been fighting to keep his laughter under control. “Besides, most of them are so unintelligent—not worthy targets of your time, my love.”

“By exploding their expectations, I’m helping them ascend to our standards,” Hermione said. “It’s a public service. Look, there’s another one.” She nodded to a wizard in golden robes with an almost frighteningly deferential expression on his face.

“Hermione,” Zacharias sighed.

Hermione looked up at him and fluttered her eyelashes. “And it provides entertainment for you, too, love.”

Zacharias hesitated, then straightened himself with all the dignity due the Heir of Hufflepuff and the Smith family and took her to meet the wizard.

Hermione smiled for him. Really, this was gentle vengeance, and far better than drawing her wand and casting curses in all directions. She couldn’t count how many times she’d heard the word “Mudblood” since she’d been here, always spoken casually, always spoken with no sign that these wizards and witches actually knew anything about the people they were denigrating.
Hermione had spent enough time getting angry with Zacharias’s assumptions of pureblood superiority already. It was far better to get even, and show them how much better she was at their own games—and that a supposed Mudblood could learn anything, do anything, that they could.

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“But it’s true,” said Thomas, wondering, as he usually did, why other people couldn’t see things that were perfectly obvious to him. This time was even stranger than usual, since he wouldn’t gain anything from telling a lie. “It’s called the Grand Unified Theory of Every Kind of Magic. Oh, some of the branches of hereditary magic are giving us a little bit of trouble, I grant you, but we’re finding exceptions in all of them, to prove that they’re not that hereditary after all, and the passage of magic is much more complicated than we ever guessed. For example, did you know that Parseltongue is only passed on from one parent in a hundred? It’s true. By tracking records of Parselmouths who had children, we found—”

“That’s all well and good,” interrupted the man Thomas was talking with. He couldn’t remember his surname, except that it was Raven-something. Thomas was far more interested in his ideas, which were in disagreement with all of Thomas’s. “But to return to your main point. Do you really mean to tell me that there is no way of predicting when and where Muggleborns will be, er, born?”

“Of course not,” said Thomas, with an airy wave of his hand. “But you aren’t paying attention. We’ve learned that there really is no difference between a pureblood’s and a Muggleborn’s magic. All those old ideas about children of mixed marriages being less powerful than their parents are lies, and so are the ones that say it’s Muggleborns coming into the wizarding world that result in the increased birth of Squibs. We—”

“That isn’t true.”

Thomas frowned. The man was stupid. How funny that he hadn’t noticed before! “Yes, it is,” he said. “We’ve studied it.”

“Who’s we?”

“Oh, an international group,” said Thomas. “I met some of the members years ago and I’ve been exchanging notes with them since, and then of course I got to meet them personally when we removed our children from Durmstrang. Nasty business,” he added, with a shrug of his shoulders. He remembered Rose telling him some of the stories about Bellatrix Lestrange, whose cruelty was not only repetitive but stupid, and for a moment he lost the thread of the conversation. Then he shook his head and came back to it. His children were rescued now, and everything had worked out all right. “We owe Harry a great deal for rescuing our families—”

“Then you really call him Harry,” said Raven-missing-syllables, looking at him with increased attention. “I thought that was only a political stunt, for him to have abandoned his last name, and that you called him Lord Potter among yourselves.”

“Why would we?” Thomas asked in bewilderment. Really, he is rather stupid. “Harry is his name.”

Raven-whatever chuckled and leaned nearer to him. “You can tell me the truth, Mr. Rhangnara,” he coaxed, his voice gentle. “I mean, we’ve all heard the stories, and they’re good stories, but don’t you think it’s just a bit unbelievable that a boy who’s not even out of school yet did all that? I’ve heard he has a friend at the Prophet, that Skeeter woman, who’ll alter stories for him as it suits him. And, likewise, you can tell me what really happened at Durmstrang. It might help me make the decision on whether to join the alliance. A boy who disclaims his last name and speaks nonsense about wanting to help house elves isn’t an attractive proposition, but if I knew that he had a circle of advisers around him, sensible adults, who know and speak the truth and are just letting him run on his rein right now to play out his wilder excesses—”

“You’ll have to find one of them elsewhere, then,” Thomas interrupted. Now he understood what was going on, and he was irritated. It was no wonder that Raven-rest-of-name was overly invested in the idea that there were fundamental differences between purebloods and Muggleborns, no matter what the evidence said. He was an idiot altogether. “Because Harry did rescue my children, and he is what he says, and the freeing of house elves is, at the very least, an interesting philosophical question that ought to be attended to with interest by anyone not utterly blinded by his own pride. Good night, sir.”

Thomas turned and stormed off towards the nearest table of food, where he could see three of his children talking with some of the other young wizards in attendance. He huffed under his breath. Why were so many people having trouble accepting that Harry was vates? It wasn’t a matter of picking a side and closing one’s eyes. It was a matter of looking at the evidence and seeing what
actually worked, what was actually true.

Then the crowd shifted, and he caught a glimpse of Harry talking to a centaur, and he smiled, his bad mood forgotten almost at once.

In the end, evidence and truth would win out, because they had to. And Thomas got to watch a real *vates* at work. He relaxed and walked forward, whistling, his native optimism restored. The ignorant couldn’t be ignorant for long, surely, when truth shouted at them from every corner of the world.

And perhaps Harry and the centaur wouldn’t mind if he listened in on their conversation, for research purposes. So far, most of the centaurs their research group had contacted had proven reluctant to let wizards interview them for information on their magic.

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Millicent turned her head abruptly. She thought she’d just felt a familiar flare of magic at her shoulder, as if someone she knew was standing there. But no, though she’d been startled, *what* had startled her was someone passing drenched in an uncomfortable amount of perfume. Millicent winced, imagining what that would be like for the werewolves in the group, and started to face her food again. She was sitting down, because only the gauche would eat while walking around.

“Miss Bulstrode?”

Millicent looked up. Next to her was a boy she didn’t recognize, standing slightly taller than she was only because of the chair. He bowed to her, as if he wanted to apologize for interrupting her meal. Millicent leaned back and studied him. He must be from Beauxbatons, she thought, because his English, though almost perfect, did have a slight French accent to it, and he looked as if he’d been in the sun far more often than Durmstrang would permit.

Millicent was sure that she would have remembered him if he attended Hogwarts. His eyes were piercing green, almost the color of Harry’s, and he was her age.

“Yes?” she asked, since she realized the boy was patiently permitting her to look at him, and that meant he wasn’t here for just a quick conversation.

“My name is Pierre Delacour.” He gave her a slightly self-deprecating smile as her eyebrows rose. “Yes, my cousin Fleur attended the Triwizard Tournament at Hogwarts,” he confirmed. “And my family is at this meeting partly because of Fleur’s reports of Harry’s power.” He cocked his head like a curious bird. “But since Harry’s speech, I have found myself more interested in you personally, Miss Bulstrode.”

Millicent felt her lips curve in a smile. This sounded like the first stages of either an alliance or a marriage offer, and she was fully prepared to accept either one.

“I am flattered, Mr. Delacour,” she said, standing. “Would you like to meet my parents, so that yours might talk with them?”

“It would be a delight,” said Pierre gravely, and claimed her hand. “But, not just at the moment, no. My first business is with you, Miss Bulstrode.”

*A marriage offer, then.* Millicent wondered how many others would be started or even concluded tonight, and whether Harry knew what purpose the alliance meeting would serve. Probably. It was not often that this many European wizards and witches came together, and they would take chances to conduct negotiations that might otherwise happen only in small festivities.

“I’m flattered, Mr. Delacour,” she said, and offered him her arm. From one corner of her eye, she caught her father’s delighted grin. “Shall we walk?”

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“Look at him,” Regulus whispered into Snape’s ear, with a slight chuckle. “If I was choosing my heir on the basis of political acumen, I could hardly do better.”

Snape had to admit that Harry was steering himself well through the crowd. He spoke to most of the people who came up to talk to him, his face friendly and open enough. In about half the conversations, it wound up closing, and he shook his head gravely and
stepped away. It needed nothing more than that to let his listeners know that he didn’t find their terms, whatever they were, acceptable.

Snape did think that the unassuming posture Harry had chosen here, eschewing his own tent and colors, and even formal robes—he wore his Hogwarts ones—went a little too far. And it was contradicted by the fact that he’d stood up in front of them all and made a speech, with a dragon blazing at his side and his allies gathered around him and Lupin practically declaring war on the Ministry.

And then the public kiss with Draco...

Snape frowned and shook his head. It was not that he disapproved of Draco’s courting ritual—it would take both of them being different people before Snape would think Harry should marry or join with someone else—but it also struck against the humility that Harry affected, and made it seem more of an affectation. He could say what he liked about being a Dark pureblood with a Muggleborn mother. More of his gestures, trappings, and actions spoke “Dark pureblood” than the other way around.

*He is a Lord, in the eyes of most of the people here. Far be it from me to press the title or the Declaration on him, but he should realize that he seems to be making himself into a Lord even without either.*

“You’re too quiet tonight, Severus,” said Regulus, dragging him out of his thoughts. “You should dance.”

Snape gave him a sharp look and shifted his right leg, which was sore enough from the short walk from the seats to the tent. “And how would you suggest that I do that, Black?” he asked. “Perhaps you intend for me to set a new fashion for unspooling one’s flesh on the dance floor?”

Regulus laughed at him. Snape reluctantly smirked. Regulus had always been able to pull him into amusement, as regularly and inexplicably as Sirius Black could infuriate him.

“Your leg wouldn’t come undone,” said Regulus. “Madam Pomfrey fixed it up too well. Come on!” He grabbed Snape’s left arm, pointedly resting one hand on the concealed Dark Mark, and tugged him off his seat. A wave of his wand, held in his other hand, and music began to play from nowhere, a slow, sedate piece that would allow Snape to dance, if he really wished to, without hurting his leg.

Snape, of course, scowled and refused to at first. Regulus capered by himself, and attracted attention, and looked so utterly ridiculous that Snape finally began, reluctantly, to move, if only to save his friend from the embarrassment of dancing alone.

“There,” said Regulus. “I knew you had it in you! You certainly dance enough in your mind, making up enough clever insults for any ten wizards.”

“You forget which one of us dances better, my friend,” Snape murmured, and kept his eyes fixed on Regulus’s face.

Regulus’s expression faltered for just a moment, and he jerked his head up, his nostrils flaring. Then he said, “Well, but some dances are just unpleasant to recall, Severus. Clumsy partners, stepping on one’s feet, reversing direction while the music’s still playing and forgetting what one does in the formal waltzes. And Voldemort had a particular predilection for clumsy partners, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know,” said Snape thoughtfully, as he moved in a slow circle. “He had me. And Peter. And Lucius. And Hawthorn. And you,” he added.

“Ah,” said Regulus, voice pitched low. “I’ll grant you your own mastery. And Lucius, his too. I think he was responsible for some of the deaths you believed Evan orchestrated. And none of us even suspected that Peter was a devotee to the Light, and not just jealous of my brother and his friends. And Hawthorn, well, the way she maneuvered to make sure her husband wouldn’t have to serve her Lord was wonderful.” Regulus spread his arms and adopted a big, goofy grin. “But me? Severus, I couldn’t even maneuver Harry into becoming my heir. How am I supposed to have been a good enough intriguer to weave elaborate plots among the Death Eaters?”

“And yet, here Harry is, your heir,” said Snape. “And here you are, alive.”

“After having spent fourteen years as a wooden dog,” said Regulus. “Poor Severus, if that’s your definition of triumph.”
“We take our victories where we can find them,” said Snape. “And we make our own defeats, half the time. I still allow a prank that occurred in my sixth year to bother me.” A month ago, he could not have said that. But then, a month ago, he could not have seen himself considering suicide for any other reason than to escape his own pain. “And you still act as if you carry a secret Harry would find it too hard to forgive you for.”

Regulus tossed his head, a nervous gesture, like a half-bridled horse. His gray eyes shone with a light Snape remembered well. “I told him about the trapped Mark, Severus.”

“Not that. What you kept from all of us for a year, Regulus. Or was it two? How early did you know what the Dark Lord tried to kill you for?”

Regulus’ hands clenched and opened. “Long enough to do certain things because of it—things I’m ashamed of now.”

“Things that Harry could forgive you for,” said Snape. “If you could overcome your own shame.”

“It’s not that easy—“

“It wasn’t for your brother, either,” Snape said, and stamped with his left foot when the music called for it. “Voldemort used his own shame to strangle him, and keep him from telling anyone of it until it was too late.”

“I’m very sure that Voldemort’s not possessing me,” said Regulus, and tried to recover with another grin. “He’d object to some of what I put my body through.”

“Not as much as Harry would object to your death,” Snape said, and waited.

It was the end of the dance, in more ways than one. Regulus drew back with a shake of his head, and whispered, “And what if my shames and my crimes are multiple, Severus?” and turned back to his seat.

Snape went to watch Harry’s back. He’d been mingling with the crowd unguarded for long enough now. And Regulus needed time to think and realize that people could forgive him, even for things that he himself considered unforgivable.

Regulus had once been the only person Snape considered worthy of his time among the Death Eaters. Then he had been more than that, and deeper. He had come back changed, but unchanged in what was at once his most endearing and his most irritating trait: his conviction that he needed to do things himself, because that was the only way he could measure up to the standards of the people around him.

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Harry grimaced and nodded. “Yes. That was a mistake, and I shouldn’t have allowed it.” He glanced ruefully at the half-empty tables of food, and the more-than-half-empty table of wine and goblets. “I’m going to take care of that in the future.”

“Good,” said Magorian, with a grave scrape of his hoof. “We did wonder, vates, whether you noticed the irony in allowing house elves to provide food for you and your allies.”

Harry knew he was blushing, but he grinned at the centaur. “That’s one thing centaurs will do that almost no wizards will: keep me honest.”

“It is our honor, vates.”

Magorian and the other centaurs took their leave then; Harry suspected it came at least partly from people starting to drift up to them, having overcome their fear, and ask them impertinent questions. He watched them thunder away, and returned Magorian’s backwards-glancing salute with a sharp nod. Then he took a deep breath to try and still his nervous excitement. Magorian had given him, in amongst all the other things they’d talked about, two pieces of extremely good news: Firenze’s mission to the giants was going well, the last his friends had heard of it.

And the centaurs were ready to join in the trap Harry intended to lure Voldemort into on Midsummer.

Harry saw the other wizards, frustrated by the centaurs’ sudden departure, turn towards him. He pasted a smile on his face. He could control his expression when he felt no emotion stronger than frustration. He was tired—it was well after nine o’clock now,
and he hadn’t had anything to eat, what with the constant talking. But he had secured several new people to the alliance, and dismissed many others, and he had the chance to do more. Frustration could wait.

Besides, he wasn’t sure he should eat the food when house elves had provided it. It was time to start paying closer attention to his morals.

“Mr.—I mean, sorry, Harry?”

Harry smiled at the first young wizard who’d forced his way forward. He was drenched in perfume, as if he feared to offend with the least scent of sweat. Something about his movements was familiar, but Harry didn’t know what it was. From his bright blue eyes, he could be related to a quarter of the pureblood families here. Harry had probably met and talked with his relatives already.

“Yes?” he asked. “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name.”

The young man bobbed nervously. “I know. Sorry. My name’s Alan Morningturn. I just wanted to tell you that I’d—I mean, if you’re serious, I don’t know if you were—I’d like to free my house elves.”

Harry blinked. “You are? You would?” That was the first such offer all evening, and he could feel his heartbeat speeding up in anticipation and the miasma of weariness and frustration falling away. “That would be wonderful. I am serious. Do you have a formal contract to give me permission to free the house elves?” Though the wizard’s word was probably enough, he’d like something written. That way, if Alan was offering a gift he couldn’t deliver on, like house elves who belonged to a relative, Harry could make sure to refuse.

“Yes. Right here.” Alan’s face was pink with excitement as he fumbled in his robe pocket. “Oh, Merlin, this is so exciting, thank you, thank you, thank you—”

Harry wasn’t sure afterwards what warned him. Perhaps it was as slight as the indentation of Alan’s robe pocket around something that definitely wasn’t a sheaf of parchment. Perhaps the boy’s practiced nervous expression faltered at the last moment. Or perhaps he remembered, suddenly, where he’d seen those familiar gestures before.

He was on the ground before Alan pointed his wand and screamed, “Avada Kedavra!”

Harry rolled safely away from the jet of green light, which had been aimed so directly at him that it struck the earth instead of flying over his head, and he didn’t have to worry about anyone else. In a moment, he was on his feet, his hand snapping out and drawing tight. In his mind, he chanted, Expelliarmus. Petrificus Totalus.

Alan’s wand flew out of his hand, his body went rigid, and he fell to the ground, his eyes rolling back in his head. Harry took a deep breath and scrambled to one knee, whispering, “Finite Incantatem.”

But the glamour, if glamour it was, remained on Alan’s face. Harry murmured a charm to turn his robe pockets inside out, and found no flask of Polyjuice Potion. He frowned at Alan, wondering who he was, and how he could have managed a spell that Harry’s magic wouldn’t expose.

One suspicion he could allay, however. At his gesture, Alan’s left robe sleeve rose. Harry let out a harsh breath at the sight of the Dark Mark gleaming on his flesh.

“Harry!”

Draco’s arms were around him in the next moment. Harry reached back to pat him absently on the shoulder, staring still at Alan, trying to figure out his deception. Alan stared back, his frozen eyes wild with rage and fear.

That expression was familiar to Harry, at least. He had to transport it into another face and into eyes that weren’t that shade of blue before he could make the connection, though.

And in the end, it was Snape, limping up to them just then, who spoke the name aloud. “Montague!” he barked, the name of the one Slytherin Death Eater, who had vanished from Hogwarts on the same night as Rovenan had died.

Harry winced as he saw the expression in “Alan’s” eyes change. “What’s been done to him, sir?” he asked, raising his voice and stepping gently away from Draco. He appreciated the support, but he needed to stand upright. Otherwise, rumors that Montague
had managed to wound him might circulate.

“A permanent change to his face and voice,” Snape murmured, leaning forward. “Very powerful and Dark magic. It can’t be reversed, so it’s rarely used. But the Dark Lord did force such a change on a few of his followers in the First War.” He glanced at Harry, ignoring the wake of shrieks and gasps and horrified gestures spreading behind them. “I recognize him as Montague, but we’ll need to use Veritaserum on him to be sure.”

Harry hesitated. Technically, only the Ministry had the legal authority to use Veritaserum. And while he could be said to be the authority in this gathering, since he was both its host and the most powerful wizard, he wasn’t entirely sure what would happen if word of this got back to Scrimgeour.

Even more, though, he did not dare to look afraid. He doubted that Montague would confess to his crime. He could claim that he was Alan Morningturn to anyone who asked, and here by Harry’s own invitation. And if he said that Voldemort had compelled him to do this, then Harry would have to accept it, since he had accepted that the victims of Dumbledore’s spell were compelled to horrible crimes against him. They could use Legilimency, but that was even more invasive, definitely illegal, and not something that Harry wanted to reveal he, Snape, or Charles could do.

