Chapter Seventy-Six: Fenrir Greyback’s Legacy

Draco was practicing how to move like a shadow.

He’d thought, after the brief surge of hot panic when he’d decided Harry was dying, and then the whispered conference between Regulus and Snape that announced Harry would have to remain at the Black house for a few days, that he’d want to do nothing but sit and brood about his boyfriend. But he’d got bored of that more quickly than he used to do. Draco had leaned back against his pillow, looking so baffled that Blaise evidently had a need to comment on it.

“Manticore got your tongue, Malfoy?” he asked, peering through his bed curtains. Draco refrained from commenting on the mark on his cheek, which looked vaguely as if someone had slapped him. It would make good blackmail material later. Besides, he wanted someone to pay attention to him.

“No,” he’d sighed, folding his arms and putting them behind his head. “Just—I used to be able to brood on the wrongs done to me for hours. And now I can’t. What’s wrong with me?”

Blaise shook his head. “Harry’s not here to make you into a little orbiting planet?”

“I notice your lioness isn’t here either, though her handprint is,” Draco had snarked, good intentions forgotten, and Blaise had scowled at him and ducked back inside his bed. But his remark had made Draco seriously consider whether it was Harry’s absence that made him feel differently.

In the end, he’d decided that, no, it wasn’t. Since his confirmation as Malfoy magical heir, he’d tried to keep busier, and now it had reached the point where sitting around and brooding on the wrongs done to him felt like a waste. At least his father created plans to avenge those wrongs. If Draco couldn’t do that, said this new sensibility of his, he didn’t deserve to brood at all.

So he joined the rune circle around his bed together again, and lay back, and closed his eyes, leaping into Blaise’s mind—but not to take over his body. He wanted to see if he could skirt his thoughts like a shadow, move about inside them without Blaise noticing and panicking. That wasn’t something he could practice with Harry, even if he’d wanted to; Harry was too sensitive to any change in his mind after all the Legilimency and Occlumency he’d learned and the numerous restructurings he’d done.

He found it was possible to lie like a stone in a river beneath the chattering surface of Blaise’s thoughts, his presence nothing more than a gentle ripple of inquiry every now and then. He could access memories if he really wanted them, or, sometimes, tug Blaise’s head to look in one direction rather than another. He did that a few times for amusement value, so that Blaise read part of the left page of his Astronomy text over and over, and then rose on smoky wings, padding out of Blaise’s head and towards the common room.

He no longer felt the same panic he had when he tumbled free of another person’s body. He had learned to relax and open senses he hadn’t known he had when he was so focused on possessing a body instead of thoughts. Now Draco let himself follow a pulling line, centered on a sixth-year girl studying by the fire. He settled into her body, and let himself get used to the unfamiliar sensations of breasts, soft genitals, strange chemicals circulating in her bloodstream.

He wondered if he could make her scratch her nose, and what would be the best way to do it. Taking control of her hand and lifting it would alert her that something was wrong at once. But maybe he could make it itch?

Draco thought of her nose becoming red and raw and irritated, twitching the thoughts through her brain, mixing them in with the regular ones. A moment later, the girl gave a grunt of annoyance, reached up her hand, and scratched her nose. Draco ran through her mind like a shadow and on to the next one.

He practiced on most of the Slytherins and grew confident before he allowed himself to venture out of the common room. He turned down the dungeon corridor, and a powerful mind yanked him into another body.

Snape.

Snape was marking Potions essays, a frown on his face as he dashed off sneering remark after sneering remark. His mind constructed the words with such flowing efficiency that Draco couldn’t trace the thoughts to their beginning. He settled very carefully into the depths of Snape’s mind.

*He’s a Leglimens. I probably can’t possess him without his sensing me. But it would be a wonderful opportunity to practice…*

Draco stayed still as Snape went on marking, observing the complicated structure of his mind. Quicksilver pools glittered everywhere that he looked, most of them hiding jagged dark shapes—emotions that Snape didn’t want to deal with, Draco
Draco could also see layered trap after layered trap, meant to catch and turn the probing of an enemy. And what traps were there that he wasn’t seeing? It was a good thing that he’d resisted the temptation to possess him.

But still. It was such a wonderful chance to practice. And Snape might know something was wrong, but not what. He was more likely to think the Dark Lord than he was to think Draco. This was the first time that Draco had ever managed to possess someone without eye contact, after all.

That thought startled and momentarily elated him—his mistake, he guessed later. Those emotions were so foreign to Snape’s mind that his thoughts bore down on them at once, trying to guess their source.

Draco found himself whirled around, caught in one of the traps, threaded between its glittering teeth. Snape examined him for a moment, and then he laughed. Draco, spinning, disoriented, couldn’t tell if the laughter was in the physical world or the mental one; he only knew it made the trap ring like a banged kettle, and sent him bouncing from wall to wall.

“Draco. I should have known.” Snape’s voice drained and bled cold. “Think before you invade my mind again. If you intend to possess a Legilimens, you will need to be more subtle than that.”

He threw Draco out, as if he were a horse bucking, and Draco found himself drifting aimlessly in midair for a moment. He started to feel for a thread that would bring him to the next mind, and then he was speeding along a corridor, drawn relentlessly by another one. He wondered if he had remained in Snape’s mind so long that only one person was in the common room.

He understood when he found himself settling into Harry as he strode up the stairs to their bedroom. His gift knew this mind, and had brought him back to a familiar place.

Harry sensed him at once, but unprotestingly carried him up the stairs and walked close enough to his bed that Draco could fly to his body. He opened his eyes, rubbed at them, and rolled over to look at Harry.

“You’re back,” he said.

“So pleased you noticed.” Harry sat on his bed and stretched for a moment, then yawned. His face was exhausted, Draco saw, but it bore no trace of burns.

“That was a stupid thing you did,” said Draco, and Harry looked at him with a faint nod.

“Yes, I know,” he said. Draco kept his mouth clamped shut, because otherwise his jaw would dangle, and Malfoys shouldn’t allow themselves to be that startled. “I should have had someone else with me when it began,” said Harry. “Or I should have stopped when I realized that it hurt. I didn’t think it was supposed to hurt. Of course, I didn’t know much of anything about the phoenix fire.” He scooted up the bed until he lay back on the pillow. “That’s cured now.”

Still trying to deal with the fact that Harry had admitted something risky he’d done was a mistake, Draco could only say, “Pardon?”

“I researched phoenix fire in the Black library with Peter,” Harry said, and then stifled another yawn. “For hours. I think I’ll see the words behind my eyes when I go to sleep.” He shut his eyes as if he would go to sleep then and there, and Draco leaned across the gap between their beds. His hand slammed into a barrier, though, and he realized the rune circle protecting his body was still up. He rose and impatiently smudged it away, then poked Harry.

“You don’t get to tell me that and then just rest,” he pointed out, when Harry opened his eyes again.

“Sorry.” Harry gave him a sleepy smile. Draco caught his breath for a moment, then shook his head and fixed Harry with a stern look. “Peter thought that some of the old legends about phoenixes, the human-created ones, might apply to someone human who had phoenix fire and a—voice.” Harry grimaced. Draco was about to ask what was wrong, but Harry was plowing on. “It seems they do. I can get mesmerized by my own fire if I’m not careful. And there used to be a tale that you could capture a phoenix chick by luring it with the smell of sweet flowers. Peter tried some on me. It has no effect when the fire doesn’t burn, but when it does—”

“Then you aren’t planning on using your phoenix fire in battle?” Draco asked.

Harry shook his head again. “I don’t think it would be useful. Even Fawkes didn’t often burn his opponents, remember? He struck at their eyes, most of the time, or tried small, concentrated blasts of fire. And the way he died was as a sacrifice, consuming himself in his flames, yielding his own immortality. He died as a gateway for the Light, so that it could enter the heart of the Dark storm; it couldn’t have done it otherwise.” Harry stopped talking and stared into the remote distance for a moment. But though grief salted his voice, it had vanished when he went briskly on. “It would be dangerous to use as a
weapon unless I had some idea of how to avoid being mesmerized when the battle is done. As long as I consumed the impurities from the tainted magic in my body, I could keep my mind on the task. The moment I tried to just call the fire for its own sake, I lost my mind.”

“So Snape and I might actually have done you more harm by interrupting you?” Draco had wondered about that since the time, three nights ago, when he’d come back and found Harry rolling on the bed, burning and screaming.

“Oh.” Harry looked startled. “No, I don’t think so. It did hurt, and Peter said that the fire-pool in Silver-Mirror had to do some healing of its own for me.” He held up his left arm and watched it shake for a moment. “I’ve absorbed two different kinds of venom through this in the last month,” he muttered. “Peter says not to do it any more.”

“That’s good advice,” Draco said quietly.

“Yes, I know.” Harry cocked his head. “And what about you? How did you manage to possess me without making eye contact?”

Draco laughed and began to describe his adventures, though he neglected to talk about his possession of Blaise with Blaise right there. He didn’t see a need to describe his resounding failure with Snape, either, though by the glitter in Harry’s eyes, he knew there was something missing. But he didn’t pursue it, and Draco didn’t pursue the mishap with the phoenix fire, since Harry had admitted he was wrong. They slid back more easily into companionship than Draco would have expected.

Maybe something really has changed, now that he’s accepted my courting ritual, Draco thought, and admired the shine of Harry’s eyes when he smiled, and counted the days in his head until Walpurgis.

Harry expected the post owl that came winging in to him at breakfast. He and Scrimgeour had exchanged numerous letters on the matter of werewolves in the past few months, since Harry had made the oath to fight for werewolves’ rights, and the Minister was a few days overdue with the next one.

He didn’t expect what it said, though.

April 5th, 1996

Dear Harry:

You will know that the full moon was the past three nights. It seems that a rogue werewolf calling himself Evergreen bit a member of the Wizengamot on the second one. The Wizengamot is meeting today to set stricter limits on the rights of werewolves. I am sorry, but there is nothing I can do to stop this when the Wizengamot has a personal cause for outrage. And it is feared that Evergreen may be acting out of a larger political agenda. There were a few points in the past when werewolves tried to make people in power amenable to their viewpoints by biting them. It has worked because the victims decided to hide the curse, and allowed their biters to blackmail them.

Elder Gillyflower has decided to reveal the curse she is now infected with. That means that the Wizengamot is buzzing with outrage on her behalf, and fear that this might happen to them next, and determination not to allow any werewolf to achieve his ends based on intimidation. It is likely that the stricter limits will include mandatory confinement on the nights of the full moon for all werewolves, and from there it is only a small step to putting them in Tullianum permanently, with penalties for those who refuse to admit their curse. Amelia is already speaking of authorizing Aurors to kill free-running werewolves on those nights. She is shaken and upset by what happened to Elder Gillyflower, an old friend of hers, but other members of the Wizengamot will not be less extreme in their sentiments.

I am sorry, Harry. But there is no way to oppose this right now. Werewolves are not allowed to speak to the Wizengamot in their own defense, either during trials or in situations like this, when laws debating them are being passed—one of Fudge’s provisions that I never dreamed would cause so much trouble.

Regretfully,

Rufus Scrimgeour,

Minister of Magic.

Harry was shaking by the time he finished the letter, and he crumpled it viciously in one hand as he stood. Scrimgeour hadn’t mentioned what time the Wizengamot was meeting—probably in an attempt to discourage Harry from interfering—and he might already be too late. But if not, then Harry knew whom he wanted to call upon.

Draco grabbed his arm. “Harry! Where are you going?”
Harry tossed the letter to him and sprinted out of the Great Hall. He knew Snape would be following. He didn’t care. At the moment, nothing was more important than having a modicum of privacy so he could use the communication spell that Charles Rosier-Henlin had taught him.

He spoke Laura Gloryflower’s name, and heard the soft chime of phoenix song. A moment later, Laura’s voice sounded in his ears, and Harry said, “A werewolf bit a member of the Wizengamot two nights ago. They’re meeting today to try and push stricter limits on them, which will probably mean confinement in Tullianum on full moon nights—or permanently. Can you help me?”

“Of course,” said Laura at once. “Delilah will not object to others knowing she is a werewolf if it is for a cause like this one. I think the hiding is rather wearing on her, to tell you the truth. She is a trained war witch, and was made to walk in the sunlight and reveal her secrets to all, even as the bells in her hair proclaim her skill. I will be at the Ministry in an hour, Harry.”

Harry nodded, then remembered she couldn’t see him, and said, “Thank you, Mrs. Gloryflower. I know this is sudden, but I don’t see much chance to stop them if we don’t move now.”

“I am prepared,” said Laura, and her voice deepened into a growl. “And I do have favors in the Ministry I may call in, Harry. Ordinarily, I save them for the idle telling of gossip, but this is more important. They are not going to hurt my niece.” She was snarling like a lioness by the time she cut off the communication spell.

Harry turned around, and saw Snape next to him. “When are you going to the Ministry?” Snape asked quietly.

“As soon as you’re ready,” said Harry. “And Remus. I want you both to be there, even though I’ll have go into the courtroom without you, sir.”

Snape cocked his head. “And why is that?”

“They have to see me as an adult, flanked by people committed to the cause of werewolf freedom, and you’re my guardian, sir,” Harry pointed out. “As long as you’re there, it’ll be easier for them to think of me as a child. I don’t want to leave you behind, but I can’t have you overshadowing me.”

Snape inclined his head, various emotions beating just under the calm surface of his face. Harry was fairly sure that one of them was pride, and even surer with the next comment he made. “I can hardly complain about the development of your political instincts,” Snape observed.
It bothered Rufus that he wouldn’t give any name other than Evergreen. His age bothered him, too. When he could look away from the lupine eyes and the teeth, which appeared longer and sharper than any ordinary human teeth even though they probably weren’t, he was very aware that this werewolf was a sixteen-year-old boy. Foul-mouthed, of course, and wearing, before they gave him a prisoner’s robes, ragged clothes that indicated he had nothing much in the world, but, still. Sixteen years old.

And, just to make things even more complicated than they already were, he was a Muggle, infected by some rogue werewolf five years ago, and living with one of the London packs since then. That much he had admitted. Rufus knew it would start at least part of the Wizengamot, Fudge’s leftover cronies, baying about the need to Obliviate Evergreen when they were done trying him—never mind that he already knew magic existed. Then they would get onto cracking down on Muggle “incursions” into the wizarding world, by which they meant Muggleborns’ families knowing about magic, and they would drag Rufus into a political battle he was not ready to fight.

Evergreen could help him, if he appeared more sane and reasonable. But he wanted to drag people around the room by his chains instead, and stare at everyone with burning hatred.

And Rufus could feel his own fear, long-conditioned, squirming in him. He didn’t want to be in the same room with a lycanthrope. He stiffened his shoulders and snapped, “Evergreen.”

The boy stopped struggling with a suddenness no human could have imitated. He turned his head towards Rufus and stared. Sure enough, burning hatred shone in his amber eyes.

“You won’t be able to speak when we’re in the courtroom,” Rufus said. “Someone will cast a Silencio on you—that’s a silencing spell—”

“I know what it is,” said Evergreen, every few words chopped off. Rufus wasn’t sure if it was a speech impediment, or if it just came from his heavy panting, itself born of his constant struggles. “I’ve lived with wizards for the past five years.”

“You know,” said Rufus, seeing a chance that hadn’t been visible before, because of the boy’s self-absorption, “you could get out of your punishment, or get it lessened, if you gave us a little information.”

“What kind of information?” Evergreen let his tongue loll out of the corner of his mouth. Rufus wished he wouldn’t.

“Where your pack is located,” said Rufus. “How many werewolves it consists of. Who they are.” That last was especially important, because werewolves weren’t supposed to have wands. In the wizarding world itself, as in the case of Remus Lupin, it could be ignored as long as the werewolves didn’t use Unforgivables or Dark Arts. But using magic in front of Muggles…Rufus could feel his skin crawling more than it had when he realized the problems Evergreen represented. The last thing they needed was Muggles learning of their world when there was a war on. “Whether the attack on Elder Gillyflower was part of a larger plan or not.”

Evergreen barked at him. Rufus realized only a moment later that it was meant to be a laugh. “I’m not telling you anything,” said Evergreen. “Pack loyalty forbids it, even if you had treated me nicely.” He gave a sharp, sly jerk sideways, and nearly rolled two of the men holding his chains off their feet. Evergreen lowered his head and studied them with his dark fringe falling into his eyes, as if waiting for a moment of weakness.

Rufus ground his teeth and wished they could simply use Stupefy—easier all around, and less messy—but werewolves were highly resistant to magic the day after a full moon, even Muggle werewolves. The Stupefy spells might hold, or they might wear off in the middle of the debate. The chains at least let them confine the werewolf, and without magic of his own, he wouldn’t be able to get out of them easily.

“Listen, Evergreen,” he said softly, trying to make his voice persuasive, trying to remind himself of what Harry had told him last year, that werewolves and the other magical creatures were also people whom he represented, “you must know that most of my colleagues would like nothing so much as to condemn you to Tullianum. But if we know more of the particulars of your situation, then we don’t need to do that. I don’t know what you mean by pack loyalty, but—“

“Of course you don’t.” Evergreen’s face had taken on the implacably bored look that adolescents did so well. “That’s because you’re outsiders.” He said it with the same kind of condescension that Rufus had heard from the lips of numerous people when talking about Muggles and Muggleborns. “Loki wouldn’t expect you to understand.”

Rufus narrowed his eyes. He’d heard of Loki before. Maybe he was a real person, and maybe he wasn’t; so many werewolves in London claimed to be in contact with him that Rufus was inclined to believe the latter. But if Evergreen had seen him, or knew who the person hiding behind the name was, then he could be an even more valuable source of information than Rufus had thought.

“Listen,” he said. “We’re offering you the same chance we would offer most prisoners, the same chance we offered Death
Eaters during the First War. If you give us information, we’ll protect you.”

Evergreen sneered at him. “And I told you, we’re not interested.”

Rufus knew what it meant when a werewolf started using the plural. He wouldn’t say anything else. With a brief, frustrated gesture he couldn’t entirely suppress, he turned out of the room, limping past Percy.

“Did you think he’d turn them over, sir?” Percy asked his back as they walked up the corridor towards the Wizengamot’s courtroom.

“I hoped so.” Rufus rubbed his forehead with one hand. It seemed that something he’d feared like a bad dream a dozen years ago had become all too real. Muggle and wizard werewolves had formed mixed communities on the edge of the magical world, and there would inevitably be crossover, leaking, bleeding in. Evergreen might still have Muggle friends. And he was so young that he would want to brag, to show off or hint at secrets, knowledge he had access to that they didn’t. He might even introduce some of them to wizards, for all that Rufus knew.

And from there, it was only a matter of time until Muggles who would react badly to magic heard of it, or until wizarding authorities did, and pushed Rufus into actions he didn’t want to take but wouldn’t be able to justify not taking.

Or, worst of all, it might give support to the Death Eaters’ beliefs, and push other people into joining them, if they thought that Muggles were invading their world.

Rufus shook his head. I shouldn’t have told Harry about this incident. If Evergreen was a wizard, or if he didn’t come from one of the mixed packs, or if he hadn’t bitten an Elder…and the timing of this couldn’t have been worse, either.

He did pause, then. Yes, all of those factors were working together at once to make this situation as complicated as possible. And that whispered to his Slytherin brain that this was deliberate, planned.