He nodded, once. He would make the decision, and if consequences followed it, then he would deal with them. “Veritaserum it is,” he said.

Snape pulled a vial of the clear liquid from his pocket, uncapped it, and moved his fingers towards Montague’s face. Harry relaxed the Body-Bind just enough for Montague’s jaw to open and Snape to place the three drops on his tongue. Montague gave a gagging sound. Snape, his face full of quiet, contained rage, massaged his throat to make sure he swallowed.

“What is your full name?” Harry asked, as the test question.

“William Richard Montague,” said Montague, his voice flat and his eyes glazed.

Harry nodded. He had expected this, he told himself. There was no reason to feel as if a cold wind were blowing down his spine, as if it had really taken him by surprise that Montague had tried to assassinate him. He had known the other boy was a Death Eater.

“What was your purpose in coming here today?” he asked.

This time, Montague fought to hold the answer back, but it emerged anyway. “To kill you if I could,” he said. “Our Lord is so weak that I wanted vengeance.”

“So you didn’t come at Voldemort’s command?”

“No,” Montague grunted, biting his own tongue as he struggled. “I’m supposed to be out recruiting other Death Eaters. Most of the Death Eaters are.”

Harry smiled. He knew it wasn’t a pleasant smile. “I suspect we’ll treat you a damn sight better than Voldemort will for trying this and failing,” he muttered. “Was your plan really just to come up and try the Killing Curse on me?”

“Yes,” said Montague, his eyes on the ground now. Harry didn’t think he was unable to meet his victim’s gaze. It was Snape’s that seemed to disturb him. “I thought if I could get close enough, I had at least a chance. And there’s no saying that you can resist the Killing Curse a second time.” He did glare at Harry then, as if challenging him to say that he could.

Harry shrugged, and looked at Snape. “Can you think of other questions to ask him before I turn him over to the Ministry?”

“Are there any other Death Eaters here today?” Snape’s voice was low and merciless.

Montague sneered, looking, for no reason Harry could fathom, triumphant. “Yes.”

Harry understood a moment later. Of course, there were other Death Eaters here today, or those who had once been Death Eaters: Peter, Regulus, Lucius, Adalrico, Hawthorn, and Snape.

But Snape swung around, drawing his wand as he moved, using his bad leg as a pivot. His voice was equally low and merciless as
he cast the spell, and Harry could feel his magic surging up behind the incantation, to insure it touched everyone in sight.

“Abscindo manulaes laevaes!”

Every robe in sight lost its left sleeve. Harry could hear cries of outrage, and sighed. Of course, some of his new allies, touchy already, would consider this the ultimate insult, to be suspected of following Voldemort when Harry had invited them to a peaceful gathering and made them swear an oath not to use magic except in self-defense.

Harry could see people looking at their neighbors’ bare left arms as if expecting a revelation. He shook his head when long moments passed and there was no reaction more extreme than some of their watchers flinching at the sight of Snape’s bared Dark Mark. “I think we should—”

A hoarse cry sounded abruptly behind them. Harry whipped around, and saw Mortimer Belville dragging someone forward. He cast the other wizard on the ground in front of Harry with a triumphant shout that was almost a bark.

The man was Edward Burke, and he had one hand on his left arm, trying to cover something up. Harry narrowed his eyes when he saw the curve of the black snake and skull sticking out from under his fingers, and his heart gave a single, harsh jump.

“Did you betray us to Voldemort during the Woodhouse battle?” he whispered.

“You know nothing,” Burke hissed, his eyes wild. He tried to back up, and failed as Belville’s wand poked him in the back. The next moment, he’d whirled around and snapped at Belville, “Yes, I was a traitor, if you want to call it that, and he helped me!”

Harry looked at Belville. He raised one eyebrow and turned his left arm towards Harry, showing him the unmarked flesh.

“You did!” spat Burke. “You did, you bastard! You told me that you were going to be Marked!”

Belville gave a short, helpless laugh and shook his head. “I was joking, Burke. I thought we were having a drinking and complaining session about Potter, back when he was still Potter, yes? And here I find out that you took me seriously.” He clasped one hand to his face. “My apologies, Harry,” he added, from between his fingers. “I never thought he was serious, or I would have suggested that you look for the Mark on his arm sooner.”

Burke uttered a short, wordless scream and tried to climb from the ground to attack him, but Snape’s wand flicked, and he was still. In a Body-Bind, Harry thought, until he squinted, and saw Burke twitching with small, swift jolts of pain traveling through him.

“Sir!” he hissed at his guardian.

Snape converted the spell to an ordinary Body-Bind without a word, but the expression on his face was fixed, and he never took his eyes off Burke. Harry sighed and stared at his ally for a moment. He could guess why the old wizard had done this, but it would be good to have confirmation.

“Why?” he asked, and gestured for Snape to relax the spell on his jaw.

Burke was more than anxious to tell him, it seemed, perhaps because his cover had been blown and this was the only chance to air his grievances he would ever have. “Because you’re tainting the Black bloodline,” he said, staring at Harry as if he could bore holes in him with his eyes. “Because you’re going to bring Mudbloods into our world and this alliance, and you act as if you don’t understand what a—a blasphemy that is! Because you just had to resurrect the Black heir, and then become his heir! Because you’re going to corrupt us and tear us, rend us and shred us, and cause our deaths at the hands of the Muggles!” His hands twitched as if he could break the Body-Bind and grope at the air. “At least His Lordship has the right idea about keeping our worlds separate! I bear his Mark with pride, and he was good enough to accept me, even though two heirs of my bloodline betrayed him and should have tainted it in his eyes!”

Harry concealed a sigh. Perhaps he should have thought twice about becoming Black heir, but that wouldn’t have stopped him from bringing Regulus back, and he had had no idea that Burke felt this deeply about Harry’s becoming heir. “And that was really all of it?” he asked softly.

“I thought I’d give you a chance to prove that you respected me,” said Burke. He spoke so violently that spit flew with his words, and Belville moved a step away to stop the saliva from getting on his robes, face twisting in disgust. “I made contributions to the meetings. But you ignored them, and you never looked at me for more than a few seconds. You overlooked me, in your eagerness
to let your pet Mudbloods and werewolves and Light wizards have a say. I refused the Dark Mark, at first. I didn’t tell my Lord everything. I wanted to keep my options open. It was a test. And you proved that you didn’t care. You granted my relatives more respect than you ever granted me.”

Harry controlled his breathing with an effort. Burke’s confession opened its own set of problems to him. He could feel eyes boring into him, resting on him. And no matter what he did, someone would account it the wrong decision.

If he drained Burke of his magic, it would frighten some of the people here. If he killed him, it would frighten them even more badly, and he could wind up being charged with murder by the Ministry. Dosing Montague with Veritaserum was pushing as it was. If he simply turned Montague and Burke over to the Ministry, then some people would think he was too lenient.

So, since he could not please everyone, he might as well please himself.

“Mr. Rhangnara,” he called, raising his voice.

Thomas hurried through the crowd a moment later, his face flushed with something that might have been excitement. He was such an optimist that Harry could see him treating this as an opportunity for observing traitors as a sub-species of wizards. “Yes, Harry?” he asked breathlessly.

“Would your wife be willing to take charge of Montague and Burke?” Harry asked. Priscilla Burke wasn’t here; since she was the Head Auror, attending this meeting might have sent the signal to Scrimgeour that she had greater allegiance to Harry than to him. But she had proved useful after the Woodhouse battle, taking charge of the captured Death Eaters after Harry and his allies had left. She might prove useful now.

Thomas beamed. “She would like nothing better. I’ll Apparate with them to the Ministry, if you’d like.”

Harry nodded. “I’ll give you their wands.” A flick of his hand sealed Montague’s and Burke’s jaws again. “If they need additional proof of their crimes—though the Dark Marks should be enough, really—then I can provide that.”

“It sounds like enough to start with,” said Thomas, and smiled at the two Death Eaters. It wasn’t a pleasant smile. Harry shook his head as Thomas floated the bound Burke into the air. He wasn’t going to be as easy with them as Harry had thought. Well, he had saved the man’s children from Durmstrang. Perhaps he was less sympathetic to Harry’s enemies as a consequence.

He turned back to the people staring at him, some of them clutching at their ruined robes. Belville was examining his missing left sleeve with a mournful air.

“I use justice when I can,” he said, raising his voice again. “I won’t kill them, because they haven’t hurt me, though not for lack of trying.” His mind flashed back to Fergus Opalline, who had died in the attack on Woodhouse, and he wondered if Paton would claim justice on Burke for that. There was no direct proof that Burke’s information had led to Fergus’s death yet, though. “I do try to offer justice, and not vengeance, to my enemies. I try not to act hastily.” He took a deep breath and met pair after pair of eyes.

“That doesn’t mean I won’t strike quickly if you battle me, or come after someone under my protection.”

Reluctantly, he dropped the barriers on his magic for the first time. Most people here would have been able to feel that he was powerful, but not how much; Harry had been holding back so as not to intimidate them into allying with him. But now, it was necessary to show strength, so he would counter any unfortunate perceptions that mercy was weakness.

The chatter went silent as waves of magic washed through the tent. Harry blinked as he saw the walls of the tent briefly start to lose their form, and stabilized them. Then he shook his head when he saw how many of the watching eyes had gone wide.

“I don’t enjoy having to do that,” he said quietly, and raised his barriers, and went off to be by himself for a while, and think.

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Draco spoke his name quietly. The last thing he wanted to do was startle a jumpy Lord-level wizard who was brooding on what he would consider his latest failure.

“Harry?”

Harry turned his head and nodded, which Draco took as permission to approach more closely. He sat down next to Harry, who’d
Draco could see lights coming from *Lumos* spells cast inside the tent, and the tent’s walls themselves, which glowed softly where golden streaks marked the deep green cloth. A softer radiance seemed to shine from inside the Antipodean Opaleye, who was curled, a glowing diamond heap, not far from the stage.

“Why did you leave?” Draco asked at last, even though he thought he knew. At least it would get Harry talking. He’d sat for ten minutes in silence already, and it was getting on Draco’s nerves.

Harry shrugged. “Thinking on what I could have done differently,” he said. “I’m not good company when I’m like that. And, well, all anyone would have wanted to talk about were Burke and Montague. I didn’t want to discuss them.”

Draco snorted. *I know why he thinks like this, but honestly, it’s ridiculous. Of course they would want to talk about it, Harry! One of them just tried to kill you, and the other admitted to being a traitor to your cause.***

Harry shrugged again. Draco stifled the impulse to hit him, or to argue that Harry should have killed Burke and Montague instead of letting them go to the Ministry. There were people here who would be horrified that Harry had killed in cold blood, and some of them might be wizards Harry would need in the future. And Harry wasn’t the kind of person to respond to lethal force with lethal force, more was the pity, or he could have slain Montague in the moments after he cast the Killing Curse—Draco would have done that—and then they could have searched his body and found the Dark Mark. Draco supposed the information they’d acquired from him was valuable, but he’d be dead.

*And Burke would still be hidden.*

Draco stifled a sigh this time. Perhaps there wasn’t an answer for that, after all.

“Well,” he said, forcing lightness into his voice. “I didn’t come to talk about them.”

Some of the tension melted from Harry’s shoulders. “About what, then?”

Draco snorted. “Oh, you know very well, Harry,” he said. “You accepted the courting ritual in public today. You kissed me in public. You acted as though we were acknowledged partners already, which I didn’t have any idea you were thinking about.” He felt the exhilaration that had gripped his heart like claws then, along with the exasperation. He would have enjoyed a moment like this in private beforehand. Harry could have told him what he planned, and Draco would have still played the part of stunned and thrilled boyfriend to perfection. “Why?”

Harry turned to face him. “Because I did want other people to see that you’re important to me, Draco,” he said. “Because I want anyone who thinks to offer me marriage or joining to see that I’m already claimed.” Draco was fairly sure he would have gibbered if he opened his mouth then, so he kept it shut. “Because, just maybe,” Harry added, a faint smile playing around the corners of his lips, “you looked so fetching in your dark blue robes that I couldn’t resist.”

“Prat,” said Draco, but without much heat. “You planned that.”

Harry nodded.

“But it wasn’t just a political stunt?” Draco pursued. “You *do* mean to accept my courting when it starts on Walpurgis Night?”

Harry blinked, then hissed, “Idiot! Would I do something like that if I didn’t mean it? You know me better than that!” He shoved Draco’s shoulder, hard enough that Draco could tell there was genuine anger behind the motion.

Draco reached out and caught both his hand and his left wrist. “That was all I wanted to know,” he murmured. “I *did* think that, Harry, but when you avoided me all afternoon—”

“I *did not* avoid you all afternoon! Other people got in my way all evening and wanted to talk about other things—”

“But now we’re alone,” Draco said, pitching his voice deliberately low, “and other people aren’t here to talk about other things. So, Harry.” He leaned closer. “When joined partners and marriage partners are acknowledged, they’re perfectly free to touch each other, you know, even when the ritual isn’t complete yet.”
Harry flushed. Draco marveled that he could have such courage in front of a crowd and not now. *Of course, there,* Draco thought, *he’s conscious of dozens of different pairs of eyes dividing consideration of him with other people. Here, I’m the only one focusing on him, and he does seem to have a problem with that.*

Draco didn’t intend to let that deter him, though, not when Harry hadn’t let other people deter him from the kiss in public today. He leaned nearer still, lifted a hand to slip it behind Harry’s neck, and brought him closer.

Harry initiated the kiss with an awkward lunge, as if to prove that he wasn’t afraid, but Draco was the first to open his mouth. Harry made a soft sound in the back of his throat, startled. He was relaxed enough to yield, however, and Draco gently pressed him backward onto the step they sat on, pooling Harry’s robes beneath him. Harry was far enough gone that he didn’t seem to notice Draco removing his robes, but he definitely noticed when Draco slid a hand beneath his shirt. Draco sat up and looked down at him. Harry, his breath rushing in a mixture of panic and pleasure, held his eyes.

“Well?” Draco whispered.

Harry swallowed. “Go ahead,” he said, and lifted his head and opened his mouth in invitation for another kiss.

Draco obliged, and obliged himself, at least, by unbuttoning Harry’s shirt. Harry was flushed all down his chest, too, making his skin an odd color in the yellow-green light of the *Lumos* charm from Draco’s wand. Draco moved his mouth gently from Harry’s mouth to his neck, and then down towards his chest.

Harry was gasping, and then he seemed to decide this wasn’t fair, and murmured a charm Draco couldn’t make out. In an instant, his own dark blue robes were folded neatly beside them, and then Harry was unbuttoning his shirt with fingers and magic made clumsy by haste and, Draco thought, looking into his clouded eyes again, by arousal.

Draco lay down gently beside Harry, and closed his eyes as Harry skated nervous fingers over his chest, and then leaned forward and placed something that was half-kiss, half-bite on his collarbone. Draco groaned, and had the thought, only relevant in another time and place, that his father would be mortified to hear that sound coming from a Malfoy. His impatience danced and strained at its leash, and he wanted to roll on top of Harry, uncomfortable as that might be with both of them on a stone step. Merlin, he felt so good, and the cold air had vanished, they might have been bathed in sunlight, and he reached for Harry again—

Harry shuddered, and gasped, and then gave a sharp cry that woke Draco from his daze at once, because that was a cry of fear, not of pleasure. “Harry?” he asked. He was talking to Harry’s shoulder, though, because he’d rolled away.

“I’m all right,” Harry whispered into his hand. “Really. Just—a little too far, that’s all.” His voice was shaky, but it gained steadiness quickly. He rolled over again and smiled at Draco. “I can see why you have a hard time waiting,” he murmured. “And yes, I’ll accept the courting ritual on Walpurgis Night, and—and everything that comes with it.” He lifted his chin as if daring his mother to appear out of the night and tell him that no, he couldn’t have this.

Draco’s body boiled and churned with impatience and pleasure, and he wished that Lily Potter was there, too, so he could kill her for having trained Harry the way she had. But they had come further this time before Harry felt too good to continue. He’d have what he wanted, they’d have what they wanted, sooner or later.

He was about to say something like that when a strange noise erupted from beside him. He raised his eyebrows. “What’s that?”

“Um,” said Harry. “While I was talking to other people about other things, I might possibly have forgotten to eat anything.” His stomach rumbled again, to confirm this.

Draco was relieved to have an excuse to claim Harry was a prat, an absolute idiot, and needed a minder almost as much as he needed a boyfriend, while they both put on their shirts and their robes again. It slid him past the moment when he had the instinct to just watch Harry, and his flushed cheeks, and his hair which was sticking in several directions, and grin like a fool.

*I’m not a fool, I’m a Malfoy. But I think I can be excused, just this once. Harry is going to join with me, and share a bed with me. The second sooner than the first, in fact. That bit of advice about waiting until the joining ritual is complete is sheer and utter nonsense, and Malfoys don’t need to listen to it.*
Chapter Seventy-Three: The Teeth of the Past

Harry wasn’t surprised to wake the next morning and find half the tents dismantled. Enough wizards and witches had spoken to him yesterday as should leave them in no doubt of his politics. Some were still lingering in hopes they could change their minds or his, but most of the hopeless cases were gone now.

That still left almost three hundred people in the valley, though. Harry shook his head, smiling. He wondered how many of them actually meant to swear an alliance with him, and how many were hoping they could drag him into a compromise of some kind.

“Harry! You shouldn’t be out here alone!”

Harry turned, startled, and then laughed as he saw his brother emerging, hair mussed with sleep, from his golden-white tent, which Harry was passing on his way towards the Malfoy one. “Connor! I don’t think anyone else is going to attack me, not after the way I handled Montague.”

Connor tried to respond, but wound up yawning. “Wait here,” he said, ducking into the tent again. “I’ll get you an escort. Fred and George are already awake.”

Harry rolled his eyes at the thought of actually taking two Weasleys to breakfast with the Malfoys, but Connor was insistent, and Fred and George would only follow if Harry didn’t walk beside them. Harry had no desire to have the twins and their inventions chasing him, perhaps calling his name in various embarrassing ways. An escort would work.

Fred and George tumbled out a few moments later, yawning so widely that Harry started to think Connor’s idea of them being awake was exaggerated. But they recovered in a moment, and focused on him with identical grins that reminded Harry of the way cats looked at mice—if cats baited mice with the smell of cheese and sent them back to lure out the rest of the nest.

“Where are we going to have breakfast, O Great and Grand Lord of Light and Dark?” the one Harry thought was George asked.

Harry sighed. “With the Malfoys. But you don’t have to stay with me. You can just take me to the tent, and—”

“Oh, no,” said the other twin, probably Fred. “After all, we’re the brothers of the best friend of your brother, and Draco’s your consort now.” The other twin sniggered. “That makes the Malfoys practically our in-laws,” Fred finished innocently, and Harry choked.