But how could that be? If pack loyalty was everything that Evergreen was hinting that it was, then his pack should have hidden him. Instead, the hunters had reported that there hadn’t been any other werewolves anywhere near Evergreen, and he had run wild through the streets of London, as if he didn’t care about seeking a safe haunt.

Either it was an incredibly clumsy plan, which the smooth execution would argue against, or the werewolves wanted something that Rufus couldn’t fathom.

Or it isn’t a plan at all, and you’re seeing shadows of plans where there’s only desperation, he reminded himself, and then he was at the door of the Wizengamot courtroom and the Aurors were letting him through.

His mood darkened when he realized that Harry was standing in the middle of the sunken courtroom floor, with Laura Gloryflower and Remus Lupin beside him, as well as a young witch who looked Gloryflower, but whom Rufus didn’t know personally. The young woman gazed up at him as he walked to his place in the balcony seats, and he caught a glimpse of amber eyes.

Fuck. He’s going to bloody force the issue, isn’t he? And on the worst case possible.

Rufus sat down solidly as the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures guards brought in Evergreen. Whatever happened next, there was no one right choice to make, and his course wasn’t clear for the first time since he’d become Minister.

Harry had discussed what they should do with Laura before they’d even entered the Wizengamot courtroom. A helpful Gloryflower contact had revealed the time of the meeting, and when they’d shown up, the Aurors on the courtroom doors had argued with them for a few inconclusive moments before giving up, because, Harry thought, of his magic and Gloryflower’s political power combined. They would let them in and let the Wizengamot deal with them.

Remus and Delilah couldn’t speak aloud here, as werewolves weren’t allowed to defend themselves before the Wizengamot. That left the words up to Laura and Harry. Harry had decided that he would add his support only if and when it became necessary. Let Laura lead this particular charge. If nothing else, her support would have the advantage of surprise, since so few people knew that her niece was a werewolf.

Thus he stood silent as Elder Sapientian leaned forward and said, “Well, with the Minister, we are all gathered. And, Mr. Pott—that is, Harry, I’m sure we’re all interested in learning why you’re here.”

“You should be questioning my presence, not his,” said Laura in a voice that seemed to pick up extra echoes from the room around them, as if other angry people were there and shouting in chorus. “After all, he is vates, and sworn to the protection and freedom of magical creatures. But I am Laura Gloryflower, head of a northern Light family. Why am I here?”
“Yes, very well,” said Sapientian, sounding a bit put out. “Why are you here, Mrs. Gloryflower?”

“Because my niece, Delilah Gloryflower, is a werewolf,” said Laura, nodding to the young woman standing silent behind her. It hadn’t surprised Harry to see the way she and Remus had leaned towards each other; Remus had told him, without really explaining what it meant, that he, Hawthorn, and the remaining Light werewolves were becoming a pack. They had the common bond of all being victims of Fenrir Greyback, if nothing else. “And unlike the majority of the wizarding world, I will not cast her out and turn my back on her because of something that was not her fault. I will guard her, and part of that guarding is making sure that persecution does not fall on her. I had considered the anti-werewolf laws up to this point as livable. I am not sure anymore. After all, I am not the one who must labor under them. And this new policy of possibly confining all werewolves, even the most law-abiding, in Tullianum on nights of the full moon is not acceptable.”

“It’s very sad, of course, that your niece was a victim,” said Sapientian, stiffly. Harry knew it wasn’t his imagination that he was looking at Delilah with distaste now, and flinching when she turned her head, as if he expected her to turn into a beast and lunge up the wall at him. “But there’s nothing that we can do about it, Mrs. Gloryflower. Our people, the common people of the wizarding world, must be protected.”

“Do you realize what you are saying?” Laura asked, her voice rising in passion. “Do you realize that anyone, any of your ‘common people,’ could become a victim? It happened to Elder Gillyflower. The problem will not be solved by turning your back on the victims unfortunate enough to contract the disease. And that is what it is, Elder: a disease, a curse. Not a crime, and not a sin.”

“But where and when it spreads, we must protect others against it.” That was Amelia Bones, leaning forward now, her hands clenched around the edges of the balcony railing. Harry could see her face tighten in rage and pain. He remembered, for a moment, what Scrimgeour had said in his letter about Elder Gillyflower being her personal friend, and felt a surge of sympathy. Then he remembered that Gillyflower was undoubtedly rich enough to afford the Wolfsbane Potion, and that Bones would condemn others who couldn’t to existences even more wretched than they already were, and his sympathy withered. “It was spread on purpose by this monster you see before you. It can be no coincidence that he bit an Elder of the Wizengamot, though so far he refuses to respond to questioning.”

Harry turned to look at the werewolf they’d brought in in chains. He was very young, perhaps only a year older than Harry himself, and the way he stood, the way he vibrated, told Harry he was either a Squib or a Muggle. His eyes were bright, and his tongue lolled from his mouth in a gesture Harry had learned to recognize as laughter in Hawthorn and Remus. He met Harry’s gaze, and he winked. Then he bowed, making his chains rattle and his handlers jerk nervously on them.

Another Elder spoke then, voice harsh with suspicion. “You would not know the reasons behind this attack, vates?” She sneered the last word.

“No,” said Harry, though he went on staring at the young werewolf. “I don’t know this man.” But he seems to know me, or of me.

“Please be honest, Harry.” That was Scrimgeour, and he was tense, weary, looking for some way out of this. “Do you really not know him?”

“I’ve never heard the name Evergreen,” said Harry, concentrating and trying to remember if he could have seen this boy in any other context. But he had to shake his head, in the end. He would have remembered someone with such a low level of magic. In the alliance gathering and at Gollrish Y Thie, Calibrid had stood out to him incredibly. “I don’t know him.”

Evergreen spoke then; they probably hadn’t thought he would dare, and so hadn’t Silenced him. “But I know you, vates, as you can probably surmise. Greetings from Loki.”

He was hit with several spells then, at least one of which managed to bind his mouth shut. And still he laughed, his eyes sparkling at Harry even if he couldn’t speak.

Harry took a deep breath and faced the Wizengamot again, motioning with his head to Laura. Increasing suspicion of Evergreen and himself wouldn’t help their cause. He wanted Laura to plead it.

She took up the signal and responded magnificently. “You don’t understand what I will give to help keep my niece out of prison,” she said, her voice clear and unwavering. “And to insure that she can hold a paying job, for that matter, and retain custody of any children she might have in future, and own her own property. I will not let you confine her in Tullianum when she has committed no crime.”

“It’s not certain that we’re going to decide that, Mrs. Gloryflower,” said Scrimgeour, obviously trying to smooth things over.

“Isn’t it?” Laura asked with a scornful toss of her head, echoing Harry’s thoughts precisely. “My apologies, then, Minister.
The faces of your colleagues certainly look as if they’re set and decided.”

“As we should be,” said Amelia Bones. “We must do something about those who would hurt our children, our friends, the helpless and the old. You should know that, ma’am,” she dared to tell Laura. “You are a mother, and dedicated to it. Would you like a werewolf to bite one of your children?”

Laura’s mouth parted, and Harry could see fangs growing. She restrained herself from transforming with an obvious effort. “One has,” she said. “And I have lived with it, and in fact defended her fiercely to those who would question her soul. Delilah is a stronger person for this. She did not become a monster, and she did not, in any sense of the word, deserve it.”

Amelia looked back at her, just as angry, just as stubborn. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Gloryflower,” she said. “But I’ve lost a friend now, and the rest of her life was changed because of what was either a werewolf’s monstrous killing instincts or a sick, disgusting political ploy.” She turned and faced Scrimgeour. “Please call for a vote, Minister. Mrs. Gloryflower and Mr. Pott—the vates have no right to be here. We’ve let them have their illegal say for long enough.”

“We can witness the vote, can’t we?” Laura asked, her voice so proper that Harry knew she was angry just from that. “That is a matter of public record, or would be if anyone knew this meeting was being held.”

Scrimgeour interrupted before any of the Elders could speak. “It is permitted, yes. After that, Mrs. Gloryflower, Harry, I will have to ask you to leave.”

Harry folded his arms, and wished he could force words past the furious lump in his throat. But they hadn’t convinced them, even though Laura’s face said she would keep fighting, and he could not use his magic to compel the Wizengamot to obedience, and he would not use it to make them fear him. He had to stand there and listen as three-quarters of the Wizengamot voted to confine all registered werewolves to Tullianum on full moon nights, unless they could make arrangements for confinement themselves. No one said what would happen to unregistered werewolves or those found running free on those nights, but Harry could guess. The only possible consolation was that Scrimgeour abstained from voting.

Remus said nothing. Delilah said nothing. Evergreen shifted once, and when Harry heard the clink and rattle of his chains, he turned his head to find the young man’s eyes on his, clear and penetrating.

_Why is he happy about this? What does he want?_ Harry continued to hold his gaze as the Wizengamot voted to hold Evergreen until he either agreed to take Veritaserum or confessed to what he’d been planning on his own. Amelia Bones’s justification for the decision was that they didn’t want to misuse Veritaserum and “overstep the bounds of our authority.”

Harry bit his lip to keep from laughing, aloud and savagely, at that statement.

Aurors entered the courtroom to escort them to the door when the proceedings were done with. Evergreen gave Harry another bow, and watched him out of sight, shaking the chains once or twice just to fuck with his handlers’ minds, Harry was sure.

_What does he want? How can I sympathize with a werewolf who did bite someone else on purpose, like Greyback? But how can I do anything else, when I see the way he’s treated, as if he were worse than a Death Eater? Even Bellatrix got more of a trial than that!_

Harry caught his breath and forced his thoughts away from questions he couldn’t answer without more information, onto more productive, if grimmer, ones. _Well, that failed, but that just means that I’ll have to do something else, something more unmistakable, to show everyone how much I mean this oath. And I am going to win in the end. I’m more determined than they are. They’re driven by fear, and I’m driven by conviction._

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Remus walked behind Harry, smelling his confusion and frustration, and half-wished he could tell Harry what the plan was, what Loki was doing. But, of course, he couldn’t, because Loki had specifically asked him not to, and loyalty between packs—and to the man who had helped Remus more than once when he was younger—forbade him to spill the secrets to anyone who wasn’t a werewolf anyway.

Besides, Harry would hate the truth. Loki’s werewolves were upsetting the applecart on purpose. They’d chosen the most difficult candidate to send to trial, the one most likely to stir debate. Evergreen would be doing other things than sitting quietly in Tullianum, and in such a way as to make it impossible either to dismiss werewolves as innocent victims or shove them aside and treat them like depraved criminals. They were equal to wizards, and they deserved to be treated so.

And Harry was part of the plan. By pushing forward, Loki would force the vates to stop sitting on the fence. Come down and join them—and he would, Remus knew, because of the oath he’d sworn and because of where his sympathies lay—and then werewolves would gain their rights more quickly than they would if they waited for Harry to make up his own mind.
He might not ever do it. He was still a wizard, and couldn’t understand the discrimination werewolves faced. He might be content with slow progress from the wizarding side, as long as it was progress.

To Remus, the discrimination was perfectly understandable, and it rasped against him like a polecat’s scent in his nostrils. And he understood the frustration that would drive Loki to send Evergreen after Elder Gillyflower, too, and the loyalty that would let Evergreen go happily to Tullianum and not rely on his pack to rescue him. Werewolves like Fenrir Greyback, serving a cause that would ultimately not benefit his kind, were contemptible. Loki was putting the cause of the packs first, and that was why so many were faithful to him.

So Remus put up his head and paced down the hall behind Harry, sorry for some of the consequences of the plan, but exulting in the idea that someday he might be able to look other wizards in the eye, and speak his piece, and know that they would have to listen to him.

Chapter Seventy-Seven: For Such Is the World

Snape ate his breakfast slowly. It was the first morning of Easter holidays, and most of the students had abandoned the school yesterday. Even the Potter brat—Snape continued to call him that despite his improvements in dueling, because the boy had neither changed his last name nor his impudent behavior in Potions—had gone with the Weasleys, to the same heavily warded location he’d shared with them during the summer. Harry had stayed, and Draco had stayed because Harry had stayed, and of course several of the professors were still there.

Yes. They are.

Snape laid down his fork and leaned forward to stare at Lupin, who was likewise eating slowly, and reading the Daily Prophet with a faint smile on his face. The front-page story, Snape knew, concerned the werewolf who had bitten the Wizengamot Elder. Apparently, he’d started talking last night, but it was nothing anyone wanted to hear. He was lecturing his captors about life in the werewolf packs, and asking, “with a mischievous glint in his eye,” as the paper put it, whether most wizarding parents knew just where their adolescent children spent the evenings.

And Lupin was reading it, and smiling.

Snape wondered that the rest of them couldn’t see it. But then, McGonagall had her mind on the school wards, and Flitwick had a relationship with Lupin that consisted mostly of Flitwick talking and Lupin nodding. And the other Professors were obsessed with their own concerns, except Hooch, who tended to stare at and then glance away from Lupin quickly when she didn’t think anyone was watching. So Snape supposed that the others didn’t notice how strange it was for the werewolf to be happy that another one of the monsters had been arrested.

“Something amusing, Lupin?”

Lupin looked up with that mild shine in his eyes that Snape hated. It said that he accepted all that life threw at him and understood that it wasn’t other wizards’ fault for being prejudiced, but the world’s fault for being made that way. Snape had loathed it more since Lupin became Head of Gryffindor House, because now it was a mask, and not reality. Lupin had accepted far more of his own temper and his own strength since he’d been at the Seers’ Sanctuary. He used the mask to make people think he was gentle. He wasn’t.

“Not anymore. And Snape wondered if that was part of the reason for the smile on his lips, which now he’d tucked neatly away.

“Not at all,” said Lupin seriously. “They’re thinking about confining us in Tullianum on the nights of the full moon, Snape, at least according to this article.” He tapped the words on the front page. “And you know that they decided to do that yesterday, at a meeting we were actually able to see.” His lips curved into a disturbing smile. “How would you feel, if they decided that everyone with the Dark Mark had to spend three nights in Tullianum a month, purely to insure good behavior?”

Snape didn’t respond for a long moment, sipping his tea. Then he said, “I do not consider myself and others with the Dark Mark part of a set, Lupin. I was under the impression that you do consider yourself allies with other werewolves.”

There. There was the beast, in the flash of Lupin’s amber eyes as they turned on him. Snape sat and stared at him. He felt the old fear well up; he had nearly died on the claws of that beast when he was sixteen. He could have become infected. Neither Dumbledore nor McGonagall, of course, would ever believe him when he talked about werewolves being dangerous, thinking it was only prejudice that guided him. It wasn’t prejudice, it was bloody good sense.

And if it hadn’t been Dumbledore’s precious Black involved in that prank, they probably would have been expelled. And Lupin certainly wouldn’t have been allowed to attend Hogwarts.

“I do,” Lupin was saying, apparently recovering from his surprise. “You heard that at Harry’s alliance meeting, Severus.”
He picked at his food for a moment. Snape narrowed his eyes, and watched the way he snapped his jaws. That could have come from the fact that the full moon was only two nights past, of course, but Lupin didn’t ordinarily eat that way even now. It seemed to come from his allying himself more firmly with werewolves. Snape gave a faint nod, feeling the realization sink home in him and link with other observations he’d made about Lupin in the past few days, and then the werewolf met his eyes and held them.

“I don’t think it’s right, what they’re doing,” Lupin breathed, gaze intent. “But there’s one good thing that might come out of it. If the Ministry goes fast and far enough, there’s going to be a reaction. People will only take so much, Severus. We’ve already lost the right to work to keep ourselves alive, to have our own families and homes, to have wands, though they often ignore that last one. They’ll tighten the restrictions now. They’ve taken our freedom. What else is left? Not much. Life. If the Ministry declares a return to the Werewolf Hunts they used to have in the eighteenth century, then yes, I think that’s cause for amusement. They have no idea what the bloody fuck they’re doing, what force they’re about to unleash.”

Snape felt a moment of startled discomfort. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d heard Lupin curse. But he watched Lupin’s eyes go back to the paper, and saw that faint smile appear again, and his mind turned in a new direction, away from one werewolf’s peculiarities and towards what those peculiarities might mean.

He felt himself freeze, not losing movement, but losing superfluous thoughts. His mind pivoted for a long moment, turning, gathering, spinning information. Snape waited. He had felt this before, usually in the moments when he crouched at the Dark Lord’s feet as a spy and considered what he had to say to survive. The cold in his mind stripped away all the irrelevancies and told him what would keep him alive—or, in this case, not him but someone dear to him.

“You are forcing Harry towards this,” he said lowly. “He is trying to stop something that violent from happening, and you are pressuring him deliberately towards it.”

Lupin jerked his head up like a wolf scenting the hounds, but he spoke calmly enough. “I am? Don’t be silly, Severus. Of course I’m not. I assure you, I don’t know the werewolf who did this, and I do wish the Ministry would simply back off and talk with us like reasonable people. But that’s not going to happen. You didn’t feel the atmosphere in that courtroom yesterday. I did. If we simply lie back and do nothing, the Ministry will start killing us, and the fear in other wizards’ hearts will prompt them to accept it. Our situation is the most desperate of all the magical creatures’ right now.”

“And it did not occur to you to tell Harry about that?” Snape asked, his voice soft. Lupin could think it was disbelief making it soft if he wished; that was his prerogative. “It did not occur to you that he would fight, heart and soul, for you without your having to begin a bloody revolution?”

“He has no objections to revolution,” said Lupin, his voice gone colder. “We heard that at the alliance meeting.”

“Not this kind of revolution.” Snape felt his wandless magic peer out from behind his eyes with the force of his anger, and strove to push it back down. This was—too dangerous for him to use it. “He must respect the free wills of wizards as well as of magical creatures, Lupin. Have you forgotten that?”

“And we have a need for him that none of the others did.” Lupin’s voice had lowered again, and was passionate enough to sound like a growl. “You forget, Severus. The others are bound, but they are spared further harm. Their webs extend so far and no farther, because most of the wizards don’t even know about the webs. We are the ones being pushed against, and we are the ones who stand to lose our rights one by one. And who knows if he will ever break our webs and free us? That would involve acting against the free will of the wolf. Harry may have sworn to our cause from his own principles, but the need we have of him extends beyond that, to the powerful wizard and the Black heir. And that is power that Harry has been reluctant to use in the past.”

Snape stared at him in silence for a long moment. Then he said, “You are acting like humans in this.”

Lupin gave a sharp nod. “Humans armed with the only weapon we have. I don’t like it, I don’t like us having to do this—”

“What is ‘this’?” It had occurred to Snape that he knew none of the details of the plan, even if he knew the motivation.

Lupin shook his head. “Pack loyalty forbids me telling you, Severus.”

Snape leaned back in his chair and narrowed his eyes. “And so I am proved right once again,” he said, deliberately making his voice as sarcastic as possible. He had to make Lupin intrigued enough to keep looking at him, so that his Legilimency probe would go home and strike at the mind behind those eyes.

“What do you mean?” Lupin leaned a little nearer.

Snape spoke smoothly, even as he sent his mind knitting forward. He could insult James Potter and his friends in his sleep. “That the Marauders are a pack of worthless cowards, braggarts, and bullies, Lupin, who would betray anyone for the sake of getting what they want. I had been willing to reconsider you in light of what you have done, and tried to do, for Harry. I
see now that the only one of you worth anything is the rat.”