“Please don’t mention that in front of them,” he begged when he’d recovered his breath.

“We won’t,” George agreed. “We’ll save it—”

“For the joining,” said Fred, looking delighted. “Then we can photograph them as they—”

“Choke on the cake,” George finished, nodding emphatically. “Can you imagine it, Fred?” The twins exchanged dreamy smiles. Harry bit down on the instinct to protest. The sooner this started, the sooner it would be over with. “Come on, then,” he said in resignation, and led the way towards the Malfoy tent. It was a beautiful morning, the sun blazing off the dew that coated the grass and mud, but he no longer took as much cheer in that as he had a few moments ago.

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Lucius Malfoy had always disliked Weasleys.

It had to do with their pure blood and their refusal to have any standards. It had to do with personal insults that Arthur Weasley had offered him. It had to do with a feud that extended backwards between their two families into decades where Weasleys had certainly committed crimes and Malfoys might, just might, have retaliated with the good taste and breeding they had always possessed.

And now Harry had brought two Weasleys to breakfast.

Lucius eyed them warily as he sipped his tea. The two boys were lanky as ropes, and exactly identical, and even though they had done nothing so far but grin, Draco and Harry were both flinching as if they expected more every moment. Narcissa had taken
one look at the twins and absented herself from breakfast, claiming that she had a headache which only walking about in mud would cure. Lucius had offered to escort her, but had been reminded that the owner of the tent should remain to offer hospitality to his guests. Implicit in Narcissa’s reminder was the one that they would probably lose the tent if they left two Weasleys alone in it with only Harry and Draco for company.

Lucius sneered. Probably return to find it Transfigured into a pile of Galleons. Merlin knows the Weasleys need the money.

“Mr. Malfoy.”

Now one of them was addressing him. Lucius tightened his grip on his teacup and wished he could pretend to be oblivious, as if he read the Daily Prophet for his own edification. But when the same voice repeated his name, he concealed a sigh and lowered the teacup to the table. He had altered the table’s composition from stone to wood when he saw the visitors. There was no reason to treat the Weasleys with a higher standard than they were accustomed to.

“Yes?” he snapped at the twin. The boy grinned at him. There really didn’t seem to be much of Arthur in him, Lucius had to admit, but he had red hair, and freckles, and the Weasley air of looking at the world as if it were an enormous gift to be unwrapped, instead of a maze to be understood and walked through. That was enough.

“Allow me to offer you our congratulations on the joining of your son and Harry,” said the boy pompously. “We have a number of products that you might be interested in—“

“Oh, Merlin, George, not here,” Lucius heard Harry say, with the smallest of groans in his voice.

Lucius felt his muscles grow tight, to the point of snapping. He knew his voice had dropped onto a glacial level when he said, “I beg your pardon?” and felt the table shiver with the force of his leashed magic.

“A number of products to make the eventual joining more poetic,” the Weasley said, and gave him another of those idiotic grins. “We have a prototype here. Fred?” He nodded to his brother, while Lucius was meditating on what sort of pureblood family would give their children such prosaic names, and the other pulled a small, silk-wrapped package from his robe pocket.

“Imagine,” said the other twin, in a hushed voice, “this beauty proclaiming the joining ritual to all and sundry, when you decide to have it!” Then he whipped the silk off, and tapped the object.

Lucius started hard at it. It appeared to be a green box ornamented with golden curlicues—garish, of course, the way he would expect of something the Weasleys thought a treasure, but otherwise ordinary. Harry and Draco were both edging away from it as if the boy held a snake, however.

No, Lucius thought, as if the boy held a piece of the Dark Lord. Harry would not fear any snake, no matter how venomous, and Lucius could have spoken to one as well.

“Please do the honors, Mr. Malfoy,” said the Weasley, and extended the box towards him with a little bow.

Harry hissed, “Fred, no!” and shook his head at Lucius. Fred turned a wounded, innocent look on Harry.

“Now, Harry, I never believed those rumors about the Malfoys being a pack of slimy cowards,” he said. “Your consort does a good enough job of protecting you in school. I think Mr. Malfoy deserves a chance to show that he’s just as brave as his son.”

Lucius knew there was no way he would get out of this without embarrassing himself. At least, if he accepted the box, it would only be embarrassment that they were forcing upon him. If he walked away, then he would be committing the sin of abandoning guests in his tent without just cause to dismiss them. With a smile that hid how tightly his teeth were clenched, he reached out and opened the box.

A puff of colored light and smoke rose into his face. Lucius blinked, and then looked around. He could see no obvious effect of the box. Then he caught sight of Draco staring at him in horror, and looked down at himself.

His robes were a brilliant, garish green, like a Gryffindor maniac’s idea of what the Slytherin colors should be. Red lettering marched along it, making him look like a bloody Christmas tree. The lettering spelled out Happy joining, Harry and Draco! and sometimes smoked and sometimes steamed, to draw further attention to itself. The robes now had pink, gleaming lights fastened at the cuff, and they blinked and beeped happily, now and then imitating the sound of faint cheers.
Even through his fury, Lucius had to admire the amount of magical skill that must have gone into developing this trick. It wouldn’t have been easy to fold so many spells into such a small container, much less insure they interacted without influencing each other into unfortunate effects, or activated when the box opened and not before. But that was through his fury.

He looked up in time to catch the flash of a camera. Then the Weasleys were out through the entrance of the tent, laughing all the way, and Harry was sitting there with an absolutely mortified look on his face. Draco didn’t look as if he knew whether to sit there in answering embarrassment or to chase the Weasels with his wand held out and avenge the honor of his family.

Lucius managed to control his impulse to shout. He put the box back on the table, though he closed it first, hoping that might remove the spells from his robes. It did no such thing. He smiled tightly at Harry.

“How…interesting,” he said.

Harry winced and stared at him through his fingers. “I’m sorry, sir,” he murmured. “I thought they could behave themselves. I hoped they wouldn’t insist on staying for breakfast, or offering you one of their products, but…” He shrugged helplessly, as if to point out that what he hadn’t wanted had happened, which Lucius knew perfectly well. One of his robe cuffs beeped, to emphasize the point.

“I understand that you were the one who gave them the thousand Galleons they would need to start their business?” Lucius asked, as if only mildly interested. When Harry nodded, he added, “Can I ask why?”

“But they have the talent and determination to do what they want,” said Harry, blinking at him. “And they’re magical geniuses, sir. They really are. They’ve already created amazing effects with a limited amount of money. I thought they might become even more amazing if they had the fortune to do what they wanted. It could prevent them from becoming bitter, and turning their pranks into jokes of true malice because they didn’t have any better outlet for their emotions?”

“And, of course, you weren’t thinking at all about what weapons they might make for us in battle,” Lucius said softly.

Harry swallowed. “That wasn’t at the top of my mind, sir.”

But it was under the surface. I think. Lucius found comfort in thinking of his future son-in-law this way. Really, it was all very well to acquire a reputation as a philanthropist—sometimes it was one of the most powerful political tools one could wield in the Ministry—but being one was a different matter. Harry would have to learn that there were better things to spend the fortune on.

And he would have to learn that there were better means of vengeance than the immediate strike that both Harry and the Weasleys seemed to have expected Lucius to launch. Lucius would wait, and watch, and see when the best opportunity to avenge the insult arose.

It would be one that both helped him and hurt the Weasleys, ideally. He had had no idea that those troublesome twins were so close to Harry, and it would be better to separate him from them as soon as possible.

“This is nothing magic cannot cure,” he said, soothingly, and that was true, though he might have to give these robes to his house elves and let them try their magic on them. “Now, finish your breakfast.”

Harry nodded, murmured another apology, and then turned back to do so. Draco slid a hand down his shoulder in comfort, and whispered something. Harry leaned into him so readily that any of Lucius’s fears about Harry’s acceptance of the joining as only a political stunt were allayed.

Now that he is so closely allied to us, we can do far more. Lucius felt his mouth curl into a vicious smile. Avenging ourselves on the Weasleys is only part of it. There are other families waiting for us to take our rightful place above them. I wonder if Harry will ever realize that, by declaring himself about to be joined and closing off paths with which other people might claim him, he has made himself an enemy of those families the Malfoys are enemies of?

He did not think Harry realized it. He believed that most of his would-be allies who had left the gathering had done so because their principles didn’t march with his. Lucius knew of at least three families, however, who had departed because they knew they would not be able to combat the Malfoy influence on Harry.

That is well for right now. When I die, then Harry will have to have more political competence, but I can guide him until then. It
would be confusing for him to try and absorb this right now.

With that comforting thought, Lucius felt equal to returning to his breakfast, even though Narcissa came in, looked at his changed robes, and declared that she had another headache.

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Harry ducked the sweep of a wing as the Opaleye settled the stones she’d been carrying into place. Then he finished Transfiguring the last of his own boulders, eyed the lines of the circle they’d drawn on the grass, and nodded.

The current of magic that ran through the Woodhouse valley had proven unexpectedly resistant to letting them put boulders from the valley’s sides together in a circular shape, even though it hadn’t cared when Harry, Regulus, and Peter assembled the stage and steps. After the third attempt, and the third time that the current tore the stone from his imagined “hands” and put it back where it belonged, Harry had given in and asked the dragon to assemble the boulders. The current appeared to accept the dragon as a beast to put up with, and while she flew back and forth with stones, it continued its tame circling.

She was done now, and they had a round table, with boulders placed around it which Harry had Transfigured into chairs. He had thought of draping family pennants over them, but for all he knew, he wouldn’t get a detail right and one of his allies would be insulted. If they wanted to mark their own seats, then they could do so.

The table was more than a hundred feet wide and more than twice that long. The dragon had been clever enough to put the boulders with their smoothest sides upright, so that it worked out as a tabletop. Harry had already selected his seat, which was on the southern side of the table, somewhere near the middle but not exactly. He wasn’t going to look as if he had a more important position than anyone else by taking the head, when the whole point of a round table in the first place was to give an impression of equality.

“Harry.”

Harry turned towards Acies, who was standing beside him with no sign of how she’d arrived. That was all right; Harry was almost used to her sudden appearances and disappearances by now. “Yes, ma’am?” he murmured.

Acies looked up at the Opaleye, as if communing with her, and didn’t respond for a long moment. Then she said, “You are on an anvil. The hammer is about to descend upon you again.”

Harry blinked. “I do consider the meeting a forging,” he said. “But I consider most experiences in my life a forging.” He wondered, sometimes, what ultimate end most of those experiences were shaping him for: facing Voldemort, accomplishing his vates task, or something altogether different. Then he scolded himself for thinking that the world turned around him like that. Prophecy or not, he didn’t want to weave a narrative of his life in which destiny was the primary focus. Perhaps the experiences shaped him simply for living. That would make the most sense.

“And the harder they temper you, the less likely you are to break,” said Acies, pulling his gaze back to her. “But this one will fall as a hard blow. Remember that you cannot heal everything, and that when the blades of others’ lives shatter, they cannot always be repaired.” She turned and walked away, her cloak swishing along the grass. Harry stood and watched her go.

She had confirmed for him already that a prophecy might come true three times, that there was no mystical rule against it—though none that said it could happen, either. She had recited that prophecy about the storms again when Harry asked her, and strengthened Harry’s conviction that he was right, that a storm of Light would descend on Midsummer Day, and at Hogwarts. Two storms for the year, the prophecy said, and Midsummer Day marked halfway around the year from Midwinter and the storm of the wild Dark.

And a year since the day Voldemort and Bellatrix had taken his hand.

Harry winced as a sharp twinge of phantom pain jolted up his left wrist, then resolved not to let it bother him. The important thing was setting up the trap so that it would take Voldemort, and, before that, getting through this meeting.

And if a hammer would fall on the anvil this time…

Well. That was what would happen.
Harry turned towards the Opaleye, who had landed next to the table and cocked her head at him, and nodded his approval of the table’s construction. As if that had been a signal, she lowered her head and laid it down next to him. Harry let her stare at him, not knowing what else she wanted.

*Perhaps that’s a good thing. I don’t want to get so confident that I forget there are forces in the world greater than I am. For a moment, his hand brushed against the stone impregnated with the foul magic, still stored in a robe pocket. Nor absorb so much magic that I think magic is the end-all and be-all of someone’s strength.*

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Augustus Starrise stretched luxuriously as he stepped out of his tent. His staff of white oak was in his hand, the bands of gold catching the sunlight and sparking it back, and he had a head full of good dreams.

Last night, he had seen and spoken with Alba for a long time in his dreams. She had reassured him that she loved him, and that he had not taken too long to find her murderers. That had reassured Augustus. Dedicated as he was to his justice quest, he could not help feeling like a failure that it had lasted so long.

He strode rapidly through the grass in the direction of the immense stone table Harry had set up, in deliberate echo of another stone table. Augustus found the gesture amusing, but not as amusing as the fact that the Apollonis tent was missing from its place. It appeared that Cupressus hadn’t been able to accept Harry’s ultimatum, and had taken his leave.

He listened to threads of conversation as he wandered in circles, yawning and touching his staff now and then as if he weren’t quite awake. The sense of his sister’s spirit accompanying him hadn’t faded yet, and it mingled with the opinions that people didn’t know he overheard. Augustus found the various reactions to Harry’s little speech yesterday interesting.

“—don’t really think that he has the right to tell us what to do with our house elves,” said one stuffy voice.

“Then why are you still here?” countered the other, and the first person didn’t seem to have an answer to that. Augustus smiled, though he kept his eyes straight ahead. In time, he thought that most of the wizards and witches who had decided to remain past that initial statement of revolution would yield to Harry’s demands. Keeping house elves was a luxury, now, not a need; there were plenty of Muggleborns and even poorer pureblood families who did without them. That didn’t mean Augustus was eager to give up his own, but next to what Harry could offer his allies, it was not sensible to continue clinging to outmoded custom.

“Think that he’ll stay with the Malfoy boy?” Flora Dawnborn was asking her sister Fauna, one of the most inveterate matchmakers in wizarding Britain.

“Only until someone better comes along,” Fauna said with a sharp nod of her head. “He said it himself. The Malfoy boy’s the first one who snared his attention, that’s all, the first friend he ever had. Bonds like that last only until a deeper and more mature love comes along and absorbs a young man’s passion. I think Proteus might be perfect for him, don’t you?” she added.

Augustus had to rack his brain for a moment before he remembered Proteus Dawnborn. Then he snorted. A puffed-up little Light wizard, that one, even worse than the Malfoy heir, with only his allegiance to recommend him. Fauna was mad to think he stood a chance of capturing Harry’s interest.

*Of course, the ritual he referred to, the one that begins Walpurgis Night, is a three-year dance, if I remember correctly. That means that someone else might interrupt it before it finishes, and snare Harry’s attention before the crucial Halloween when he’ll be unable to back out of it…hmmm.*

Much as he tried to think of a relative of his who would snare Harry, however, Augustus couldn’t come up with a candidate. Pharos was to be married soon, and his brother’s children were all too young—and girls besides, which might not be a barrier, but, on the other hand, might be. Certainly Tybalt had refused to consider any of his cousins, even when Augustus had pleaded political expediency. Some wizards and witches were like that, seeing the sex before the person. Augustus couldn’t understand the attitude himself, but then, he didn’t need to understand it, just be aware of it and manipulate it—or, in Tybalt’s case, give up in disgust when he threw himself away on a Muggleborn, not even an *eligible* young man.

“Paul won’t like it,” a witch he knew only slightly was telling a friend of hers.

“Really?” Her friend leaned nearer, her voice a bit breathless, and Augustus took the opportunity to pretend to search for something he’d dropped in the grass, so that he’d have an excuse to listen.
“Really,” confirmed the witch, with a nod. “After all, if Lord Harry’s going after centaurs and house elves and dragons this year, who’s to say that he won’t be going after Granians the next? Paul and the other breeders won’t be pleased, oh no, if His Lordship wants them to free their stock instead of breeding and selling.”

“I hadn’t considered the economic aspect of this, I must admit,” her friend said, looking disturbed.

Augustus frowned as he moved on. He knew Paul, at least if he was Paul Fredericks, breeder of the fastest Granian flying horses in Britain. He was part of a more than slightly fanatical political group called Shield of the Granian, which had leaned on the Ministry in the past to change laws that would have affected their breeders. They had money and power backing them. Harry should think twice before he went up against them, or encouraged them to go up against him.

Of course, he won’t. Say what you want about our young Lord, but he’s more than dedicated to his cause.

Augustus moved on, taking in reactions and a cup of hot tea that one of his house elves, when summoned, brought him. Most of the reactions he heard were positive, but cautious. Harry was refusing to play by too many rules for these wizards and witches to feel entirely comfortable with him. He wouldn’t claim the title of Lord. He wouldn’t use the Black fortune, at least so far, for bribery and the more subtle gifts that bought future favors. He had joined himself to the Malfoy family, but had reached out to Light wizards. And now this, his determination to haul the wizarding world into revolution whether it wanted it or not.

Augustus shook his head as he assumed a seat at the table. He is making this harder than it needs to be. If he learned to compromise, he might achieve more of what he wants.

It was not long before the other allies who had chosen to stay assembled, many of them casting a glamour of their family flag on the back of their chairs. Harry had one of only two blank seats in the midst of them, by the time he showed up. He had his scowling guardian, Severus Snape, on one side, who refused to cast the glamour he was entitled to; Augustus knew his mother had been a witch of the once-powerful Prince line. The other side was thick with Malfoys and their blue-gray. On the far side of Snape sat the resurrected Black, Regulus. He had tried to cast a glamour of the Black crest on the back of Harry’s chair, but the moment Harry appeared and looked at it, it vanished.

Harry leaned forward and cast whatever charm it was that made his voice appear to sound directly in one’s ears. Augustus shook his head. It was an effective political tool, in one way, but in another, it promised an intimacy, a personal touch to the politics, that Augustus doubted Harry would be able to sustain.

“Thank you for coming,” said Harry. “Yesterday was a general introduction to my purposes and the purposes of this alliance, which I thank you for enduring, as I know the recitation was redundant for those who’ve paid attention to me.” A chuckle moved up and down the table. “Today, I have a favor to ask of the Light families who have linchpins in the north of England.” And he turned his eyes on Augustus, and the Dawnborns, and the Griffinsnest representatives, and Laura Gloryflower.

Augustus caught his breath in surprise. Can he mean to ask us to give up our linchpins? Surely he would not be that bold.

He was distracted for a moment as his staff gave a spark. But when he glanced at it, his sister had nothing to say to him as yet. Augustus could feel her spirit searching the table, however. He leaned back in his chair and tried to relax.

“The linchpins are the stakes in a web that binds the northern goblins,” said Harry bluntly. “It was done to make them unable to hurt wizards, so far as I can determine, and also to stop some land that wizards valued from sliding into the sea. There are two ways I know of that the web can be removed. One is to sacrifice enough magic to take the place of the linchpins in the web.” For some reason, his hand brushed his robe pocket. Augustus repressed the temptation to snort. If he thinks he can channel enough magic through his wand for that to happen, he should think again. “Another is to change the nature of the inheritance, so that the linchpins are no longer linchpins and each Light family inheritance is bound to one person, as happens in some Dark families, including the Blacks. My brother has already allowed this to be done.”

Pandemonium answered him. Augustus leaned back in his chair, distracted both by the way that the golden band at the end of his staff sparkled and by the fact that he thought he should say nothing. Of course Harry’s second suggestion was ridiculous; the linchpins were precious, a matter of pride and a family’s legacy, and perhaps only someone like Connor Potter, a half-blood reared away from his ancestors’ traditions, could consider it seriously. But the first might have possibilities, merit. Augustus had no particular investment in the slavery of the northern goblins, as long as Harry could persuade them not to attack the wizards.

The southern goblins are a different matter, but we would know if they were free. They would have attacked the wizarding world
As he had expected would happen, one voice emerged, calmly, from the center of the maelstrom. That was Laura Gloryflower’s. The *puellaris* witch had a commanding presence when she chose to exert it, and she was on her feet now, her face set and a golden aura playing around her. Augustus was close enough to smell the thick, musky scent that came from her when she was on the edge of transforming into a lioness.

“Harry,” she told the fifteen-year-old they were here, nominally at least, to follow, “tell us why you think we should give up our heritage.”

Harry smiled. “Because you would not be giving up your heritage,” he said. “I could spare your houses, your lands, and all the priceless treasures inside your houses. The only thing that would change is that your houses would no longer have their connection to the earth.”

“But that makes them linchpins,” said Laura intently.

Harry leaned back in his seat and raised his eyebrows. “I was under the impression that what made them linchpins was their link to the moods of the current family leader, and the fact that if the house is attacked by an enemy, it will drain strength for its wards from the family.”

“That is true.” Laura settled her hands in front of her, a gesture that Augustus recognized of old. She was trying to keep herself from fussing with her robes. She lowered her voice, too. “But the link is grounded in the earth. That is what, as you pointed out, keeps the earth from sliding into the sea. How do you propose to change the nature of that link and yet keep them linchpins?”

“By linking the wards to the sacrificed magic,” said Harry, just as quietly. “Some power will be given to maintain the linchpins as they are, but with their wards flowing into pure magic instead of the earth. The rest will go to replace the linchpins in the northern goblins’ web. Then, when the goblins pull, the web will shred without disturbing your estates.” He cocked his head. “The goblins have already agreed to this. I need your permission, and your permission only, to change the anchor of the wards. Then they shall be free.”

“And the goblins really won’t attack the northern families?” Laura asked. Her face was so stern that Augustus hoped no one tried to interrupt her. The last thing they needed right now was a lioness springing on someone who’d insulted her or Harry.

“They swore so, by the most sacred oaths they have,” said Harry. “They used to do mining and minting for our ancestors, but most of those tasks have been taken over by the southern goblins. All the web does now is assist the paranoia of our ancestors, and prevent the goblins from practicing some of their most sacred rites. With it gone, the only difference you’ll notice is that any goblins you encounter might be a bit less deferential than normal. I think you can live with that,” he added, and his voice was smeared with an emotion only partly contempt.

“I can live with it,” said Laura. “I do not know about everyone else.” She sat down, yielding the table to members of other northern families.

Augustus spoke first, partly because the sparking of his staff had died for the moment and partly because even Harry’s preferred solution had something wrong with it. “It sounds as though unbinding this web will take an enormous amount of power.”

Harry nodded. “It will.”

“And where will you get that much magic?” Augustus eyed the boy, wondering if his sacrificial instincts were really so strong that he’d leave himself a Squib for the sake of some goblins. Perhaps he *did* think that others would follow him even if he were powerless, which indicated a lack of basic understanding about the way the wizarding world and its politics worked.

Harry raised his eyebrows, and a dark smile touched the corners of his mouth. “You forget I’m an *absorbere*, sir,” he said. “I can gather in that much magic, and channel it for my purposes. Both my gift and my will are strong enough.”

Augustus refused to shiver. Being reminded so suddenly that the teenager sitting across from him was a magic-eater did shock him a bit, but he would just have to get used to it. “I thought that you would not take magic unless it was willingly yielded,” he said.

“There are some of my enemies who’ve given up their immunity to my dislike of eating magic,” said Harry. “Voldemort, for one.
And I have other sources that I haven’t told anyone about.” That made the Malfoys start and glance at him sharply. Harry didn’t appear to notice. “I can accomplish this, sir, you don’t need to worry about that. But I need the linchpin families’ permission. Contrary to what some people might think, I do care about the opinions of my own species. I will do nothing without your permission.”

Augustus tapped his fingers on the table. Put like that, it seemed the greatest obstacle was that Harry wouldn’t be able to do this, that something would go wrong when he tried to replace the linchpins with the sacrificed magic in the goblins’ web. It was a large chance. On the other hand, Augustus didn’t know enough about such procedures to determine that something would go wrong, and to refuse because he didn’t trust Harry enough would be an insult.

He could see similar emotions at play on the faces of the witches and wizards beside him. Many of them owned several small estates that were linchpins. Come to think of it, Augustus couldn’t think of one linchpin-owning family that was missing. Some of them would have stayed because Starrise was Harry’s ally, but not all of them. Augustus wondered if that was good fortune, or conspiracy, or the combination of both that seemed to attend Harry.

Harry waited, looking calm and content and fearless. Laura Gloryflower spoke a few minutes later. “For my part, I accept, and will yield the Gloryflower linchpins to the change.”

Harry smiled at her. “Thank you, ma’am.” He glanced down the table, and waited some more.

One by one, other, minor families, some of their members looking at Augustus, gave their permission. Augustus waited in magnificent silence. He saw no reason to rush. He would look the more gracious for giving his permission after waiting so long.

At last, it came down to him and Flora Dawnborn. Augustus listened to her assent, and then jerked his head sharply sideways. His staff had vibrated in his hand, and now he could see a ghostly mist of gold and white forming above the end of it. He caught his breath.

Alba, sister, are you telling me the name of your murderer at last? Since his sister had died before the enchantments on the staff were complete, Augustus had had little hope of discovering one of the murderers until he was in his presence. But time and proximity had done their work at last. He could see an image of his sister’s face as it had looked in the year of her death forming above the staff, looking fretfully back and forth.

Then a hand of white light sprang from the image. Augustus followed the sweep of its fingers, feeling a deep, clear, strange inevitability overtake him.

The hand pointed straight at Adalrico Bulstrode.

Augustus felt the inevitability yield to savage gladness. The oath he had sworn not to use magic except in self-defense was gone from his mind. What mattered was that he finally, finally knew who one of his sister’s murderers was.

In a loud, deep voice, he began the incantation of the Caerimonia Inrevocabilis, the highest and sternest of the justice rituals. It would take Adalrico’s life, and his own, in payment. Augustus did not care. Other concerns melted and dropped away from him. He was no longer a part of the living world in any case, to worry about them.

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Harry heard the chant begin. Later, he could feel thankful that he was already looking towards Augustus’s section of the table. He saw the man rise to his feet, holding out his white oak staff banded with gold, his eyes focused on Adalrico.

Harry rose to his feet, his hand held out. “Augustus,” he said. “Mr. Starrise.”

Augustus gave no sign that he’d heard him. In fact, his chant was picking up speed, and Harry recognized it, now. There was no way he could allow that ritual to be completed, both because it would kill and because this was such a delicate time and place. A Light wizard killing both a Dark wizard and himself might be the boulder that shattered the alliance.

Harry shouted the word, so that everyone could hear him. “Silencio!”

Augustus’s voice ceased in an instant. The gathering power of the ritual wavered for a moment, then fell off and drained away. Harry stood in the center of a spreading pool of silence, as though his spell had been aimed at more people than just that one, and
felt Snape place a hand on his shoulder, Draco rise and touch his arm.

“Why, Mr. Starrise,” Harry asked, when he was certain he had everyone’s attention, “would you be trying to use a justice ritual on Mr. Bulstrode, a man I am certain has done you no harm, and against the oath you took that forbids offensive use of magic here?” A subtle gesture of his hand disrupted the silencing spell so Augustus could answer, though Harry stood ready to renew it in an instant if he tried to take up the justice ritual again.

Augustus didn’t try. His face was beatific, and he answered readily. “No harm? Is that what he told you, Harry? No, no. It is not so.” He laughed, and the laughter was not sane. “He was one of the Death Eaters who captured and tortured my sister Alba, so badly that when the Aurors rescued her, she hanged herself. I am claiming vengeance. It took me fourteen years to find him, but here he is at last. There is no law in the world that can keep me from laying my heart and Alba’s to rest.” He smiled at Harry. “I am sorry to abandon your alliance just as it is forming, my Lord. I would have liked to see what happened in its wake. But this is a higher duty, a greater. I am going to kill the murderer of my sister.”

“You have no proof,” said Harry softly, though he could feel his heart beating erratically. He had not yet dared to look at Adalrico.

“My sister helped me with the enchantments on my staff,” said Augustus. “She did not live to complete them, and thus it took them years of preparation and hours in the company of the murderer before she could locate him. But now she has. I trust Alba’s spirit, my Lord. And it makes sense, truly. Adalrico Bulstrode has long had a reputation as the most cruelly inventive of the Death Eaters. I should have suspected him before this.” He sighed, his voice longing. “But I did not want to condemn an innocent man to death.”

Harry took a deep breath and turned to face Adalrico. “Is this true, Mr. Bulstrode?” he asked.

One glance into Adalrico’s face told him it was. Adalrico was still, silent, his mouth clamped shut and the lines of his skin, crow’s feet and laughter lines and all, white. He stared at Augustus as if he were a creature come out of nightmare.

Then he met Harry’s eyes, and his face relaxed. “You know what the verdict was from the Wizengamot, Harry,” he said softly. “I was under the Imperius Curse, and not myself at the time, so I cannot be held responsible for what I did at Voldemort’s behest. And I cannot be tried twice for the same crime,” he added, just in case anyone had missed the point of his mentioning the Wizengamot.

“That does not matter,” said Augustus. Now he didn’t sound human, as if he were some masked spirit of justice come riding out of story. “I still claim justice. I know what he did. I shall have justice.”

Harry looked at Adalrico, and could think of nothing to say. He knew, if no one else there did, that Adalrico had been a willing Death Eater, as much in control of his own actions as Lucius was. And now he had no idea which was the greatest allegiance: to truth, to justice, to the family alliance he had sworn with the Bulstrodes, or to the fact that he’d tried to move on, put his allies’ crimes in the past, and accept that they had changed and become different people.

“I want to know who the other Death Eaters who helped him were, mind,” Augustus’s voice said, warm and distant. “I would like to know that. That might be worth staying alive for.”

Harry cocked his head at Adalrico, who answered in a clipped voice, “They died in Azkaban. All of them.”

“I suppose I can accept that,” said Augustus. “Since I am about to have justice on you, and you have not only lived, but never served a penance for your crimes.”

“I will not allow you to use the Caerimonia Inrevocabilis,” said Harry, certain of this, at least. “It breaks all the rules I have asked you to abide by, not only the oath you swore before the alliance meeting, but also the rules that prevent you from attacking someone else in the alliance.”

Augustus bowed to him and took his staff in his hands, moving it in a pattern Harry didn’t recognize. A moment later, he felt a bond he hadn’t known was there loosen, and Augustus said in a clear voice, “I formally resign from the alliance that I entered into with Harry, once called Potter. Let magic witness that this was done willingly on my part, and because of no fault on his.”

Harry ground his teeth. “Then you must leave Woodhouse,” he said. “I cannot permit—“
“Woodhouse is a place within the wizarding world, and it belongs to you as much as it belongs to anyone right now,” Augustus interrupted contemplatively. “But there is a place outside the wizarding world, outside law, outside anything but honor.” He faced Adalrico, and his voice gained depth like a stream flooded with snowmelt. “I call Adalrico Bulstrode to that place, in the name of Merlin, in the name of sea and stone and silver and gold. To that place, only honor will guide us, and from it, only blood will release us. If he refuses this call, may the consequences fall upon his head.”

Harry didn’t recognize that ritual, but Adalrico obviously did. His hands clenched in front of him, and then he said, “Far be it from me to refuse this call. I come through in honor, and will depart in blood. In the name of bronze and iron and fire and wind, in the name of Merlin, I answer Augustus Starrise.”

Augustus gave a wide, genuine smile, and inclined his head. “Tomorrow, then, Bulstrode,” he said softly, and turned away, striding rapidly from the table, with his cloak fluttering behind him.

Harry turned to Adalrico. “What does that mean?” he asked, without pause.

It was Elfrida who answered him, voice soft. “It means that my husband is called to a duel of honor,” she said. She cradled Marian against her with one arm, and her eyes were wide. “If he had refused it, his children would have become Squibs, and every Bulstrode born from now until the end of time would be a Squib, likewise. The duel is to the death.”

Harry gave a shudder. Adalrico was a savage, skilled fighter, and the inventiveness and cruelty that Augustus had accused him of would function to keep him alive. On the other hand, Augustus Starrise was a trained war wizard, and especially good at duels, from what Harry had heard, and ridden by vengeance.

And, tomorrow, one of them would die.

Harry closed his eyes.

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Chapter Seventy-Four: The High Cost of Vengeance

Millicent sat in silence with her father. Adalrico had asked Elfrida to take Marian outside and walk with her for a little while, although still within the protective wards of their tent. There was no telling whether Starrise might not try to strike at his enemy’s family before the duel. He’d have to use someone else to do it, but from what her father had said, Millicent thought that would be like him.

Adalrico had sent her mother outside five minutes ago, and still he hadn’t said anything. Millicent did her best to remain still, holding her breath and willing her heart to beat more slowly. All the while, she wondered why she was so affected. She had not expected her father to die of old age. He could easily have perished in one of the battles that Harry wanted him to fight, or at the hand of a Death Eater assassin who would start taking out Harry’s most valued allies. She should have expected something like this from around every corner, instead of feeling as if it had struck from overhead like a lightning bolt.

“Millicent.”

At last, he’s getting to it. Millicent sat up and fastened her eyes on her father’s face. Adalrico said nothing else for a long moment, but his fingers were moving now, tapping on his legs while he gazed into their bonfire with a faint frown on his face. It was more movement than he’d shown since sending Elfrida and Marian out. Millicent waited, as patient as she could make herself.

“I want you to remember,” said Adalrico, “our motto.”

“Duramus,” Millicent whispered. We endure. And the Bulstrodes did, lasting out the crises that diminished the power and fortune of many other pureblood families. They had never wanted to achieve the dizzy heights of ambition that the Malfoys aimed for. They wanted to remain alive and comfortable—rich, of course, and with people paying them respect, but without enemies staring them in the eye.

“If I die tomorrow,” said Adalrico, “you will become the head of our family, Millicent. I want you to hold firm to our motto in public. No tears. I want your face to be as hard as stone.”

Millicent nodded. “Do you have other instructions for me, father, in the event of your death?” she asked. Her tongue scarcely
moved in her mouth, feeling as if it, in turn, were made of stone.

“You may accept the hand of Pierre Delacour,” said Adalrico judiciously. “I have studied his family. Rich enough, and while they’ve interbred with both Muggles and Veela, they’ve not been obnoxious about it. They always come back to pureblood wizards and witches in the end. I give you my blessing for him.”

Millicent nodded. “And for my mother and sister?” she whispered.

“Use some of our money to make sure Marian gets private tutoring.” Adalrico made a large movement for the first time since he’d arrived back in the tent, bending down and lifting the goblet of wine that had sat beside his stool. “I don’t want her attending Hogwarts, until and unless the school is actually better ten years from now. She’d be taught things there that a young magical heir shouldn’t have to learn. I didn’t think I had any choice with you, Millicent, or I would have sent you somewhere else, too.” He met her eyes directly for a moment. “Will you forgive me?”

Millicent choked back the stupid, ridiculous, stupid tears that wanted to rise up her throat. “There’s nothing to forgive,” she whispered. “I’m glad I attend Hogwarts. How would we have met Harry and learned about him otherwise?”

Adalrico gave a faint smile. “I imagine we would still have heard of him from Mrs. Malfoy. She’s a rather insistent dancer. But—well, I won’t make you regret the way things have gone, daughter. I’m glad that you like your life the way it is.” He put the goblet down again, and held out his hand to her. His skin briefly turned the color of quartz. “Will you clasp hands with me, daughter, for old times’ sake?”

Millicent nodded. Her own skin turned transparent and glittering when she concentrated, and she moved her fist forward and through her father’s. For a moment, she felt his flesh and muscle as if it were her own, the rush of foreign blood through her veins, the pulling of skin over unfamiliar tendons. From the look on her father’s face, he was feeling the same thing.

“Based in stone,” he whispered, “through the stone we commune, and like stone we endure. Duramus.”

Millicent nodded again. She could say nothing without choking on tears that were unworthy of her, as a magical heir and the future head of the Bulstrode family in the event of her father’s death. She sat tall and proud instead as Adalrico leaned forward and placed his shining fist on her brow.

“Call your mother in, please, Millicent,” he said, leaning back on the stool. The light left his hand.

She rose to fetch Elfrida and Marian, and when that was done, she stood outside the tent and looked up at the stars for a long time.

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“Uncle. You wanted to speak with me?”

Augustus looked up with a small, hard smile. He supposed he shouldn’t take such joy in the fact that his possible death compelled his wild nephew to listen to him, but he wouldn’t lie to himself the night before such a duel. Tybalt was only listening to him because Augustus might not be here to listen to tomorrow, and they both knew it.

“Yes.” Augustus gestured for Tybalt to take a seat on the chair he’d Transfigured from a hump of grass, secretly pleased to see that his nephew really hadn’t brought his Muggleborn partner. Tybalt wasn’t entirely lost to family honor after all, then. That would make the things Augustus had to tell him easier. “I have something to tell you.”

Tybalt sat down and stared up at him. Augustus stood still and stared back. He loved and treasured his nephew Pharos, his heir. He was the one who would carry on the Starrise family legacy, and he would do it with a grace that Augustus knew to be beyond him, himself.

That was why he would never say aloud that Tybalt was the one who more reminded him of his sister Alba. It was partly his face, of course, those wide eyes and that pale hair, but it was also in the gestures he made, his grip on his wand and his method of turning on one heel.

“I’ve found one of the murderers of your mother,” said Augustus at last, when some moments had passed in silence. “I would have thought you’d be pleased.”
Tybalt shook his head. “I did my mourning for Mother a long time ago,” he said, his words impatient—always so impatient, Augustus thought, as though wizards did not have decades to achieve what they wanted to do. But then, he’d been impatient, too, to find the murderers and complete his justice quest. “I haven’t let her death taint my life. And I never realized how deep the venom had run in you, Uncle, or I would have tried to purge it a long time ago.”

Augustus snorted. “Would you have, now? I was under the impression that you did not care about this family, Tybalt, with the way that you can toss aside our traditions as if they were dandelion down.”