It worked. He was back in his own mind, holding the information he desired, and Lupin was rising from the table, looking completely unaware that something was wrong, his teeth bared in a vicious snarl. McGonagall turned and looked at them sternly. Lupin ignored her, and Snape did not dare take his eyes off him. His hand was on his wand under the table, his magic trembling at the edge of his control.

“You cannot understand,” Lupin whispered. “You will never understand, Snape. I tried to deny and excuse what I was for far too long. In the Sanctuary, I learned to acknowledge it. And I learned that no one is going to do anything for us unless we do it for ourselves. I love Harry, but he will hesitate on this too long. He’ll give more weight to the free will of wizards than of werewolves. And while he’s trying to find some way to satisfy both sides, they’ll start killing us. Even if we hadn’t done anything to force the issue, it would have come to this sooner or later. I love Harry, but I don’t live for him, the way that you apparently do.”

He turned and walked rapidly towards the doors of the Great Hall. Snape sipped his tea and watched him go, ignoring Harry’s anxious glance from the Slytherin table. Harry would come to see him in a short time, no doubt, and hear all about it.

The Headmistress was a bit more insistent.

“How do you get those post owls to do your mischief for you?”

Snape glanced at McGonagall with a faint smirk. “Always blaming the Slytherin, Minerva?”

McGonagall visibly reined herself in. She did approximate a neutral tone a few moments later. “I was merely observing the fact that you have a temper, Severus, and Remus does not.”

Oh, doesn’t he? Severus smiled at her, and saw her frown. “I suggest you talk to Remus about it,” he said, standing. “I would be interested to see what he says.” He caught Harry’s eye briefly, then turned towards his own quarters. He had marking that he could do until Harry arrived.

Before he could get out of the Great Hall, the post owls came in carrying the package for Harry.

Harry noticed the post owls immediately; it was hard not to, when five of them were clutched about and laboring with an enormous package. The package came to the Slytherin table, the way he had been secretly suspecting it would since he saw it. The day a mysterious delivery entered the Great Hall and was not for him would probably be the day the war was over.

The post owls looked like ordinary birds, he noted as they set down their burden gently in front of him, not from Gringotts or any pureblood wizarding family. However, when Harry tried to fetch food from the table to feed them, they spread their wings and wheeled away at once, heading for the windows. Harry blinked and looked at the package, wrapped in red and black paper, wondering if they were upset or merely tired.

Then Argutus, coiled on his shoulder, lifted his head and flicked his tongue. “There is something organic in there,” he said. Harry warily cast one of the spells he’d seen Narcissa using on the Room of Requirement, and nodded. Yes, there was flesh and blood in the package, but he couldn’t tell what it was. The spell wasn’t sophisticated enough to sense the difference between, say, a venomous snake and a non-venomous one.

“Let me, Harry.”

Harry moved out of the way so that Draco could cast some dispelling magic on the package. No traps were revealed. Nothing moved, either, even when Draco incanted a curse Harry didn’t know, and explained that it was meant to sting a hiding person or creature intolerably. Draco tried most of the countercurses he knew, and they struck the package harmlessly.

Harry leaned closer, and let Argutus have another sniff of the package, as well as sniffing himself. No smell came to either of them except a faint, dry, dusty one. He shook his head. If there was an animal in there, Argutus should be able to tell me what kind it was. Flesh and blood, so it can’t be a plant. What the hell is it?

He badly wanted to open the package and find out, but he wasn’t about to without some more preparation. He Levitated it, and nodded to Snape, who had halted behind his chair. “Do you have potions that can melt the box without touching the contents, sir?”

“I may have, depending on what the contents are,” said Snape, and led them out of the Great Hall. Harry could feel eyes on him from the few remaining students, mostly members of the dueling club. He met a few of them and shook his head. He
didn’t have any more idea what was in the package than what the cause of the argument between Snape and Remus had been.

They entered Snape’s office, and Snape busied himself taking out a Dissolving Potion. He cast several spells of his own spells on the box first, but wasn’t able to tell what was inside. He then instructed them to move out of the way as he poured the potion on the box. Harry had to hold an increasingly curious Argutus back, or the Omen snake would have slithered down his arm and towards the box, determined to be the first one to get a look inside.

The box began to smoke as the potion struck it, and then it billowed up into purple fumes, flowing back to the vial when Snape motioned for it to do so. That left the object inside the package untouched. Harry couldn’t tell what expression he’d died with. It might have been shock, or only mild surprise.

“That’s not—” Draco said, and stopped. Harry shot a sideways glance at him and found him looking pale. Well, while he might have heard stories about this, he wouldn’t ever have seen something like it. Harry slid an arm around Draco’s shoulders to give him support, and felt the other boy lean against him. “That’s not really cut off a centaur’s head and send it to you?”

“Centaur?” asked Snape sharply. He’d been staring at Firenze; now he looked around at them.

Harry nodded. “Firenze was one of the centaurs I freed from their web in the Forbidden Forest. He was—he was going to go negotiate with the giants for me.” He swallowed. “I didn’t know that giants would work preservation spells and send the head back when a negotiation failed,” he said quietly.

“They would not.” Snape pointed his wand at the head. “Acclaro nuntium!”

The head wavered like smoke for a moment, and Harry prepared to protect his nose, since he thought the preservation spells would dissipate and they would be assaulted by the smell of rotting flesh. Instead, Firenze’s features simply rearranged themselves, and now Harry could see the message on the face in impossibly tiny and clear letters that must have been cut by magic.

Snape leaned near enough to read them, his wand still out. “Potter,” he said, his voice empty of emotion. “Your centaur was too late. I thought it would be amusing to send you this, as a little memento mori. Regards, Igor Karkaroff.”

Harry caught his breath, and swallowed. Emotions collided in him like charging horses, so thick that he could barely decide what to feel first. Sorrow that Firenze had died? Rage at Karkaroff for desecrating his body like this? Fear that the giants were now fighting on Voldemort’s side? Disgust that the Death Eater had chosen to send such a vile message?

“Karkaroff sent many messages like that during the war, but usually to victims’ families,” said Snape, his face expressionless. “My pardons, Harry. I would have warned you beforehand about what to expect, but it has been years since I have seen a package like that one.”

“It’s—all right.” Harry squeezed Draco’s shoulder one more time, and stepped away from Snape, forcing his mind to function. “Voldemort has the giants now. We’ll need to be more careful, plan more carefully, than ever.” He studied Firenze’s head for a moment. “Will the preservation spells suddenly leave off?”

“They should not.” Snape’s mouth twisted. “Igor always took good care of his—presents.”

Harry nodded, and then gently lifted Firenze’s head from its place. “I have to tell the centaurs,” he explained, more to Draco’s horrified gaze than to Snape’s. “They deserve to know that one of their own died trying to help me.” Now he could feel sorrow; tears stung his eyes as he stared down at Firenze’s head and remembered how the centaur had been alive on New Year’s Eve. The skin felt as warm under his fingers as if that were still the case. Karkaroff couldn’t have cast his preservation spells more than a few minutes after he’d killed Firenze. “And they deserve to know who did it.”

“Harry.”

He looked up at Snape, who was standing with no expression at all on his face. That was all right. Harry knew that didn’t always mean he felt nothing; sometimes he was simply trying to control his own struggling emotions. “Yes?” he asked.

“You should know,” said Snape softly, “that Lupin is part of a plan with other werewolf packs. The arrest of the young werewolf who bit the Wizengamot Elder was calculated. He’ll be staying in prison, but acquiring various objects and spreading various bits of information to show wizards that werewolves are different and more dangerous than we think they
are. And more bites are planned, as well as the opening of the wizarding world to the Muggle one through the border communities. A leader named Loki, who lives in London, has arranged this. They’re trying to speed along something they believe would have happened anyway—the Wizengamot turning to the open hunting and killing of werewolves—to force you to help them.”

Harry felt his insides freeze in a way that hadn’t happened even when he saw Firenze’s head. “Remus is part of this, you said?” he whispered. “How do you know?”

“I used Legilimency on him this morning at the breakfast table,” said Snape. “I know only as much as he does, which isn’t much. He didn’t want to know everything. Apparently he thinks his betrayal of you is lessened that way.” Snape sneered, but it seemed almost reflexive; his dark eyes were watching Harry intently. “Lupin all but admitted the motivation to me at breakfast, this morning. The werewolves want to live in wizarding society, Harry, since they don’t trust you to break their webs. They think you will not act against or kill the wolves inside them, when those wolves don’t want to die. They’re planning to use you as a driving force to secure themselves rights as soon as possible. They think no one else will fight for them.”

Harry felt light-headed. He leaned on the wall for a moment, and found himself running his fingers across the letters carved on Firenze’s face; the weight of the head rested in the crook of his arm. Then the weight was gone, and he was turned to the side and resting his face in Draco’s shoulder.

“Gryffindors,” said Draco as he held him, one poisonous word, and that was all.

But it crystallized what Harry was feeling, and set him back into the world with a thump. He pushed at Draco until his boyfriend let him go in puzzlement, and stepped back, and looked up at Snape.

“They’re right,” he said quietly.

Snape narrowed his eyes at him. “What do you mean?”

Harry sighed. “They’re right that I have to help them. They’re not exactly right that no one else will fight for them, but I’m the only one who’s sworn an oath to do so. Old oath, remember? Turns my blood to molten silver if I don’t help?” He smiled slightly at Snape. “So their plan worked in that respect. I have to use my political power to fight for them. And their situation is different than most other magical creatures’. Dobby wanted to be free and journey wherever he liked, and I had to give that to him. The centaurs wanted to go on living in the Forbidden Forest and help me with the war effort, even with —” His gaze went to the head Draco had set aside. “Even with things like that. The werewolves want to be part of the only society where they can really survive. If that’s their will, then I need to help them achieve it.”