“I don’t care about it in the same way,” said Tybalt, voice sharpening. “But yes, I do still care, Uncle. And above all, Mother is dead. Has been dead for years. She doesn’t have any options anymore; she can’t change. You’re alive. You can change. And you’ve chosen to do something that will not only lose a vates I love and follow a large political advantage, but which will probably cost you your life.”

“Are you sure about that?” Augustus touched his white staff, and heard his sister breathing words of love and praise into his ear. He’d heard them ever since she was able to point at Bulstrode. It was impossible to describe the contentment he felt. The gaping wound of his life had closed at last. “I am a trained duelist. Yes, Bulstrode’s a fighter, but not trained in the way I am, or he’d wear the bells.”

“He is a fighter,” said Tybalt. “Not a duelist. I know where the advantage lies in battle, Uncle. I’ve seen battle now, in case you forgot.” His eyes were large and dark, and Augustus realized that, yes, he had forgotten that Tybalt had fought a battle in the very valley where they stood now. “I wish you had not done this. I know that you have no choice but to follow through with it, now. But I wish you hadn’t done it.”

Augustus shook his head in wonder. Any anger he had felt burning had faded, by now. This was the last night he expected to spend alive, if he was honest. It would be good to go back to his sister, to see Alba again, to talk to her about her sons and the things that had happened when she was alive, those thirty years when he had really lived. Augustus didn’t know what the afterlife would actually look like, but he knew what it would sound like. There would be conversations and conversations and conversations, endless talks. Alba had been with him to know the anecdotes he most wanted to tell her, but she would add her perspective to them, a perspective that Augustus had missed like a limb. Possibly Tybalt didn’t understand that because he tended to think of her as Augustus’s sister, not his twin. That made the difference.

This was his last night, and so he could ask the question that he had wanted to know the answer to since Tybalt had abandoned his family for a non-pureblood. “Why don’t you feel more strongly about this, Tybalt? She is your mother.”

Tybalt rose to his feet and began to pace back and forth. Augustus watched in silence. He wouldn’t order him back to his chair, not when it seemed that Tybalt needed to be on his feet to give his answer.

“She’s an encumbrance,” said Tybalt at last. “Yes, she was my mother, but neither you nor Pharos ever treated her like that. You treated her like a Muggle saint—” Augustus frowned slightly, but let his comments on the appropriateness of Tybalt studying Muggle religions go “—like someone whose memory had to be watered in case it ever faded. And so I started resenting her. She wasn’t someone I could just love and remember. She was someone I had to love. And it took away your time and love from me.”

“That, at least, is not true,” said Augustus, feeling his wonder deepen. “Pharos would not feel that way.”

“That’s because he did what you wanted,” said Tybalt, raising his eyes to his uncle’s face again. “How much of your love for him, Uncle, is the fact that he loved and fawned on the memory of Alba with you, and how much the fact that he’s actually better-suited to lead our family?”

“I do not think you will ever understand, Tybalt.” Augustus sighed. Well, I should have known the rift between us was too deep to be crossed or bridged. That’s what I get for being optimistic. “As for something else you said, yes, you’re right. I have already sent Pharos an owl telling him not to give the linchpin to Harry.”


“Can you ask?” Augustus raised his eyebrows. “He had a murderer in his company. If I die, then that murderer will still be alive, and I can’t see Harry rejecting him. A torturer, a rapist—Harry had to have at least suspected he’d done those things, since he was a Death Eater, and he accepted him anyway.” Augustus shook his head. “I knew it in the abstract, and now it has come home for me. It will come home even harder for Pharos, if I die. And if I live, then I shall think myself honor-bound to work against Harry. He won’t deliver criminals to justice when he knows they’re criminals, Tybalt. What do you think will happen if he finds more of
them during this war? He won’t punish them, either. Someone will have to.”

Tybalt straightened as if under the weight of a heavy burden. “Why did you join the alliance in the first place, Uncle?”

Augustus cocked his head. “Because I thought I might find one of your mother’s murderers here, or directions to him,” he said. “And I have. And because I thought there was a slight chance that this was the right thing to do. I see it isn’t, now. And Pharos sees the same thing.”

“You’ll try to break Harry’s cause whether you live or die,” Tybalt whispered.

“I believe I just said that.”

Tybalt looked at him in silence for a long moment. Then he said, “Uncle, you’ve never taken me seriously since I was Sorted into Gryffindor. Something about foolish courage and rash behavior, I think you said in the first letter you sent me after it.” Augustus nodded, remembering the letter as well as Tybalt did. “Well, I have my own ideals, no matter how wild you think I am. And in this alliance, I’ve found someone I actually want to follow. What makes you imagine that I’ll permit this damage to him?”

Augustus laughed. “Tybalt, there is nothing you can do. I changed my will so that Pharos is my heir.”

“Oh, I know that,” said Tybalt, his eyes in shadow. “And you won’t change the means of inheriting the linchpin.”

“Of course not.”

Tybalt nodded. “That’s all I wanted to know.” He turned away. “I would wish you a clear mind, but it’s a useless wish,” he added over his shoulder.

And those are the last words we’ll ever exchange, Augustus thought in some sadness. But I know Tybalt. I was a fool to suspect anything different. And he’s a fool to think I take him seriously. Your son has become a wild boy, Alba, a feckless, reckless child who never grew up. He may threaten me, but there’s nothing he’ll be able to do when matters come pounding down to the end. He wasn’t made for the kind of politics that we play.

He turned away and went back to listening to the voice of his sister whispering thanks and congratulations and welcome to her world.

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“Harry.”

Harry rose to his feet in surprise. A man he hadn’t expected to see until tomorrow, if then, was standing in the entrance to Snape’s tent. Snape at once rose behind him, his wand out. He’d already become an expert at compensating for his weak right leg by letting his left take most of his weight, Harry noted absently.

“Mr. Bulstrode,” he murmured, giving a shallow bow. “Is something the matter? Can I do something for you?” Given what he’d heard about the duel, and what Snape had told him after they came to sit in private, he knew there was no chance that Adalrico had come to tell him the duel was off.

“Actually, you can,” said Adalrico. “There’s a story I want to tell you. Or an explanation. Yes, call it that.” He glanced at Snape. “I would prefer to do it alone, if you don’t mind, Harry.”

Harry nodded at Snape. Snape studied them with silent dark eyes, then said, “Remember Cardiff, Adalrico.”

With those odd words, which Harry suspected must refer to something that had happened between them in their Death Eater days, Snape limped out of the tent. Harry wondered what he would do. Perhaps watch the moon and stars. Perhaps listen for the sound of a shout, or any other sign that Harry needed him. Harry didn’t think he would eavesdrop. He trusted his guardian too much now to suspect that.

“Please, sit down,” Harry said, Transfiguring one of their stools into a more comfortable, padded chair. Adalrico took it, moving slowly and stiffly. Harry eyed him anxiously as he sat back down. Adalrico noticed, and smiled.
“It’s not a wound,” he said. “I’ve just spent time talking to my wife and daughters, and that fills my mind enough to make my body heavy.” He sighed and bent his dark eyes on the fire. Harry studied his face and said nothing. What was there to say? It was cruel that Adalrico had to fight this duel or lose his daughters’ magical ability to a curse. It was cruel that he might die in the doing, even if he saved his daughters’ magic.

*And it was cruel, wasn’t it, what he did to Alba Starrise? You notice that he didn’t deny it.*

With his head filled with such boiling thoughts about cruelty and crime and blame, it took Harry a moment to realize that Adalrico was speaking.

“There were five of us,” Adalrico told the flames. “We’d captured her in a series of raids that the Dark Lord ordered us to make while he prepared for some grand strike. As it turned out, that strike was sending the Lestranges after the Longbottoms and going, himself, after you.” He glanced up at Harry briefly. “We never expected him not to come back. I think he was building up to a celebration when he returned after destroying the latest threat to his power.”

*I do not want to hear this. But what does wanting have to do with it?* Harry gave a shallow nod to show he was listening.

“We tortured Alba in ordinary ways, at first,” said Adalrico distantly, no longer looking at Harry. “Pain curses and *Crucio*. She screamed, and then she went quiet and would no longer give us the satisfaction, which was opposite to the way most people went about it. I don’t know if I remember her so well because she was the last person I ever did that to, or because she was unusual and beautiful like some white deer out of a story, but I can see her still: biting her lip, her eyes wide, her hair splayed around her head. When I met Tybalt Starrise, it gave me a shock. He looks like that most of the time.”

Harry said nothing.

Adalrico half-lidded his eyes and took a deep breath. “Then we—one of the others put on a glamour of her brother, and raped her. She screamed then, just once, at the beginning of it, like something was breaking within her. Dolohov cast a spell to make her own hands join in, crawling up and down her body.” Abruptly, his face darkened. “At least, I thought it was Dolohov. I know now that Dolohov died the year before, and it was Evan Rosier under a glamour of him. Which—explains a lot, really.”

Harry said nothing. He tried not to think of a Light witch at Evan Rosier’s mercy, and failed.

“I was the one who suggested that she ought to be made to rape someone herself,” said Adalrico quietly, staring at his hands. “And I was the one who found a child who resembled her elder son.”

Harry jerked to his feet. “Why are you telling me this?” he demanded. “Did you want me to ask you why you did it?”

“Actually, I did.” Adalrico lifted his head. “This is the last lesson I can give you if I die tomorrow, Harry. The reasons I did it, and what happens in war—that is going to happen at least among the Dark Lord’s servants, if not your own. Everything happened to me in a dark place. Nothing mattered anymore except what the Dark Lord said mattered. And it became imperative to believe that, because if we’d been wrong, the path behind us was littered with too much blood and flesh to justify what we’d done.” He took another deep breath. “I had to think that way, when the Dark Lord fell and I emerged from the dark place. I would have committed suicide if not for Elfrida. I reconciled myself to living like a normal person again, and to the fact that that I’d done those things, but it took me seven years.”

“And you think the same thing will happen now,” said Harry. He found it hard to look at Adalrico. “I know that. Knew that. I listened to stories of the First War when I was still a child, Adalrico. I know atrocities happened, and I know they will now. If nothing else, Voldemort hates me too much not to try and hurt me.”

“That’s not exactly what I meant,” said Adalrico carefully. “When the war ended, then the only way I could survive was to face what I’d done. But while it lasted, the only way I could survive was to breathe in the perfume of that poisoned garden and believe it fully. I believe that you’ll die if you try to live in the war like you’d live in a normal time, Harry. You can’t. War marks everyone’s souls. War takes everyone’s souls, at least while they’re fighting it. Afterwards, that’s the time for healing. Reconcile yourself to that, Harry, and you’ll do better.”

“It’s not going to take mine,” said Harry. He had not known that his voice could be that low, or that passionate. “I promise you, Adalrico. I promise you it never will. I will live through this.”

“Of course you have to survive, Harry—“
“Not survive,” said Harry, leaning forward so that he could see the other man’s eyes. “Live. I’m not going to close myself off from the war. I’m not going to become a shell, or stop feeling. I’m going to walk through this with my eyes open. I’m going to take every loss personally. I’m going to let the war rip my soul to shreds all it wants, but never steal it.”

Adalrico gave a convulsive movement. Then he said, “Then I have died knowing your cause will fail, Harry, and so has my instruction.” His voice was hemlock-bitter.

“No,” said Harry. “You’ll die or live tomorrow knowing that I’m a different person than you are, Adalrico.” He cocked his head, feeling his lips stretched in a smile that had nothing of humor in it. “But you have reminded me that I should make an important speech tomorrow. Thank you for that.”

“Harry, you cannot mean this,” said Adalrico. “You will kill my family if you try to fight like that.”

Harry shook his head slowly. “No more surely than I would have if I became a copy of Voldemort, or shut myself down for the duration of the war and did not grieve for their deaths,” he said. “I’ve had to learn the hard way that I can’t influence everything, can’t do everything. I’ll do what I can to protect your family, Adalrico. On that, you have my word. I will do anything in my power—except become what you became.”

“But that is how one fights a war, Harry.” Adalrico blinked at him.

“That is how Voldemort fights a war,” said Harry.

Adalrico stared at him for some time more, his eyes wide and troubled. Harry stared back. At last, Adalrico glanced away from him and rose to his feet, shaking his head.

“I don’t know how you do that,” he muttered. “I come here seeking peace on what could be the last night of my life, and you manage to make me feel unsettled, and troubled, and as if I want to stay alive to see the end of your mad plans.”

Good. Then maybe you’ll fight harder tomorrow, Harry thought. “Good night, Adalrico,” was all he said aloud.

Adalrico departed. Snape came back in at once. “What did he want?” he demanded.

“To tell me about Alba Starrise,” said Harry, and raised the flames a bit higher. He imagined he could see a writhing, screaming, raped woman if he looked at the fire long enough. He wondered for a moment if he should tell Augustus that Evan Rosier, at least, was still alive and free of Azkaban. Then he imagined Rosier’s pleasure in destroying Augustus, and he knew exactly why Adalrico hadn’t done it. He was trying to halt the vengeance here, to insure that it didn’t slop over onto others. Harry doubted it was to protect Rosier. He was trying, as hard as it was to imagine, to protect Augustus, or, if he died, the Starrise heirs who might otherwise feel a compulsion to avenge their mother, and would only die.

And if that is not a sign that he has changed from the man he was, I don’t know what is.

“Why must you be everyone’s confessor?” Snape asked, his voice ragged.

Harry looked up at him in surprise. “I’m sorry,” he said after a moment. “I don’t know why I didn’t think that you’d be affected by the duel, too. Adalrico is your friend, isn’t he? Or was.”

“I was thinking of you,” said Snape.

Harry blinked, then smiled. “I can bear it,” he said, facing the fire again. “But I do have some things to say tomorrow.”

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The dawn came cold and clear, in a pearly gray sky. Harry stood at the entrance of Snape’s tent and breathed in the nipping air. Adalrico and Augustus had apparently decided to duel at nine-o’clock, and it was eight now. That left him an hour to say what he wanted to say.

“This is not the wisest move,” said Snape at his shoulder.
“So you’ve said,” Harry murmured, not looking at him.

Snape grunted, and fell silent.

Harry began to walk in the direction of the stone table. He saw a few people glance at him curiously, but most didn’t look until it was obvious where he was going. A lot of people were staring at him by the time he leaped onto the tabletop and turned to face them, once again casting the spell that would allow his voice to reach their ears without shouting.

“There will be a duel today,” he began. “A duel to the death, between Augustus Starrise and Adalrico Bulstrode.”

Muffled snorts came to him. Most people would already have known that, of course. Harry raised his eyebrows higher, in a reprimanding expression he’d learned from Snape, or perhaps from Draco; it was hard to remember. This was just the beginning, just the preface, to give them an idea of what he was talking about.

“It is a duel that I do not intend to stop or affect,” said Harry. “It is beyond my reach for affecting. I do wish to make it clear that this is an example of the rituals I was speaking of on the first day of this meeting, the ones that enshrine vengeance at the cost of forgiveness, that say pride and honor are more important than life.” He snorted, and knew the sound would carry on the spell’s wind as readily as the words. “I don’t agree,” he added. “If Starrise had consulted me before he tried to call the duel on Mr. Bulstrode, I would have advised him not to do it.”

“He killed my sister.”

Harry had wondered how long it would take Augustus to show up. He turned towards him, and nodded.

“Or was one of those responsible for her death, at least,” he said. “As I understand it, she committed suicide when she was rescued.”

“And you think that makes him less responsible?” Augustus was in fine form today, every line of his face wrinkled in aristocratic disdain.

“Of course not,” said Harry. “But she’s dead, Mr. Starrise. And you’ve wasted your life on a hunt for her murderers that might not have borne any fruit. They could all have been dead, for what you knew. Or fighting beside Voldemort still, and someone else might have killed them.” Or alive, and so mad that it is plain suicide for a Light wizard to go up against them. “Perhaps you would have faced them, and slain them, and never known it. It’s sheer chance that you’re facing one of them in a duel today. Forgive me, but I don’t think that sheer chance is worth the loss of a life.” He didn’t have to pour contempt into his voice. It was already all there.

“You are lost to honor if you believe otherwise,” Augustus breathed. He was staring at Harry as if seeing him for the first time.

“I already said that I considered some things more important than honor,” said Harry, tossing his fringe out of his eyes and frowning at him. “And that’s something everyone still in the alliance, or thinking about joining it, should know,” he added, turning his eyes on those who watched him. “I don’t think vengeance is an excuse. I don’t care how many rituals justify it. As you’ve seen with this duel, I may sometimes be unable to do anything but despise it. But if I can affect its progression—if I hear that someone who fights with me plans to use torture as a means of vengeance, or a ritual, like this, that puts honor ahead of life—then I will cut that person out of the alliance at once.”

“Is that not trampling on our free wills?” Lucius Malfoy said that, his eyes the color of the sky.

Harry smiled coolly at him. “Of course not. I won’t kill anyone who does this, after all, or drain their magic. But I can and will make them politically powerless, unable to have a say in the formation of the wizarding world. For some people, Mr. Malfoy, that fate is worse than death.” He held Lucius’s eyes, and saw him get the point.

“How unlike a Lord, Harry,” said Augustus, “to restrain himself when he might do more. Cut them out of the alliance? How prosaic and limited a punishment.” His voice was relaxed, a contemptuous drawl.

“I am not a Lord,” said Harry, speaking slowly and clearly. “Apparently, Mr. Starrise, you didn’t understand that the first dozen times I told you, so here is a thirteenth. I want limits. I want checks and balances. I want the free wills of my allies to be unbounded—except where they step on the free wills of others. You’ve cleverly arranged matters so that I can’t punish you for interfering with Mr. Bulstrode’s free will. Where I can stop others from doing that, I will. All I can do in this situation is resent
you terribly for wasting your life and potentially wasting another.” He met Augustus’s eyes and held them. “That is the difference between us.”

“He tortured my sister,” said Augustus. His face was dark now. “He raped her.”

_Made her rape someone else, actually,_ Harry thought. He nodded. “He did,” he said. “And during the First War, the Aurors were granted permission to use the Unforgivable Curses, at least for a short time. Has anyone ever demanded justice for those innocent people who were tortured or compelled or killed in the process of searching out Death Eaters? Wouldn’t they be laughed at if they tried? But they would have as much basis as you do for demanding justice for your sister.”

“That was war,” said Augustus. “As much force was used as was needed. But this—this was different. This was torture.”

“And if an Auror used the Crucius Curse on an innocent person?” Harry widened his eyes. “That wasn’t torture, Mr. Starrise? Explain the difference to me, please.”

“You will never understand,” said Augustus, appearing to swell, “because you are not of the Light.”

Harry laughed. It was a sharp sound, and he saw it make people flinch like the crack of a whip. “Nor will I be,” he said. “I am loyal to neither the principles of Dark nor Light, because there are always times when that loyalty becomes slavish. I will choose from day to day, Mr. Starrise, and make sure that those choices march with my _own_ principles. It’s a considerably more frightening existence than a blind decision for Dark or Light, so I can see why not many wizards choose it. But it is what I am. Perhaps you should have questioned that more closely before you entered the alliance.”