Snape was scowling as if someone had tricked him into swallowing a cauldron full of Calming Draught. “Even though Lupin is a traitor?” he all but spat.

Harry winced. “I didn’t know how much he cared about his people,” he said quietly. “But he deserves the right to his own life, doesn’t he, his own concerns? He’s not just my ally, not just my parents’ friend.” He glanced sideways at Draco. “I couldn’t ask Draco to give up being a Malfoy just because he loves me.”

“This is a bit different, Harry,” said Draco, all but radiating fury. “My being a Malfoy doesn’t involve my betraying you.”

“I know.” Harry turned back to Snape. “Thank you for finding out about this, sir. Now that I know this Loki is trying to manipulate me, and that the werewolves are willing to bite people to achieve their goals, I know better how to act. But I can’t abandon them all just because Remus betrayed me and some of them have stupid ideas. I can’t tar them all with the same brush.”

“You do realize,” said Snape, his voice going deadly soft, “that some of your allies might think you were lying if you do not do what you promised you would, and make Remus politically powerless for acting against your principles?”

Harry closed his eyes and nodded. “Yes, I know,” he said. “And that’s—something I’ll need to handle. First, though, I’ll need to find out how deep it goes, whether any of the other werewolves in the alliance know about it, and whether Remus is willing to just give up associating with me. After all, sir,” he added, opening his eyes and focusing on Snape, “if this is supposed to be completely in the daylight, I’d also have to tell him how I knew. Would I have to turn you out of the alliance for using Legilimency on him?”

“Do not be ridiculous, Harry.”

“But it’s something I have to think about,” said Harry, as calmly as he could with the knowledge that Firenze had died for him and Remus had betrayed him weighing on his mind. “The ethics of it are delicate. I’m hoping that Remus will be happy with the political help I am willing to give, and will understand when I outline the kinds I won’t. If not, then yes, I’ll make sure that he can’t interfere with the alliance. But I haven’t even talked to him. I have no idea what he’ll say.”
“Isn’t it enough that he tried to manipulate you?” Draco’s arms draped over his shoulders again. “I would be angry just given that.”

“So am I,” said Harry, touching his cheek in reassurance. “But I won’t shove him into the same category as Dumbledore, either, not until I have answers.”

“Will you go to him now?” Snape asked. “I wish to be with you when you do.”

“No.” Harry gathered up Firenze’s head again. “Now I have to call Millicent back to school, since she’s my official representative to the centaurs, and make sure that she’s free to go with me when I deliver this.”

“It’s wasteful,” Millicent said for the fourth time since Harry had summoned her and she’d agreed to Floo to Hogwarts. Her voice was disgusted.

Harry nodded as they walked along the main path of the Forbidden Forest, towards one of the clearings where he often met the centaurs. “I have no idea what Karkaroff hoped to accomplish with it, really,” he said quietly. “Now we know that the giants are fighting on Voldemort’s side, when he could have kept that a horrible secret. And Karkaroff has to know that this is hardly going to make me back off from the war and sit in a corner tearing my hair.”

“Most Death Eaters do extravagant wasteful things all the time,” said Millicent. “So long as they’re grotesque or cause mayhem, they really don’t care.”

“How’s your father?”

Millicent gave him a grim little smile, to say that she appreciated the ironic springboard Harry had used into the subject. “Well enough,” she said. “My mother’s found a spell that mostly conceals the smell of the wound. I hope it continues working. Talk about another extravagant, wasteful gesture. The Fisher King Curse really does smell terrible.”

Harry nodded. Then he paused, as he became aware of hoofbeats traveling parallel to him through the underbrush. He was surprised at how long it had taken the centaurs to approach, really. Maybe they had been unable to imagine why he would walk through the woods with Firenze’s head in his arms.

Magorian appeared, shaking his tail and staring steadily at Harry for a moment before he turned to Millicent. “Greetings, stone-bearer,” he said. “What news do you have for us?”

Millicent dipped her head. “Greetings, leader,” she said. “I am sad to say that Firenze will run no more. A Death Eater named Karkaroff who was also sent to negotiate with the giants cut his head off and returned it to Harry this morning.”

Harry looked up at him, and watched the shadow of his dark head crowned by branches thick with budding leaves. That’s what Firenze was supposed to look like, he thought, even though Magorian’s coat was considerably darker than the other centaur’s had been, and he was taller. If he had stayed here, he would be alive still.

Harry swallowed several times. It was hard to remind himself, even though he had determined to think of it that way, that Firenze had chosen his fate of his own free will, that he had wanted to help Harry with trying to secure allies. Neither he nor Harry could have known that Karkaroff was with the giants and would do this.

“Vates?” Magorian made it a demand and a plea at once.

Harry looked up at him again. “I am sorry,” he whispered. “For your loss, and for the fact that Firenze was free for such a short time before his death.” He looked down into the face cut with Karkaroff’s obscene letters. “I would bring him back if I can. But I cannot. All I can do is bring his head home, and tell you that I would have given anything for this to be different.” He knelt, gently lowering the head to the earth.

For a moment, it sat there like some strange plant rooting in the soil. Then Magorian stooped and picked it up, his strong arms making the burden seem a slight weight. “Thank you, vates,” he said. “It has been centuries since wizards in general have wished any fate for us other than the one our web dictated. Your sorrow is sincere, and Firenze chose his path, and did not know where it would end. It is enough.” He reared, and a strange cry, half-neigh and half-whistle, exploded from his mouth.

Harry started as a pair of centaurs he’d never seen before, short and wizened with white coats and hair, emerged abruptly from the trees on either side of the path. They linked their arms with Magorian’s, and turned to guide him and the head away into the Forest.

“You are welcome, vates,” said Magorian over his shoulder. “But we must ask that you excuse us for our funeral rites. No human has witnessed them, and no human ever will. Be assured that we still intend to aid you in this war. We have
suffered a loss along with you now.”

Harry nodded, and stood there watching until they plunged out of sight. It took a much shorter time than it would have in winter, since the trees and thickening flowers swallowed them quickly. One last flirt of one of the white centaurs’ tails, and they were gone.

Millicent put a hand on his arm. “Are you well, Harry?”

Harry turned around and gave her a faint smile. “Fine. Just thinking about what I’ll have to do next.” That was confront Remus, and it gave him a sickening churning sensation in his stomach. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and said, “Thank you for coming at such short notice.”

“You may always call on the Bulstrodes,” said Millicent, with unexpected conviction. “You’ve certainly done enough for us.” She paused, and then added, “Besides, we’ve invested so much of ourselves in the alliance already. We deserve something out of it, I think.”

Harry laughed, it was that unexpected, and felt his heart lighten a little, Remus or no Remus.

Harry took a deep breath and rapped on the door to Remus’s quarters. He’d put this off as long as he could, first telling McGonagall what had been in the package he’d received, and then going over some of the plans for Midsummer with her, and then reading in one of the books he’d retrieved from the Black library about phoenix fire, and then persuading Snape and Draco that he could face Remus on his own and he didn’t think Remus would attack him, or, Merlin forbid, bite him.

Remus opened the door at once. From the look on his face, he’d been expecting Harry, though not alone.

“I figured out that Severus must have read my thoughts from the sneer on his face at lunch,” he said, before Harry could speak. “Come in, Harry. There are certain things that we both need to understand.”

Harry couldn’t help the slight bristling those words provoked along his spine, though he reminded himself that, even if Remus was arrogant and had been stupid, that was still no reason to think all werewolves were. He stepped inside, and Remus shut the door and turned to face him.

He also let the masks slip from his expression. Harry found himself looking at a man he almost didn’t know, a man who had been pursuing some grand passion while Harry pursued his.

*And he never told me?*

*Did I ever ask?*

Harry felt a momentary deep sadness shift through him, a frustration that he couldn’t understand everything about the people who mattered to him and couldn’t help them in their every endeavor. He had already been forced to prioritize wizards, he thought. He had said that Draco and Snape were more important to him than others. Would he be forced to prioritize causes, too? Would he think that helping Remus was less important than accomplishing other goals?

It looked as if he would have to, and even as he faced the choice head-on, Harry hated it. No one had said he had to like this part.

“Sit down,” said Remus courteously, and Harry took one of the three chairs in the room, watching Remus narrowly all the while. Remus practically shone with nervous energy. He sat down himself, but only for a moment. Then he sprang up and walked about, his hand skimming the walls.

“Why?” Harry asked his back.

Remus tensed, and then turned around. “Because my year in the Sanctuary taught me to trust myself,” he said. “I *did* try to keep my anger under control, but I was no longer afraid of releasing it. And I *did* try to act both for werewolves and for you as long as I could, but now the point’s come where we part paths, Harry, and for that I am truly sorry.”

The man Harry remembered was looking out of his amber eyes, gentle and mild with remorse. Harry sat on his resentment. It appeared that Remus was going to explain logically. Harry thought he was wrong, but, no doubt, Remus thought that about him. If he did have good reasons for his actions, Harry would be happy to hear them.

“Why?” he repeated.

“Because it’s never going to get better if we don’t do something,” Remus said, a snarl growing in the back of his voice. “I’ve watched the newspapers over the past several months, Harry. There have been other front page stories, but hidden in the back of the *Daily Prophet* is often something about werewolves: letters from wizards saying they don’t trust us,
speculations about whether Wolfsbane Potion actually works, interviews with people from the Department for the
Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures saying they had to hunt down such and such a rogue werewolf in a certain part
of London, when it was probably someone’s dog. And I’ve gone back and read some of the older stories, too, the ones that
first proposed anti-werewolf laws and the records of the ones passed.