He met the eyes of the people in front of him, and saw stunned expressions on some faces, and understanding ones on others. *Perhaps they finally understand now why I’m not a bloody fucking Lord._

He sprang from the tabletop and turned towards Augustus with a sarcastic bow. “I believe that you have a duel with Mr. Bulstrode in five minutes,” he said. “Far be it from me to keep you from it.”

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Lucius tapped his wand against his hip as he watched Adalrico and Starrise move towards the center of the large clear space of grass where they would be dueling. His mind could step back from the drama of the fight to see how Harry’s words applied to him, as it always could.

Harry had said he would tolerate no torture done in vengeance.

That meant he could never be allowed to find out what Lucius had done to Lily and James Potter, lest it meant that the Malfoys would not have their chance at political power. Harry might even break off the joining with Draco. Lucius was not _entirely_ sure of that, how strong his love for Draco was in comparison to his principles, but it was a possibility.

Lucius had taken steps he thought were sufficient at the time to insure Harry would never find out. But his contacts at the Ministry had since informed him that Fiona Mallory, the Auror who’d taken the fall for his vengeance, had been sacked for her actions. She was living somewhere in London, doing _Merlin_ knew what.

_Perhaps it is time to make sure that one of those things is not confessing my part in the torment of Harry’s parents._

Lucius nodded sharply before he turned to watch the duel. Something to attend to when this was done with, then.

******

Augustus shook off the last of his irritation as he walked to the center of the grass. Harry was right—at least, if he really believed the rubbish he had been spouting. He should not have joined the alliance. Harry was not the right leader for someone of Augustus Starrise’s principles if he could not even see that of course vengeance in a situation like this _was_ justice.

He turned to face Adalrico Bulstrode, who had walked out to stand opposite him. The air began to shimmer with the colors of gold and silver and bronze and iron, the four metals they had called upon to witness the duel. The shimmer spread out around them, forming a hazy, round wall of light. Neither of them would be able to cross that barrier until one of them was dead, and no one from outside could interfere. Augustus had called Bulstrode to a place beyond the reach of the wizarding world, and here it
Augustus took a deep breath. The air was sharp around him, the colors carving lines into his eyes and his brain. This was the end of life, the end of days, the end of the aching and the hurting.

Bulstrode stared at him, dark-eyed and dark-haired, heavy as the black stone that his ancestors had chosen as their sigil. Augustus wondered if his sister had seen him like that in her last moments on earth.

He felt an answering spark from his staff that seemed to say she had, though, Augustus thought, without the fear that showed in his eyes now.

He held his staff out in front of him, and bowed to his opponent. The duel’s code said he had to. Bulstrode bowed stiffly back, clearly uncomfortable with the gestures of honor. Augustus smiled. He was no duelist. He was no duelist, and the morning around them was gray and green and brown with spring, and any moment now, Alba would be avenged.

Both of them knew the moment to begin. The wall of light told them, the morning told them, the tension between them—between executioner and criminal, Augustus thought, between Light wizard and Dark wizard—told them.

Bulstrode flicked his wand, and, of course, a Dark Arts defense spell came spilling out. “Defensor vindicate!”

Black mist filled the dueling ring, a fist opening in the middle of it. Augustus knew the fist would seize him and crush him if he wasn’t careful. He also knew it would never have the chance to touch him.

“Finite Incantatem,” he said, loudly and calmly, and the mist dissipated. He was already into his next spell, a step ahead of Bulstrode, who had thought he would have a moment more behind his Dark shield. Augustus heard his own voice incanting, and the stumbling words of his opponent.

“Aspectus ignis!”

“Ardesco!”

Augustus concentrated on the fire that Bulstrode had tried to light within him, and murmured Finite Incantatem over and over, drawing on the power that he’d stored in the staff. The fire went out, and he looked up, expecting to see Bulstrode stumbling. After all, the Fire Sight spell tended to do that, effectively blinding an opponent by making him see the heat that burned inside every object.

But Bulstrode had closed his eyes, and was fighting blind. He shouted the next spell with a note of triumph in his voice that Augustus didn’t understand, unless it was delight in using the Darkest spell he could think of. “Cogo!”

The Compression Curse struck Augustus before he was ready—he had always underestimated how fast that one moved—and he felt pain crumpling his shoulders, shoving his spine into his buttocks, trying to make him bow his head so that it could crumple him. But they did not know Augustus Starrise, neither the original creator of this spell nor Adalrico Bulstrode. He would never bow his head. He bore up under it, and even cast a nonverbal Shield Charm to protect himself from the next spell, and only then reached out to the power in the staff again to end the curse.

Bulstrode was at work, too. The glow of Shield Charms moved around him when Augustus next looked, and a black spark he wasn’t familiar with. Bulstrode thrust a fist forward with a wordless cry, and ebony fire galloped from his hand, heading straight for Augustus.

It ate through the Shield Charm as if it wasn’t there, and struck his left hand, not the one that gripped the staff. Augustus looked down at the sudden lack of feeling. His arm had turned to stone from the fingers to the elbow.

There was a moment when he might have panicked. He forced the panic away. This is for Alba.

He threw himself sideways from the next rush of black fire, knowing it must be one of the Bulstrode magical gifts. Most Light families let others know what they could do, speaking in honesty, walking in the daylight. Dark families kept them secret so their enemies wouldn’t know exactly what they might do in battle. Paranoid bastards.

And these are the kinds of people Harry would ally himself with. I was right. This alliance was wrong for me.
Dragging the stone limb, he concentrated on himself, and cast *Exsurgo*. Strength raced through him like a river in flood, like the Light in the ritual he’d used on Midwinter—and he didn’t have to feel sorry about that, because they’d been doing it to battle the Dark, not to aid Harry—and gave him the ability to stand up straight and renew the Fire Sight spell. Bulstrode had just opened his eyes, but he slammed them shut again, with what Augustus thought was a little whimper.

Augustus knew he could still win. It was a matter of finding a Light spell that would eat through Bulstrode’s strong shields and kill him. He knew the other man was stronger than he was, magically, but that didn’t matter right now, when he was also blinded and reduced to relying on his family gifts to grant him an advantage.

Alba’s voice whispered restlessly in his head. *You can do it, brother. Remember the spell that you used when the Death Eaters tried to raid our house in the First War.*

Augustus smiled. Yes, that would do.

“*Lux Aeterna!*” he cried, throwing his hand and what he could move of his left arm wide, and pouring all his will down the staff, as if it were a river forced through a narrow course.

Light exploded around him, a burning sunrise, a killing radiance. He knew it would first blind Bulstrode and then hollow him out and then consume him with fire. It was fatal only to wizards who used Dark Arts, and Bulstrode had surely used enough of them to fall victim to it.

*It is right that he die of the Light,* Augustus thought, and opened his eyes, and watched eagerly. He could see through the radiance, though no one who used Dark Arts would be able to.

He saw the Light stalk towards Bulstrode. He saw him fall before it like a sacrifice on a pyre. Augustus opened his mouth to laugh.

And Bulstrode whispered back, “*Obscuritas aeterna.*”

He should not have been able to remember the counterspell at such a time. He should not have been able to concentrate on it when he was blinded and in such a position that he could only react defensively, Augustus thought. But darkness rose around him, and spread forward, and met the Light in mid-flight. Darkness and Light coiled and whipped and became a black-and-gold maelstrom that it hurt Augustus to look upon. Then they faded and were gone.

Bulstrode unleashed another stream of the black fire, and Augustus’s right leg was suddenly heavy and useless.

That was when he knew he was going to die.

Madness stirred in him. He could not die and allow Alba’s murderer and rapist to go unpunished. He could bear death, he could bear how long his justice quest had taken him, but never that.

So he pulled his magic into himself—all of his magic, including that stored in his staff. He concentrated deep, and heard the voice of the tutor talking to him and Alba, telling them legends, telling them old stories. Perhaps the particular story that came to him did so because of the round table that Harry had constructed; he did not know. Perhaps it was his sister’s inspiration. But, either way, it was perfect.

He dropped his shields. He left himself utterly vulnerable to that black fire. And before it came again, he whispered, “*Ulcer regis piscatori!*”

The spell wrenched itself out of him. Augustus could feel his insides convulsing as he gave up his being to the curse, his magic and his purpose in life. His sister was with him in that moment, moving with him, speaking the words she had been unable to speak in life because they had taken her wand from her before they began torturing her, of course they had.

Augustus knew the curse had flown and hit Bulstrode. He gave a deep sigh, contentment consuming him before the fire turned him into a stone statue. It was done. He had at least taken vengeance for Alba before his death, and Pharos would know what to do in his absence.

And then he was with Alba, and everything was well again.
Harry didn’t at first realize what had happened to Adalrico, because he was busy staring at Augustus, turned to a bizarre mixed figure of stone and flesh. The black fire had hit his head, killing him, but his torso, his right arm, and his left leg were still alive. Harry gave a shudder and turned away. The duel had been swift, but still he felt the waste of life lying in his body like a stone limb of his own.

“Harry!”

He turned back swiftly. The barrier around Augustus and Adalrico had vanished with the ending of the duel, and Millicent was kneeling next to her father. It was her voice that had cried out, so angry and fearful and lost that Harry hadn’t recognized it at first. He strode forward and knelt next to her.

“What is it?” he asked, and then saw the seeping wound on Adalrico’s heel and heard his soft, pained breaths.

“I tried to heal it,” said Millicent, her fingers closing around her wand and then letting it go again. “I did. But I can’t. What is it? What curse is this, Harry? It’s hurting him.” She gazed up at him as if he could make everything better.

Harry swallowed. He couldn’t make everything better, and this was one of those things. “I’m sorry, Millicent,” he said softly. “I’ve tried. It’s the Fisher King Curse. It inflicts a wound that doesn’t heal. The only person who can cure it is the person who cast it.” He led her gaze to Augustus.

“But that—that doesn’t make sense,” Millicent whispered. “I mean, you’re a Lord-level wizard. You should be able to reverse it.”

Harry shook his head. “This is one of those times where pure power doesn’t do anything,” he said, and gently moved his hand over Adalrico’s face, fearing him blinded. It was just the Fire Sight spell, though; the pain in his ankle was distracting him from ending it. Harry ended it, and nodded to Adalrico as his eyes flicked open. “It’s like someone gone insane from the Cruciatus Curse, Millicent. I can’t bring back Neville’s parents, no matter how powerful I am. And I can’t heal this. It doesn’t kill, but it is part of the laws of magic that only the caster can reverse it. And I wasn’t the caster. I’m sorry,” he added, feeling the words inadequate in the face of Millicent’s stare.

“He’s right, daughter,” Adalrico said, his voice exhausted. “In the end, he wanted to cost me some pain more than he wanted to live. I felt his shields drop when I attacked. He poured everything he had into this curse, knowing I would kill him a moment later.” He pressed Harry’s hand hard enough to hurt. “I do not blame you. Leave us for a moment, Harry. I have to speak to Millicent.”

Harry nodded, and stood, backing away as Elfrida hurried up to her husband and daughter with Marian in her arms. “I’m glad you’re alive, sir,” he murmured.

“So am I,” said Adalrico, in a voice that was already learning to beat back the pain. “I still have a chance to change.”

Harry had to turn away then, partly from the truth of the words and partly so Elfrida could have some privacy as she knelt beside her husband and embraced him. He had to breathe in sharply several times, before he shook his head and met Draco and Snape’s gazes with a tiny nod. He was all right.

He was even more confirmed in his prejudices against vengeance, though.

_The cost is too high. Always too high. I’ll do what I must to win the war and what I can to alleviate the pain of others, but vengeance is not something I can commit, not a wound I can inflict on my soul. No more. No longer._

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**Intermission: After the Duel**

“No, to the side. Now try me.”

“Expelliarmus!”
Millicent caught her breath as she watched her father lunge out of the way of her spell, and land heavily in the dirt under their tent. Adalrico had insisted on removing the charms that protected them from the rough, wet ground, so that he could get used to walking on different kinds of surfaces with his wounded ankle. Now he stood up, grimacing, and flexed his foot. The bandages around it were already unraveling, but he tightened them again with a muttered charm and faced her.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” he demanded. “You should have attacked me while I was down, daughter. None of this fair play nonsense, if you please, or I shall think you’ve been spending too long around Gryffindors.”

With a breathless laugh, Millicent obliged, and dueled further with her father, helping him to test the limits the wound had put on his life. Elfrida sat in a corner of the tent with Marian, and held her, and smiled like the stars.

Millicent had come to accept that the Fisher King Curse couldn’t be healed, mostly because Adalrico himself seemed so accepting. The wound was permanent. It wouldn’t heal, and if Adalrico removed the skin where it had taken root, or even his whole foot, it would only move up his leg and fester there. The important thing was to keep it clean and wrapped so it wouldn’t stink, drink plenty of Blood-Replenishing Potion from now on, and learn to know what movements he could make without pain and which he couldn’t.

It was a small price, considering he might have paid with his life, though Millicent still found herself unsatisfied. She would have liked vengeance against Starrise. But Adalrico had seen the thoughts written on her face and shaken his head at her.

“Do not, daughter,” he’d said softly. “You heard what Harry said. He means it. No seeking vengeance against Starrise.”

“They’re not part of the alliance anymore,” said Millicent. Harry had come to their tent an hour ago, to see how Adalrico was, and to share the owl he’d received from Pharos Starrise. Apparently, in the event of his uncle’s death, Augustus had instructed him not to ally with Harry, and to keep the linchpin from him by any means possible. “We could attack them.” She’d murmured those words directly after Harry had left, and still her father shook his head, that stubborn, dark expression fastened into place.

“Pharos Starrise is not part of the alliance any more, but Tybalt Starrise still is,” said Adalrico. “Attack his brother, and we would be obeying the letter of Harry’s words while disobeying the spirit. I won’t have that said of us ever again, Millicent. Once, I followed a Lord I had to be ashamed to own when I wasn’t doing exactly what he wanted. Now, I follow a leader I can be proud of, and that means doing what he asks of me, even when it’s hard.”

Millicent had nodded, reluctantly, and then they’d returned to their dueling practice. Now Adalrico stood, bowed to her, and then limped across to her mother, who lifted her face to be kissed.

Millicent slipped out of the tent as she had the night before, but this time, her gaze fixed on the moon and stars was much happier than it had been. She had also been alone then, and she wasn’t now. Catching a faint movement off to the side, she whirled around and lifted her wand.

Pierre Delacour moved a step forwards, raising his hands with a slight smirk. “My lady,” he said. “I can approach you without triggering your defensive reflexes, no?”

“You can,” said Millicent, lowering her wand and studying him carefully. “But I did not think you would ever wish to approach me again, after what you have heard about my father.”

“My lady, your father survived a duel,” said Pierre. “I am not sure why this strange country is so without honor, but in mine, we can put aside wounds when the duel is done. That is the way of it. That is what all duels were meant to do in the past, to satisfy honor.” He claimed her hand and brushed his lips over her knuckles. “And I find myself more than satisfied in the beauty of the winner’s daughter.”

Millicent knew he was flattering her—she wasn’t beautiful—but that he was willing to flatter her said a great deal. She laid a hand on the side of his face and said, “My father did grant me permission to marry you if he’d died in the duel.”

“Did he?” Pierre cocked his head, eyes intent on her face.

“He did,” Millicent confirmed. “Therefore, it’s not entirely inappropriate if I do this.” She leaned forward and kissed him on the lips.

Pierre stiffened in surprise for just a moment, then kissed her back, and stepped away with a soft smile of appreciation. “Thank
you, my lady,” he murmured. “If you were a shy and fainting maiden—“

“Then you would not have approached me at all,” Millicent retorted, and nodded towards the entrance of the Bulstrode tent. “Shall we go inside and see what my father has to say about this, since he’s still alive?”

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“That doesn’t make sense?” Laura Gloryflower sounded concerned, her eyebrows rising. “But it is supposed to make sense, vates. I assure you, all the northern families but Starrise are agreed on this.”

Harry forced himself to relax and sit still on his stool. Laura had shown up with such splendor—not only attired in formal robes adorned with her family crest, but with an artificial golden cat at her side—that he felt as if he should have received her in grander surroundings. Now, he could admit that staying in the Black tent might have been a good idea. “I suppose it does make sense,” he said. “I just didn’t expect it, ma’am. I thought for certain you would follow Starrise in denying me the linchpins. I had seen that many of the northern families did whatever he told them.”

Laura shrugged. “That was Augustus. Pharos has been in the shadow of his uncle for so long that very few of us have had the chance to know him for himself. I know him better than most, and I don’t like what I see. Pharos is a follower, not a leader. That was the core of the conflict between Tybalt and Augustus, you know,” she added. “Both were leaders, and Tybalt could not endure the kind of confinement Pharos accepted. But Starrise will pay for it now. Augustus has the heir he wanted, but Pharos is already looking for the guidance that he misses.

“The other part of it, Harry, is that this was a duel. If we broke apart from you now, or denied what we promised you before the duel began simply because a Dark wizard won, then we are saying such rituals are worthless to us. A duel matters—but only if the person we think should have the victory wins?” Laura snorted and shook her head. “Any true Light wizard is worth more than that, Harry, I would hope. I’m sure Augustus didn’t intend to, but he did you a favor. You were bound to accept the result, and that binds us to accept it, too.”

Harry blinked and ran his hand through his hair. “Then I have all the linchpins except Starrise,” he said. “I—thank you, Mrs. Gloryflower. I still didn’t expect it, though it’s starting to sound as if I should have.”

Laura’s lips wrinkled in a small smile. “Perhaps when you come to understand Light wizards better, Harry, you will learn to expect such things,” she murmured. She stood and considered him for a moment, then added, “There are some of your Light allies who are a bit concerned that your guardian, your future joined partner, the person whose heir you are, and most of your closest allies are all Dark wizards.”

“And my brother’s Declared for Light,” said Harry firmly. “And I count the Weasleys and many other Light children in Hogwarts as friends. And I need the support of the Light families to take out the linchpins. I appreciate the concern, Mrs. Gloryflower, and thank you for telling me of it. But I don’t intend to change matters in my personal life to suit my allies’ whim.”

Laura laughed in delight, and the cat beside her sat up and clapped its paws with a soft ringing sound. “I appreciate the honesty, Harry,” she said. “And I can sway most of the others to seeing things your way, I’m sure.”

“You’re their leader now, aren’t you?” Harry asked. “Now that Augustus is dead, they’re looking to you.”

Laura dipped her head. “Harry, whatever gave you that idea?”

He just looked at her, and she laughed again. “I am the most determined of them,” she said. “And that has always counted for a great deal in our world, more than magical strength; Augustus was not as powerful a wizard as Gloriana Griffinsnest, for example, but he had more of an idea of what to do with his power.” She paused for a moment, then added contemplatively, “And I think it will benefit your alliance, Harry. After all, I wish the rights of werewolves to be extended, too, now that my niece is one. I will try to persuade the others to see things the same way.”

“Thank you,” said Harry softly. Laura nodded.

“There is one more thing I wanted to tell you, a gift that only I can give you,” said Laura. “I understand that you may be joining battle soon.”

Harry nodded, his mind flashing to Midsummer and what he would try to do there. Some pieces of the plan were already in place
—for example, the centaurs’ participation and the fact that he would have to find some way to cleanse the tainted magic in the stone—but others were floating, awaiting confirmation of certain reports.

“Allow me to offer you some artificial animals,” said Laura. “My family is small enough that our fighting alone would not turn the tide of battle, but some of our golden or jeweled creations might.” She smiled down at the cat beside her, and touched the realistic-looking tufts of golden fur that grew from between the ears. “What kind would most help you? Horses? Unicorns? Cats? Dogs?”

If I’m right, then we’ll need to move swiftly on the battlefield, and attacking from above and underneath wouldn’t be a bad idea, either. “Horses,” Harry said firmly. “And anything you have that flies or burrows underground.”

Laura laughed again. “Then we can get rid of a prototype that one of my ancestors created and which has been gathering dust ever since,” she said. “I will send you their specifications in a few weeks’ time, Harry. Until then.” She inclined her head and stepped out of the tent, the cat padding beside her.

Harry stretched his arms above his head and yawned. Snape had gone off for a private discussion with Regulus, and told Harry not to wait up. In fact, Harry was fairly sure that Snape had thought he would go to bed by now. But Harry had had to visit the Bulstrodes, read Pharos’s letter, and have discussions with a few of his allies, including Laura, which had filled him with tentative determination. Most of them weren’t going to be torn apart from him by this duel—

If—and that reminder always lingered in the back of their voices—Harry really did enforce the standards he’d spoken of. If he allowed his Dark allies to get away with things that he wouldn’t allow his Light allies, then bad things would happen.

He was just turning for bed when the tent entrance rustled. John Smythe-Blyton was standing there when Harry faced it again, and he spoke at once in a hushed, excited voice.

“Tybalt can’t be seen coming near you right now,” he whispered. “It would be disrespectful to his uncle’s memory, since the new head of the family has decided that he wants nothing to do with you.”

Harry nodded, having expected that.

“But Tybalt wants you to know that he’s still loyal to you,” said John. His dark eyes shone in the firelight. Harry wondered if it was defying the family that had so despised him, or just the sneaking around and delivering of secret messages, that made him so excited. “He’s going to do what he can to restore the linchpin to your control. And he says it’s a good thing now that you didn’t persuade Augustus to change the means of inheritance.” He laughed, quietly, and then dipped his head to Harry and ducked out of the tent.

Harry paused, thinking about that. The linchpins were linked to the earth, yes, but also to a family. If he had not rejected his last name, then Lux Aeterna and the house at Godric’s Hollow would have passed to him when James was stripped of his magic, because he was the elder son and of Potter blood. With the Black legacy, though, Regulus had had to choose the person he wanted to leave the inheritance to, and Sirius had been formally disowned and then reinstated with the help of Dumbledore’s spell. There was no sharing of the property in common.

That was the major difference Harry could think of. He wasn’t sure how it would help Tybalt keep the linchpin, though.

He shook his head, and sought his bed. He was tired, and if the events of the evening had strengthened him, the events of the morning had embittered him. He knew he would see the flesh-and-stone statue that Augustus had become in his dreams.

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“You should tell him.”

Regulus stood in the entrance of the Black tent, looking into the sky. Snape concealed a snort in his hand. He knew what Regulus was doing: watching the stars, the way those of his family tended to do in times of great crisis. Or maybe that was just Regulus. Certainly Snape remembered seeing him do it in their Death Eater days.

“You’re a fine one to talk, Severus,” his friend said, without looking over his shoulder. “Since you kept so many things from Harry for his own good, that you’d be turning his parents in not least among them.”
Snape scowled and said nothing. That had been for Harry’s own good, so that he wouldn’t stop Snape and try to keep his parents and Dumbledore free. Regulus’s secret was based on shame, from what he’d said, and shame was nothing Harry could not forgive.

“Besides,” Regulus added then, “I’m going to tell him in a few days.”

Snape fought to keep his jaw shut. At last he said, “And you’re still not going to tell me, I suppose?”

Regulus’s shoulders hunched. “I…no. Please don’t ask me, Severus. Telling you why would involve telling you the secret.”

Snape bowed coldly and swept out of the tent, cursing his bad leg that wouldn’t let him make as dramatic an exit as he liked; his robes swirled once and then dropped like a wounded bat behind him. He made his way back to his own tent, now and then studying the sky. He couldn’t read whatever message Regulus had seen written in the stars, though, no matter how long he looked.

It was better looking than admitting he was jealous of Harry for receiving Regulus’s confidence.

And it was better than the imaginary vision of a bottomless pit he could see opening under his feet. This alliance had not ended on the settled note Snape had thought it would. They all seemed to be hurtling forward faster than he would like, a fall that might end on Midsummer Day, or never.

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Chapter Seventy-Five: Regulus’s Shame

“Ouch!”

Harry shook his head and tried not to laugh as Draco went sliding off his bed, hitting his temple on top of the mental hurt he’d taken. He slid off his own and extended a hand, only to be stopped by the boundary of the rune circle Draco had drawn to keep his body safe while he was possessing Harry. “Are you all right?” he asked, when Draco picked himself up off the carpet and glared at him.

“You didn’t say that you were going to do that,” Draco snapped, shaking out his robes. He felt the side of his head and winced, and part of Harry’s amusement melted.

“I am sorry,” he said, and then visions of what worse wounds Draco could take on Midsummer Day touched him. “But if you can’t ride out a Legilimency attack while you’re possessing someone else, then I think this plan isn’t going to work.”

Draco looked up at once. “And who else would help you, you idiot?” he muttered, his fingers still on the lump on the side of his head. “Unless you have a centaur who can possess people waiting in the wings…”

Harry shook his head. “I didn’t mean it that way, Draco. But you know that everything has to work for this plan to succeed. If you can’t possess me while I use Legilimency on you, then that’s not a bad reflection on you, but I’ll have to find some other way to accomplish what I want. Because you’re right. I have no one else who can play the role that you do in the battle.”

Draco glanced up quickly. “That sounds as if you mean more than just a person who can possess people, Harry.”

“I do.” Draco had been like this since the meeting on the equinox and the announcement of their joining. At certain moments, he would demand evidence that he was important to Harry, and for more reasons than just battle tactics. Harry held his eyes, not smiling. “I need you there when this battle begins, Draco, for moral support and because I can’t imagine pulling off something like this without you. I’m hoping to defang Voldemort and destroy most of the Death Eaters and show the wizarding world that the magical creatures can fight beside us and free the northern goblins all on the same day. If you weren’t there, I would fail, simply because I wouldn’t trust my own strength.”

Smirking, satisfied, Draco nodded and stood. “Then I’ll work on this some more,” he said. “Just let me retrieve my wand and heal this wound first.”

Harry nodded, and waited. He could wait, he told himself. It was only the beginning of April; they still had almost three whole months before Midsummer arrived and there was no more time to practice. He had no reason to feel as if impatience were
gripping him by the throat and driving spurs into his sides.

But he did. And when he and Draco were finished here, then he had something else to study.

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Zacharias Smith had never been so insulted in his life. Really, who did Harry think he was, asking a question like that?

*Well, he thinks he’s a vates and incipient Lord, and he’s probably right,* the voice of his training answered him, and Zacharias had to admit he was correct. But he still did not have to be so insulting.

*Of course* I can ride, and *of course* I can ride more than brooms,* he told Harry stiffly. *And no, before you ask, I have some experience with ordinary horses, too, not just winged ones. My family raised me properly, Harry. Light wizarding families once did a great deal of their fighting from horseback, you know.*

He stifled the temptation to ask why Harry was smiling like that. Besides, in a moment the smile went away, and Harry nodded gravely. *“Who are the other good riders in the school? Do you know?”*

Zacharias sniffed. *“Of course, Harry. The Smiths weren’t the only pureblood families who patronized the institutions I attended before Hogwarts, you know. I know the best riders in Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff, and I can make a good guess about the Gryffindors—at least, if they’ve kept up their skills.”* He glanced around, but though there were more than a few people lingering in the latest abandoned classroom where they’d held the dueling club, there were no other Slytherins. That meant he was free to add, *“And you can ask about your own House. I had little contact with Dark families as I was growing up. My mother didn’t think it proper.”*

*“Your mother sounds a formidable woman,”* Harry mused.

*“She is,”* said Zacharias unrepentantly. His mother had largely raised him; while his father was the one who’d taught him skills like riding a broom and some of his earliest spells, his mother had passed along the Smith family traditions to him, and taken him to attend sessions of the Wizengamot, and sent him to be instructed in riding and other necessary means of claiming his title. *“I’ll tell her you said so. She’ll take it as a great compliment.”*

Harry nodded. *“So you’d be willing to go forth into battle on Midsummer Day, then? Riding?”*

Zacharias felt a great surge of satisfaction. He would never be so rude as to show it—one thing pureblood Light heirs did *not* do was complain about petty things—but he had resented the fact that the Slytherins and his Dark allies received so much attention from Harry. He had attended the alliance meeting, of course, but Harry had paid him almost no personal attention. He supposed Harry felt sure of the Smiths’ support, while he needed to spend some more time on securing those uncertain allies who still wavered, but he had fumed about it all the same. *“Being felt sure of”* had felt an awful lot like *“being taken for granted.”*

And now here was personal attention, and he hadn’t even had to complain to receive it. Harry had or was going to have horses for the battle, and he had, quite sensibly, thought that Zacharias, as a pureblood Light wizard, would know how to ride. He wasn’t going to insist on leading the riders himself, which Zacharias was privately grateful for. Harry might be unsurpassed on a broom, maybe even on a dragon, but he’d shown no sign of skill on horseback.

That Harry was asking for help soothed another fear that Zacharias’s mother had voiced to him: that this was a leader who did not know how to delegate. Obviously, he was learning.

*“I would be honored,”* said Zacharias, when he realized that some moments had passed and he hadn’t given an answer to Harry’s question. *“And I’ll start approaching some of the other good riders. I know that Chang would be willing to give up her life, at least, and as she owes you a life debt, that’s quite proper, but others will need to ask permission of their parents.”*

Harry nodded. *“I know it sounds strange,”* he said, *“sending children to battle against a Dark Lord and his Death Eaters. And if their parents are good riders who would rather go into battle instead, then I’ll be happy to have them. But others—I don’t know if I have enough time to bring other people I trust into this alliance, get them to trust me, and then insure that they can ride well enough to go forth into battle.”*

*“I am not a child, Harry, at least,”* said Zacharias stiffly. *“Remember that my family keeps the old age of majority, at fifteen.”*
Harry actually swept him a little bow. “I did forget. My apologies.”

Zacharias relaxed. “The horses are a new addition to your plans, aren’t they?” At Harry’s nod, he added, “I can ask my mother if she’d be willing to participate, though I’m almost sure she will be.”

“Thank you,” Harry said, and then he grinned, and then he was gone. Zacharias felt relaxed and elated for a long time after he left. When Harry wasn’t on the brink of losing his temper and thrashing someone else to death, then he did make an inspiring sight. Zacharias would be happy to ride for him.

He got a firecall from his mother that evening. Miriam Smith was more than willing to go into battle, if her son called her.

Zacharias went to bed thinking that all was right with the world, since his day had also included a kiss from Hermione, and his confounding her with a pureblood ritual she didn’t know.

Harry turned the sheathed knife over in his hand thoughtfully. He had started looking through the gifts he had received—from Lucius in the truce-dance and from his allies for Christmas and his birthday—and had found one that might be perfect for his plans.

He drew the knife from the sheath on a sudden whim, and held it up to the light that came from the lamp on his bedside table. The blade glittered at him, a sharp golden contrast to the dark hilt. Adalrico had given the blade to him for the Christmas in which Harry and Lucius had concluded their truce-dance, and the words he had spoken about it still rang in Harry’s mind.

One of my ancestors fell in love with a Lady of the Light. But she would not have him, which is not surprising, since he was Declared Dark and had aided the Dark Lord that Lady defeated. He created this knife to symbolize what he could not have. The hilt is forged of the same rock that makes up Blackstone’s walls. The knife blade is sunlight that he captured on a Midsummer evening—the last ray as the sun sank beneath the horizon on the day of longest light.

Harry half-wished he had remembered this blade last year. Then he could have used it perhaps, to fend off the loss of his hand. Or could he have? Voldemort’s power at the moment of sunset on Midsummer last year had been absolute. He might only have bound Harry as he already had and then taken the knife. Harry shuddered to think of it in Voldemort’s hands. Perhaps it wouldn’t have aided him—Adalrico had said that the knife’s Light blade was unhappy in the hands of a Dark family like the Bulstrodes, so it would probably have been even unhappier with the actual Dark Lord—but he could have corrupted it, broken it, found a use for it. Harry was now confident that Voldemort could find a use for everything, even those objects he ought to most despise. He’d break them down into their component parts and soil them, drain them for their magic, if he couldn’t do anything else.

Now, though, it would probably be the perfect tool to aid him for a moment on Midsummer that Harry was rather nervous about.

He tossed the knife in the air and tried to catch it, cursing mildly as it spun through his fingers and onto the floor. He slid it back into its sheath and laid it across his lap, then muttered, “Here goes nothing,” as he took out the stone from his robe pocket that contained the tainted magic.

It felt warm to his hand, and the tainted magic chose to manifest as a whisper in his head. Now it sounded like Voldemort’s voice, now like Dumbledore’s. Just now, it had adopted a warm, grandfatherly tone.

You could free me, you know. I would obey your will from now on, and only yours. I promise. I am tired of being cooped up in here. I want to be free. I would let you use me as you willed. Imagine yourself, more powerful than your mentor, more powerful that your magical ancestor.

Harry shook his head. He wondered if the magic’s lack of imagination in tempting him was due to the Lords it had come from, or the fact that it just didn’t understand him. It should have spoken about the good he could do, if it wanted him to free it. Power for its own sake repelled Harry. What in the world would he do with it? It was what he could use magic for that mattered to him.

He lay back on his bed, cradling the stone in his hand and staring at it. The knife shifted position, and he rolled over so that it slid onto the bed and couldn’t stab him. He would not have a better chance than this for cleansing the magic, he thought. Blaise had had an argument with Ginny and was currently sulking in the library, and Draco was serving a detention with McGonagall for cheek. Just because he was Harry’s boyfriend didn’t give him the right to Transfigure teapots into tabby cats biting their own
arses, as he’d found out.

Harry closed his eyes. He had thought of a way to do this that might work, if only by example. The phoenix web Lily and Dumbledore had placed in his mind had been supposed to strain impurities out of his magic. Harry doubted that had worked the way they thought, but phoenix fire was a symbol of purity. Perhaps he could use his own fire to burn out the soiled magic and leave behind the clean material.

*Perhaps.*

Harry took a deep breath and called the phoenix fire, concentrating on the shape of the flame. When he opened his eyes, he was looking through a haze of blue. Luckily, he’d already fire-proofed his bed and his curtains—easy enough to do without Draco and Blaise noticing, since Harry always cast his own cleaning charms on his bed anyway, refusing to let the house elves do the work.

He held up the stone in front of his face, wondering if it was his imagination that its warmth had increased since he called the phoenix fire. Then he passed the fire through the stone.

The shock was sharp, grinding, twisting, as if the knife had managed to stab him after all, and had gone straight into his belly. Harry gasped and curled up around himself, but continued forcing the flame into the rock. It felt as if he were burning the bones of the earth, or slowly changing them from stone to wood. Should it *be* this hard to burn something?

The impurities were catching fire. But as they did, they tried to recoil, flee for their existence, and they took the only escape they could, rushing up through Harry’s hand and his arm. It made the snake venom he’d taken from Snape after the Chamber of Secrets seem like a pleasant experience.

*Burn!* Harry thought, concentrating as hard as he could, bending all his will to that single task. *You can’t find refuge in me, because I’m burning!*

The blue flame sprang higher, and Harry was grateful he’d thought to add the fire-proofing charms to his bed’s ceiling, too. Then he lost himself inside a world of pain.

He had expected resistance, not pain, but since he’d begun, he didn’t want to stop. He didn’t know when he’d have the hours alone to face this again, and now that he knew it was going to hurt, the anticipation would be worse the next time. He poured all his will forward, pushing through curtain after curtain of dirt and disgusting stickiness, oil and morbid heat, rotting flesh and rotting wood. He could do this. He needed the magic for his plans on Midsummer. That meant he had to burn it clean.

Duty and responsibility pushed him through what he could not have endured for his own sake. And Harry could sense the clean magic slopping free from the stain, and settling quietly into the stone. The purity of it, the sharp imagined scent, lifted up his heart. He could do this. *He could do this.* He gritted his teeth and pushed the fire more and more, burning the inner defenses. He thought he was about halfway through. Who knew? Once he was halfway through, and had consumed the thick core of slime at the center of the stone, perhaps it would become easier. Or perhaps the greatest push would be saved for the end.

He heard a distant voice shouting, but didn’t recognize it. And anyway, he was in no danger of dying, just of pain, and he doubted that anyone could break through the phoenix fire to stop him. He went on pushing, though his arms shook with the effort, and he could feel the pain throbbing in his shoulders. The impurities were shoving further into his body with each minute that passed. He always burned them, and he was sure that he would consume them before they could consume him.

One of his own sheets abruptly wrapped around him, plunging him into darkness, and in the shock, Harry lost his hold on the stone. It fell from his hand. He gasped, then, as the agony in his arms hit him without the ecstasy of the burning to compensate. He rolled over, running his hand up and down the shaking muscles of his left arm.

“*Idiot,*” Draco’s voice was saying beyond the blanket, and Snape snarled, a wordless sound of agreement. “*Where should we take him?*” Draco asked, and Snape murmured something Harry couldn’t hear. “*No, you’re right, Pomfrey probably couldn’t handle it,*” Draco said reluctantly, and then Harry was picked up and carried.

He struggled for a moment. He knew his fire wouldn’t hurt the person holding him—Snape, he thought—because of the charms on the blanket, but he resented this. He’d been doing all right. He could get down and walk, and he wanted to make sure the stone and the knife were safe—

And then the pain coiled down from his shoulders and into his chest, now that Harry was no longer concentrating on burning the
impurities out of himself. He closed his eyes and called the fire again, intent on cleansing his body, inside and out.

Brief, hot oblivion took him.

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“—don’t know what to do to keep this from happening.” That was a voice that it took Harry some time to identify. Then he opened his eyes in startlement, only to see thick cloth directly above him. Peter?

“I’m going to talk to him.” That was Regulus’s voice, sounding exhausted, but determined through the exhaustion. “I don’t have a choice, anyway, and it’s obvious that Severus hasn’t managed to talk him out of this yet, nor my little cousin.”