“They’ve only been pushing against us, Harry, never allowing us breathing space. They took away our right to speak in
court first, our voices. Then they removed our ability to have custody of children. Because, of course, we’re an evil
influence.” He spat the words, and snapped his teeth after them. “Then they took away our ability to work. That old law
about werewolves not having wands was brought up again, and started being enforced. And since then, they’ve been
chipping away at all we have left, our freedom and our lives.

“Sure, the lucky ones of us can afford Wolfsbane Potion, but the price of that is rising, too.”

Harry blinked. He honestly hadn’t noticed. “It is?”

Remus snorted and glanced at him. “Of course. Since the suppliers of the ingredients have figured out that the demand is
growing, they’ve raised the price. And demiguise hair is particularly expensive, because there are people agitating for us to
leave the peaceful, innocent demiguises alone.” Remus folded his arms around his middle and closed his eyes. “I used to
laugh over the fact that so many people love animals like unicorns and demiguises, while they don’t care that much about
beasts they think are ugly. It doesn’t seem that funny, now that they’ve decided werewolves are among the ugly ones.”

“You could have come to me,” Harry said. “I would have done something.”

“What?” Remus opened his eyes and stared at him bleakly. “What could you have done? The demiguises are magical
creatures too, Harry, so it’s not as though we can ask you to champion our interests over theirs. And you won’t use your
magic to compel people into lowering the price of ingredients. And my wolf—” Remus flinched, and Harry suspected that
the mere mention of the word had called the hateful, blood-filled voice to the surface of his mind. “My wolf is intelligent,”
Remus said softly. “You know that. All the werewolf webs are. Are you going to kill them, Harry? Are you going to bind
them? You’ll slice all the other webs, but they aren’t living creatures in their own right. These are, and they’re self-aware.”

Harry clenched his hand. “None of that explains why you’re spreading the web to other people,” he said.

“Because it’s the only weapon we have,” said Remus. “They won’t listen to us, they don’t think we’re beautiful, they don’t
even pity us most of the time. The only thing we can do is make them fear us. No, that might not bring the change we want,
but waiting quietly won’t, either. The last three decades have proven that. And I think—and most of the werewolves in
southern England think—that the time is coming when we must act or die.”

“It was still wrong.” Harry leaned forward and stared intently into Remus’s eyes. “I do consider that a betrayal, Remus.”

“And you are too bound among other concerns to see things the way we do,” Remus said. He never looked away from
Harry. “It’s admirable, Harry, the way that you try to balance all these concerns, but it won’t work in this situation. Our
enemies aren’t going to change their minds. They fear us too much; they would even if Loki hadn’t decided to move. And
you won’t oppose them.” Bitterness flecked Remus’s voice. “You won’t oppose them, and you won’t oppose them, until
they clamp the collars around our necks. And even then you’ll only wring your hands—sorry, hand—and say that you had
to change their minds by persuasion, not force.”

“So you decided to force me to use force?” Harry asked.

Remus inclined his head. “We can at least set the pace of our own destruction, if destruction it’s going to be,” he said. “And
I don’t think it will be, not now. If we provoke the Ministry into moving carelessly, then you’ll defend us. We’ve watched
you, Harry, closely. The only time you use your magic without remorse, without flinching, is when someone else’s life,
rather than will, is in danger. Protect us, get involved in the debate on our side, and then you’ll go ahead with putting our
interests first. It’s the only way.”

“Has it ever occurred to you that I’m less likely to do that now that you’ve chosen to go about things this way?” Harry rose
to his feet, feeling his magic stir around him like wings. “That I wouldn’t appreciate manipulation? That I might be so
disgusted at the fact that you’ve chosen to bite other people, and play to the stereotypes most wizards have of you, that I
would turn my back on your cause?”

“Honestly, no,” said Remus. “We know you too well, Harry. When they come for us, we know that you’ll be there—if only
to stop the conflict from exploding into a bloody war. You’ll defend the innocent. True, you might let the werewolves who
bite others perish. But you’ll protect those who can’t protect themselves, and there are more of those than there are wizards,
because we’re less powerful than they are.” His eyes shone.

Harry nodded at the wand that lay on the table near Remus’s hand. “You’re a wizard, too, Remus.”
Remus slowly bared his teeth. “Am I, Harry? Am I? Tell that to the Wizengamot. Technically, you know, I’m not even supposed to have the wand, or this job, and as long as I were starving to death in peace and silence, like a good little puppy, they wouldn’t care what happened to me, wand or not.”

“So you’ll let them define you?” Harry shook his head, and behind him, his magic made his chair vibrate in frustration. “You are, with the biting and the violence. I thought better of you than that, Remus.”

“That’s all philosophy, Harry.” Remus waved a dismissive hand. “We’ve tried that, and tried that, and that doesn’t work. We’ve made the decision, or the werewolves who follow Loki have made the decision. And his are the wolves who are going to be taking the risks, letting themselves be arrested.”

“Does Mrs. Parkinson know about this?” Harry asked.

Remus shook his head. “No. Nor Delilah or Claudia, before you can ask. They’re becoming part of my pack, but none of them are London werewolves, or know many of the traditions of a pack yet. I didn’t tell them, because I didn’t want to chance them making an uncomfortable choice.”

“Or revealing the plan to me before Loki was ready to move,” Harry said.

Remus nodded.

“Why are you telling me the plan now?” Harry asked. “Surely you wanted to keep it secret?”

“Because you know some of the reasons already,” said Remus. “And when I realized Severus had read my thoughts, I spoke to Loki. He gave me permission to do this. He was never that happy about keeping the secret from you. He did think of approaching you, until he realized that you wouldn’t kill the webs, and that you had too many conflicting interests to help us without a little push. Your oath was a blessing.”

“What sort of person is Loki? It sounds like he’s sacrificing his wolves,” Harry said, wondering if that was the right tack to take. Perhaps the sacrificial angle was the way to wake Remus up. He had rejected Dumbledore when he had finally been able to see how much his sacrifices cost.

“Willing sacrifices, Harry,” Remus said. “The same thing you did to lift the centaurs’ web. A pack is—a pack. All the people helping Loki know his mind exactly, and they all agreed to do it. Those who didn’t have retreated into their own packs, and have been kept ignorant of what he chose. They’ll be benefited by it ultimately, though.”

“Has it even occurred to him that he could end up spending hundreds of lives and changing nothing?”

Remus smiled slightly. “Of course it has. But there’s a reason he chose the name Loki, Harry. He’s a chaos-rider. He’s like Draco, actually: an expert in shaping a wild situation to his advantage. He acts and reacts faster than most of his opponents can. He’s confident that he can snatch victory out of this volcano.”

Harry stared at Remus for a long moment. Remus looked back, and it became obvious to Harry that he wasn’t about to change his mind, wasn’t about to look back down his path and see that it was wrong, wasn’t about to see the tidal wave of blood that could drown them all.

“I’m going to cut you out of the alliance,” Harry said softly.

“I know,” Remus said.

“I resent this,” said Harry. He realized he was shaking. “I’m disappointed in you.”

“I know,” Remus repeated.

“You know that trying to compel me is the worst course you could have chosen?” Harry asked. “When I’m a vates, and respect free will above all?”

“But you aren’t our vates, because you can’t benefit us as a vates,” Remus said, his voice and face both very gentle. He even looked aside from Harry a little, as if he thought the eye contact too challenging. “I said that already, Harry. You’ll never break our webs. Will you?”

Harry gave an irritated shrug. “I hadn’t thought about it,” he whispered. Could he bring himself to kill another species, which was essentially what the werewolf webs were? The best solution would be to transfer them elsewhere, but if they didn’t want to go, what would he do then?

“And you have too many other considerations waiting for you on your path,” said Remus. “It’s all right. We understand that, Harry. That’s why we chose to step back and act outside of the vates requirements. It’s no use approaching you like the centaurs or the unicorns did, anyway.”
**What a bloody fucking mess,** Harry thought tiredly. “The betrayal does feel personal,” he told Remus, and saw his eyes shut this time.

“For that, I am sorrier than you can know,” Remus whispered. “But we value different things, Harry.”

Harry stepped out of the room and shut the door behind him.

The next day, he scanned the *Daily Prophet* grimly when it came to the table, determined to see what secrets might be hiding among the stories he’d ignored. He paused on a story about the rising price of demiguise hair, and read about a group that, as Remus had said, was agitating to protect demiguises and prevent their hair from being shipped out of China and Japan at all. He also paused on one of the objects in “Cheshire’s Curiosities Column,” more shaken than he had expected it to be.

*And for our final mysterious account today, we present the story of one Fiona Mallory, 37, a former Auror, found in a trance in her London flat. Investigating personnel from the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes state that the trance is apparently the result of an illegal Dark magic object, but have been unable to locate the object, and so unable to wake her. Mallory’s breathing is calm, her eyes fixed, and her body preserved as though by Still-Beetle. If anyone has any information on what object may have caused Miss Mallory’s unusual state, they are encouraged to contact the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes at once.*

Harry put down the paper and rubbed the gooseflesh that appeared on his arms. Had Mallory been the victim of someone wanting to punish her for her torture of Lily and James? Why not just kill her, though, if that was the case? Or perhaps she’d stolen a Dark Arts object when she was sacked from the Ministry, and been careless in how she used it?

He closed his eyes and sat back. The world seemed to be tumbling out of control around him, and he badly needed some kind of firm footing back under him. He couldn’t trust Remus, Connor wasn’t here right now, Draco would be glad to help but didn’t know much more than Harry himself did, if as much, McGonagall was busy with the need to re-ward the school, and Snape—

*I don’t know if I can trust Snape yet, not fully.*

Well, that was something, wasn’t it? And he had some time to handle it, the two weeks of Easter holiday.