“I’d like to talk to him myself.”

“All right, then.”

The thick cloth got tugged aside. Harry realized it had been a sheet, and that he was lying in an unfamiliar bed, in the middle of a room that slanted slightly, and seemed made of metal. A faint resonance of magic walked up and down his nerves like fingers, and he realized he must be in Silver-Mirror. Only the pool of fire and the pool of wind, combined with the portraits, could make him feel this way. He sat up, and glanced at the chairs on either side of his bed.

Regulus sat on his right, Peter on his left. Peter smiled at the sight of him, but the expression was harder than Harry remembered seeing on his face since the first night when Peter had introduced himself. Harry stared for a moment. He had the impression that he was seeing the Death Eater side of Peter for the first time. He often saw it in Lucius and Snape, and he had thought it would appear the same in Peter. It didn’t; this was not coldness, but hard, bright, ruthless determination, the resolve to keep going and endure no matter what happened.

He glanced at Regulus, and was alarmed to see that he looked haggard, and was holding his left arm at a short distance from his body. “Why haven’t you gone into the picture yet?” he demanded, then coughed. His throat felt hot and dry, as if a scream had been burning inside it.

Regulus waved his wand, and a goblet soared over to Harry. He found that it contained water, which tasted of a faint sweetness. He sniffed a few times, but it didn’t have a Calming Draught in it. And really, he thought as he put the goblet down and looked at the two men again, he should know them better than that.

“What happened?” he asked.

“Draco came back after his detention and found you burning,” said Peter quietly. “He fetched Snape. He couldn’t make you listen to him, but he did get the stone out of your hand and wrap you in the blankets, since he noticed those weren’t burning. And then he brought you here.”

“Why here?”

“This house is dedicated to fire as well as wind, Harry,” said Regulus, stirring from his contemplation of his own arm. “The golden pool was able to wake you from your trance. You’d gone so far into your own phoenix fire that you were in danger of never coming back.”

“I didn’t know that was possible,” said Harry, flinching a bit.

“It is,” said Peter. “I suspected it, when I first realized what had happened after Fawkes sacrificed himself. There are old, old legends of people who witnessed a phoenix’s rebirth being struck dead by the wonder of it, or mesmerized to the point that they never paid attention to anything else. We know those aren’t true from having phoenixes live among us, but you have a phoenix’s gifts within you. When we put you in the golden pool, it drew the fire to the surface, and forced it to mingle with its own flames. That freed you from the trance.”

Harry wondered for a moment if that meant his own fire was gone now. But a gleam of blue along his arms reassured him.

“What you did, Harry,” Regulus said, his voice empty and distant and sad, “was an extraordinarily stupid and selfish thing.”
Harry suppressed his own immediate impulse to snap back. “I didn’t know what was going to happen,” he said quietly, when he had his breathing and his voice under control. “I didn’t even know it would hurt. I thought I could burn the impurities out of the magic in the stone, and all would be well. Phoenix fire purifies.”

“And why didn’t you tell anyone that you intended to do this?” Regulus cocked his head at Harry, his gray eyes gone almost black. “At least Draco and Snape could have been on hand to make sure that you didn’t hurt, or to stop you when the pain began.”

Harry shook his head. “Because I didn’t think it was dangerous.”

“That doesn’t excuse concealing it,” said Peter, frowning. “Even if you thought it needed to be done alone—and I can see why having other people around would be a distraction—then you could have told Draco about it. Or Snape. I’m sure they would have respected you and left you alone if that’s what you wanted, but at least they wouldn’t have been entirely alarmed when they found you on fire.”

Harry bowed his head. “I don’t know,” he said quietly. The decision he’d made seemed cloudy to him now, covered with its own scrim of dirt, like his vision immediately after rescuing Snape from the Chamber of Secrets. “I suppose because I thought they might not leave me alone, that they’d try to stop me.”

“Did you have to do this now?” Regulus asked.

“The time until Midsummer is dwindling,” said Harry. “I thought so, yes.” He met Regulus’s eyes. “Were you waiting for something like this? I thought you were going to go into the picture just a few days after the alliance meeting.”

Regulus sighed and bowed his head. “There are things I needed to tell you,” he whispered. “And it took me until now to work up my courage.” He looked at Peter. “Would you leave, please?”

Peter stood, but his gaze, all compassion when he looked at Regulus, hardened again when he swept it back to Harry. “I still want to talk to you about not having a proper sense of strategy,” he said, and walked rapidly up the slanting floor and out of the room. Harry blinked.

“Harry. There’s something I need to tell you.”

Regulus’s tone was enough to make Harry lose interest in Peter’s departure at once. He turned around and waited, locking his arms around his legs in a defensive gesture he hadn’t made in a while. He peered at Regulus over the tops of his knees.

Regulus smiled faintly. “You look like Sirius when you do that.” Then he closed his eyes, and began to speak without much transition.

“The pictures here in Silver-Mirror lead to different places, Harry, I told you that. I didn’t tell you that I went into one of them when I was sixteen. I don’t remember the motivation. Raging curiosity, I suppose, or maybe loneliness. Sirius had had his confrontation with our parents by then and run away, and I was still trying to get used to being the only child of my mother and father as well as their formal heir; they’d disowned Sirius the moment they could see straight.

“I chose a painting you may have noticed the last time you were here, one with a crystalline blue door high in a mountain.”

Harry concentrated, and did remember seeing such a picture. He nodded.

Regulus opened his eyes. “I wouldn’t have been able to tell you this just a few months ago,” he said. “For that reason among many others, I’m glad that you’ve decided to accept the Black legacy, Harry.

“Most of the notes about that picture just said that anyone opening the door would learn something interesting. I opened the door. I can’t remember what I expected to find there, either. Maybe the secret to a riddle, maybe all the answers to the next Transfiguration exam; I was pants at Transfiguration.

“The door gave me a vision of a golden locket marked with the crest of Salazar Slytherin.”

Harry gasped, despite his determination to stay silent and let Regulus tell the story. He recognized the description. That had been the ornament hanging around the neck of the partially transformed Sirius when Harry and Connor had faced him at the end of their third year. It had allowed a bit of Voldemort to possess Sirius, in some way. Harry still hadn’t figured out how, and to be
honest, he had no desire to. Sirius had fallen victim to the locket because he’d put it on. Harry never intended to be *that*
impetuous.

“Yes,” said Regulus softly. “*That* one. I didn’t know what it meant, at first. The vision showed me that it was hidden in a cave,
and what I had to do to get at it. I didn’t understand why I would want to. It was protected by Inferi and a—a nasty potion. Why?
It wasn’t a treasure of our family, so no honor would require me to recover it, and unless we fell on incredibly hard times, I
couldn’t imagine needing the locket for money. It was something interesting, but only in purely abstract terms.

“I understood better, later. There was a—nasty evening—” Regulus swallowed “—during which I became better acquainted with
the Dark Lord, and learned things he probably wouldn’t have wanted me to see. But to accomplish the ritual he wished to work,
he had no choice but to *trust* me, and avoid using compulsion or possession or *Obliviate*, anything that would have threatened my
mind or my memory of the event. I suppose he thought the risk small enough. After all, why should I connect the vision of a
locket important to him with anything in particular?

“He hadn’t known I’d seen that locket before. And if I was a good little Death Eater, I should have told him at once. But I held it
secret, first thinking that it could be more useful if I waited, and then deciding that I had to make some attempt to gain that locket,
if it was important to him. By then, I hated him.”

Harry was secretly impressed by the flex of Regulus’s hands, the shine in his gray eyes. He didn’t say anything else about the
depth of his hatred. He didn’t have to.

“I knew what I had to do to retrieve it, but it was an enormous risk. And there was the fact that retrieving it required me to—kill
someone.” Regulus pulled at a lock of his thick dark hair. “For a long time, I had nothing that could push me into doing that. I
wasn’t courageous like Sirius, or I would have gone to Gryffindor. So I hesitated, and waited, and thought that maybe something
would happen to make me hate the Dark Lord less than I did.

“Then came Cardiff—“

“Will you please tell me what happened at Cardiff?” Harry surprised himself by asking. “Snape mentioned it to Adalrico
Bulstrode, too.”

Regulus made a careful motion of his head. “Sorry, Harry. I swore an Unbreakable Vow with Severus and Adalrico. None of us
can talk about it unless all three of us agree to do so. And you’ll have more luck dragging the secrets of Severus’s childhood out
of him. But what happened at Cardiff decided me. I had to go and get that fucking locket.”

Harry settled back, knowing that he could hardly demand the secret when he’d kept his own, but simultaneously burning and
eaten alive with curiosity.

“I suppose you’ll laugh, given everything,” said Regulus, and his voice had grown thick and heavy with reluctance. “But, by that
time, I’d changed my mind about the killing and torture the Death Eaters did. I had my conscience back. I didn’t speak out against
it—I wasn’t *that* brave—but I avoided it. Severus helped cover for me. I didn’t know why at the time. Now I do. He had his own
conscience back by then, and was spying for Dumbledore.

“To get past the guards on the locket, I took a Muggle along to the cave, and made him drink the potion, a horrible, horrible thing.
He died from it, and it took him hours.” Regulus bowed his head, his shoulders shaking. “I knew better by then, I believed it was
wrong, and I did it anyway. That was what I didn’t want to tell you, Harry. I sacrificed someone else’s life for my own goals. I
knew the locket was important to Voldemort, a trophy or a weapon, and I was determined to destroy it because it was the only one
of his powerful weapons I knew the exact location of. But I didn’t know *how* it was important, any more than Dumbledore knew
exactly how forcing you into the guardian role would enable your brother to defeat the Dark Lord. So I committed the same error
he did. You can blame me, hate me if you want. I wouldn’t blame *you*.”

Harry sat still for a long moment. “Who was the Muggle?” he asked at last.

Regulus shook his head, not looking up. “Just someone random I snatched off the street,” he said. “I didn’t even ask for his
name.”

Harry bowed his head to rest on his knees. “Well, blaming you won’t bring him back to life,” he said slowly. “And—it’s not that I
like it, Regulus, and if you did something like that right now I’d be horrified. But I still think it’s not on the scale of what
Dumbledore did. He sent Peter to Azkaban for twelve years, not even because of what Peter had done, but just to make sure that
his tracks were covered. He set the phoenix web on me for nine years, and he never intended for it to be discovered or come off; I have Tom Riddle’s possession to thank for the fact that I found it out at all. He molded Connor and my mother, and even my father to a certain extent—and Sirius, of course—to do exactly as he said, to obey and follow his every word. He Obliviated Remus when he made his first rebellion against that. He tortured the people at the Ministry with Capto Horrifer. And those are just the first of his crimes springing to mind. You made a sacrifice, once, and you hated yourself for it. He made them time and again, and he told himself all the while that he was doing right.”

“Does that really make it better?” demanded Regulus. From the sound of his voice, Harry had found the edge of a deep pit of self-loathing. “Just because it was one person? And when I didn’t even know what the damn thing did? And when it wound up costing my brother his freedom, his sanity, his life?”

Harry cocked his head. “You couldn’t have known that would happen to Sirius, Regulus,” he said softly. “You can’t take on that much responsibility. And I suppose I have to take into account that I like you much better than Dumbledore—” that won him a quick, impossible-to-stifle smile “—and that this crime is old, while I lived through the consequences of many of Dumbledore’s. That might be clouding my judgment. But I still think your sacrifice is not something you needed to be ashamed of and hide for this long. I won’t think substantially different of you for it. I know the details of Adalric’s torture of Alba Starrise now, and I can accept that he’s not the same man he was when he did that. I know one more detail of your Death Eater days, that’s all. Though I’d still like to know what happened at Cardiff,” he couldn’t help adding.

“Ah, Harry,” Regulus whispered. “That’s the reason I said that your inflicting yourself with phoenix fire was selfish. I don’t know what I would do, who I’d rely on, if I lost you.” He lunged forward abruptly and caught Harry in a deep hug.

Harry hugged him back, a little stunned, understanding for the first time the depth of emotion that must have made Regulus keep silent about the Muggle’s death for so long. He truly had been afraid that Harry would judge him, cast him aside with no chance for absolution. His body shook with relief now, and Harry held him close, running his hand gently down his back.

“Will you go into the picture to heal yourself?” he asked, when Regulus sniffed and drew back from him.

Regulus nodded, with a faint smile. “Yes. I expect to be gone for a while, Harry.” He hesitated one more time, then said, “There’s no harm in telling you this, now. I’m going to try to figure out what the locket was, exactly. From my viewing of your memories, the diary you destroyed in the Chamber of Secrets was something like it, of the same kind. Voldemort values them highly. I want to know what they are, what it means if we find and destroy them. So I’m going into two pictures, one to heal myself and another that might give me the answer to that question about the weapons.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “You could have done that without telling me the secret of the locket,” he said. “What prompted you to confess, Regulus?”

Regulus retained the same faint smile. “You know me too well, Harry,” he said. “That second picture is known by some in my family as the execution picture. It’s killed people before. The world it leads to offers great treasures of knowledge, but only for a very high price.”

“You thought you might die, and you didn’t want to die with that weighing on your soul.”

Regulus caught his eye. “Yes. And if I died, I wanted you to know why I died, Harry. I don’t want to seek these answers lightly. I think they’re important. And only the current owner of the Black legacy or his heir can enter the execution picture, and of course you can’t go into it, since you’re needed here.”

Harry swallowed his protest. At least Regulus had told him. And he understood, now, a little better, why Regulus had so badly wanted Harry to be his heir. He now had someone to take care of his houses and the other parts of his legacy if he didn’t return.

“All right,” he whispered. “I agree.”

Regulus smiled more broadly this time. “Thank you, Harry. When I’m out of this world, the houses will consider you their rightful owner, by the way, and you’ll appear as Harry Black on the Ministry papers. But that’s just an expression; you don’t have to take my surname. When I come back, the Black name and the formal ownership will return to me.”

Harry heard the plea in his voice, but held firm under the temptation to give in. Just as it was Regulus’s choice to risk his life this way, it was Harry’s choice to remain free of a family name for the moment. “All right,” he said. “Thank you again for telling me.”
Regulus hugged him, then, and held him tightly. Harry hugged him back, though he pulled away when he noticed the heat of the infected Dark Mark through the robe.

“Well, go away and heal yourself, then,” he said.

“Thank you, Harry,” Regulus said. “The last two years of my life have been the richest I’ve lived, thanks to you. I wanted you to know that.” He bowed, and then swept out of the room while Harry still sat blinking.

He didn’t notice how many minutes passed before Peter re-entered, carrying the stone filled with the tainted magic and the Midsummer knife. “He’s gone,” said Peter quietly, taking the chair he’d taken before. “He told me good-bye already, when he realized it was time to go.” He put the stone and the knife on the bed, and then leaned forward, his eyes fixed on Harry’s face. “And now we need to talk about strategy.”

“You said that,” Harry muttered. He picked up the stone. He could feel it filled with both pure magic and the taint. The coaxing, whispering voice of the magic in his head was not as strong now, but more deadly, more venomous, and Harry sensed that when he tried to drain the poison again, it would be more concentrated. “I didn’t know what you meant.”

“Well, now you should,” said Peter. “You can’t sacrifice yourself for a short-term advantage, Harry.”

Stung, Harry jerked his eyes up. “The Midsummer plan isn’t like that. It—”

“Might still fail,” said Peter, turning so that he faced Harry in profile, studying him with just one eye, like a carrion bird. “If you hang all your hopes on it, it’s likelier than ever to, because you’ll pour all your concern into it and neglect basic defense. I think you should remember, Harry, that you need to live beyond Midsummer, and your dying there, even to rid the world of Voldemort, is not an acceptable price.”

Harry frowned at him. “You really don’t think that my death might be required to kill him?” he asked.

Peter snorted at him. “You forget that you’re talking to someone who knows the full prophecy, Harry. It says nothing about that. And even if it comes true three times and chooses a different pair of candidates to fulfill the roles of elder and younger each time, it still doesn’t say anything about death. I plan for you to remain alive. I want you to think that way, too.”

“I do. I’m making plans for after the war. I’m entering a three-year courting ritual with Draco.”

“Those are both wonderful signs,” said Peter. “But you still might stumble because of your focus on the short-term. What happens after Midsummer? What’s your next plan for fighting him?”

“I don’t know,” Harry admitted. “I suppose I might have to concentrate on the weapons that Regulus was talking about, but I don’t know if he’ll have returned by then.” He closed his hand into a fist around the stone. “I don’t know if he’ll ever return, or when I should count him as dead.”

“Two years,” said Peter softly. “That’s the longest any Black heir remained in the execution picture.”

Harry nodded, his throat dry.

“So, you see,” Peter went on, his voice implacable, “you’ll have to think in the long term, Harry, and be flexible enough to have several plans going at once. Don’t halt your vates work while you struggle to defeat Voldemort, and so on. Trust me.” For a moment, a smile Harry had never seen before, part sneer and part twisted grin, slid across his face. “I learned to think in the long run while I was in Azkaban. If I’d thought solely of surviving one day and then surviving another, I would have killed myself. So I worked on the phoenix web, and imagined what I would do when I got out, if that ever did happen. I expected my friends to rescue me at first, when Dumbledore was so honored that no one would care about anything he did to secure the world from the Dark Lord, and then I had to adjust my thinking patterns when they never even came to visit me.” A snarl showed in his voice for a moment, then faded. “So. Adjust your own thinking. Don’t think that the pain you endure has to be alone, or that all of it is an acceptable price for what you might achieve because of it. Delegate. Get help. Tell us what you plan to do.” He caught Harry’s eye. “Remus told me that you’re reaching out to the werewolves. Think of how long they’ve been suffering, Harry, and think that you might be their best hope. Think of what might happen if you die.”

Harry winced. “Isn’t that just forcing myself back into thinking as a sacrifice, though?” he asked. “Of living for other people?”
“Now you’re thinking.” Peter flashed his teeth in a bright, rat-like smile. “Not necessarily, Harry, because I don’t want you to stop living for yourself at the same time. But don’t stop living, please.” His hand came down on Harry’s arm. “I have selfish reasons for asking that, and I have reasons for Regulus’s sake, too. Imagine what would happen if he came back and found you dead.”

Harry shuddered and bowed his head. “All right,” he said. “I’ve started asking for help, but I’ll expand it to asking for help with the phoenix fire, too.”

“Good, Harry.” Peter touched his hand, and then stood up. “Now, I said I’d looked up legends on phoenixes. Why don’t we go to the Black library—excuse me, Your Heirship, your library—“

“Shut up,” Harry muttered, but without much force.

“And start seeing how one controls phoenix fire?” Peter finished cheerfully. “One old legend about phoenixes seems to apply to you. Others might as well.”

It did, Harry had to admit, sound like a better idea than lying around in bed and worrying. He got up and followed Peter to go do some serious study.

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To Be Continued in

**Chapter Seventy-Six: Fenrir Greyback’s Legacy**