Harry’s eyes snapped open. He knew Vera was still staying in the school, though he had only spoken with her three times since the New Year. Apparently, her gift hadn’t yet overcome her and forced her to go back to the Sanctuary. He would ask Snape if he would be willing to speak to her. If not, then he would ask Snape to talk with him in private.

*I need to be able to trust Snape. He’s an adult, he has contacts and means of gathering information that I don’t, and he sees angles and shadows I don’t. I would never have suspected that Remus was involved in this stupid werewolf situation if he hadn’t told me. But even then, I was angry at his using Legilimency on Remus, and I had to wonder if his dislike of him was part of the reason he read his mind at all.*

*It’s time to have out the things we didn’t talk about after I rescued him from the Chamber of Secrets. I want my guardian back completely. And it’s the best step I can take now, for his mental health, and mine, and the war.*

**Chapter Seventy-Eight: Snape, Harry, and Their Issues**

“Sir?”

Snape looked up sharply. Harry was peering at him around the corner of his office door, his face set politely but implacably, as if he were going to drag Snape off and make him reconcile with the werewolf. He carefully put down the Potions text he’d been reviewing to remind him of the uses of dragon’s blood and turned around to stare at his ward.

“What do you have in your head this time?” he asked bluntly. *When I know that he’s going to have me doing something mad anyway, I should know what it is as soon as possible, so that I can protect both of us from the consequences of his stupidity.*

“That I’m really fucking tired of not being able to trust you,” said Harry cheerfully, and stepped into the office, pulling the door shut behind him. Snape experienced a spasm of alarm for the volatile Potions ingredients around the walls, but Harry didn’t pay any attention to them, instead staring intently at Snape’s face. “That I’m really fucking tired of you not being able to trust me, even to do something as basic as take care of myself or test my own magic without a guard sitting by just in case I light something on fire.”
“You did light yourself on fire last time,” said Snape darkly. He was not about to let Harry forget that.

“Yes, but I didn’t mean to,” Harry said, and then paused and shook his head before resuming the same slightly manic cheerfulness. “And I didn’t come here to talk to you about this, not yet. I wanted to ask if you would go to Vera, the Seer, and let her look at our souls as she speaks to us.”

Snape choked. Then he said, “The werewolf has hexed you. It can’t be Imperio, because you can throw that off. Hold eye contact, Harry, so that I can make sure it isn’t something else that affects the mind. Perhaps it only affects the mouth, and you are silently berating yourself for saying such a ridiculous thing. There are potions that turn all one’s words to nonsense —“

“Is it really that ridiculous a suggestion?” Harry sounded both exasperated and offended. “This is why we need her. You still think that no one else would want to see your soul.”

“I know what my soul looks like.” Snape scowled at Harry, a scowl he knew was truly horrible; it had frightened Lupin this morning, when he met the werewolf coming out of the Headmistress’s office. McGonagall had apparently told Lupin that he must leave the school, that she would not trust him to act as Head of Gryffindor House any more. Lupin had been angry enough that his eyes were glowing amber, and yet he had shrunk when he saw Snape. “I see no reason to have anyone else poking and prying about in it. Imagine a swamp of pitch at high midnight, Harry, and you will have my soul.”

“You know that’s not true,” said Harry patiently, “or you would never care about anyone else but yourself. You’ve changed, and I think it’s time to see how much. Will you come with me to Vera or not?”

Snape snarled between his teeth. “Not willingly.”

Harry eyed him for a moment, then nodded. “All right. Come and talk to me in your quarters, then.” He glanced at the Potions ingredients on the walls for the first time. “I wouldn’t want to corrupt any of your experiments, or damage future ones, with the amounts of magic I’ll probably be leaking.”

“What will we talk about?” Snape asked. He became aware that he was clutching the Potions text like a shield as he stood, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. Harry knew this would make him vulnerable. Harry had seen him more vulnerable, when the pain in his leg was a screaming thing and not a gnawing, persistent ache.

“Why we can’t trust each other,” said Harry, looking fully into his eyes. “Why I’m still upset at you for taking the information about my parents and Dumbledore to the Ministry. Why you don’t trust me to stay by myself for an hour without bursting into flame. That kind of thing.”

Snape looked steadily at him. Harry showed no sign of backing down or glancing away. Snape was not sure what had brought this on—the conversation with the werewolf, which Harry hadn’t sketched to him in more than details, should not have—but it was apparent that they were going to have this conversation now or later. And putting it off until later might result in Harry showing up at his door with the Seer next time, and letting her look at Snape’s soul before Snape could stop it.

“Very well,” said Snape, hoping his voice sounded ungracious and neither hopeful nor angry. “My rooms.” He swept out of the office, letting Harry have a full-on view of his set back, and not his pale face or tightly clutching hands.

Harry let Snape choose his seat when they entered his rooms. Harry had been the one to abruptly show up and demand that they do this. It was only fair that he should choose the ground.

Snape decided to sit on the couch in front of the fire, perhaps so he could feel the comforting warmth at his back, perhaps so that Harry would have to sit in the smaller and more vulnerable chair. Harry didn’t really mind. What mattered to him most was that they were finally going to talk about this, and, Vera or no Vera, they weren’t leaving until they’d built up a new foundation of trust or repaired the damaged one.

“Sir,” said Harry, when he was seated. “What do you want to talk about first?”

Snape stared at him in silence for a long time. Then he said, “Why don’t you tell me the major reason that you still don’t trust me? I had thought you did, Harry, after the Chamber.”

Harry sighed and rubbed his eyes with his hand. “I thought it at least repaired enough that we didn’t need to do this,” he admitted. “Then I realized, yesterday, that I assumed automatically that you’d used Legilimency on Remus because you hate him, not because you thought it would help or protect me.”

“That is wrong.” Snape’s voice had gone flat.
“I know.” Harry lowered his hand to his lap and gave Snape an apologetic look. “But it’s one of those things you need to talk about. Is there anyone else whose mind you would have read so willingly, sir? That’s alive, I mean? I could see you reading Sirius’s mind, or Dumbledore’s, if you could get past his own Legilimency. But would you read the Headmistress, or Flitwick, on the off-chance that they were hiding something unpleasant in their thoughts?”

“This was more than an off-chance.”

Harry waited, but Snape didn’t elaborate. It seemed that he would have to do all the work, at least for this part of the conversation. Well, he had expected no less. He wanted his guardian back, and his guardian was quite content to squat in the hole he’d dug for himself like a toad. Harry would pull the toad out.

“Would you have asked permission from the Headmistress, first, before you read her thoughts?” he asked. “From Professor Flitwick? From Professor Sprout?”

Snape stared straight at him, this time without a scowl, without any expression at all. Harry waited. Snape often used silence to unnerve students and make them confess their crimes before they were ready. But it could be used on him, too, and Harry knew his conviction—at this point—to be greater than Snape’s. He waited, and Snape cracked.

“There is no one else who would be so dangerous!” he snarled at last. “There is no one else who has a curse that he can spread to anyone in the school with a single bite! And Minerva agrees with me, Harry. She dismissed Lupin this morning, and told me that she could not have a Head of Gryffindor who was dedicated to something else more than he was dedicated to the safety of the school.”

Harry winced. He had known that McGonagall would do something like that, but he had not expected it so soon. He drew in a deep breath, and reminded himself that Remus would be all right. He’d set that Gringotts account up for him, after all, and Remus could live out of it.

But it’s more than that. It’s the symbolism of things. McGonagall just dismissed the one werewolf who’s ever been welcome at Hogwarts. He now has no job. Even if he wasn’t being paid in anything other than food and clothes and Wolfsbane Potion, the fact that he could live around and with other wizards is an important signal that some of us are accepting of werewolves.

Harry told himself that that wasn’t the issue right now; his conversation with Snape was, and Snape had likely only brought this up at all to distract him. Harry recognized the gambit. He’d used it himself countless times, especially when he wanted Narcissa Malfoy to stop worrying about him; he had only to bring up Draco, and she was involved in considering what her beloved baby boy wanted and needed, with fewer concerns about Harry himself. Harry kept a determinedly pleasant expression on his face. “So you admit that you would not have mind-read anyone else except Remus without at least asking first.”

“It has nothing to do with him being a Marauder,” said Snape quickly, his face gone dark. “It has everything to do with him being a danger to you. You forget, I treated Dumbledore the same way.”

“And Dumbledore was a Gryffindor and a friend of the Marauders,” said Harry, with a nod, “the one who kept them in school when they should have been expelled for hurting you.”

Snape started to answer, and then paused, staring at him.

Harry figured out the cause of that stare a moment later. “Of course I don’t think that what they did to you was right!” he snapped. “Honestly, sir, you’ve grown so used to being alone with your grievances that I think you’ve forgotten other people can sympathize with them. I would have done what I could to make sure that Sirius and James paid for that. There’s only the little matter of my not having been born at the time, you see.”

Snape recovered himself at the sarcasm. “Dumbledore was a menace,” he said, “at least where Slytherin students were concerned. And, in the last years, he was a menace to you. And so was Lupin.”

“Then you could have gone to the Headmistress, and told her what you knew without benefit of Legilimency,” said Harry. “Besides, I think we were discussing something else, sir. Do you really think that no one would ever agree that your almost dying or becoming infected by a werewolf was wrong?”

“Precious few people have ever been in sympathy with it.” Snape stared down his nose at him as if Harry were Connor instead of himself. “Dumbledore and Minerva both refused to even consider expulsion for Black or Potter. Minerva took House points and gave detention, and that is all. And Dumbledore told me that I should try to understand what would have led them to play that prank, that I should try to make more friends and be kinder.” Bitterness choked his voices like ashes in a chimney.

“Then I understand why you hated them so much,” said Harry. “But do you really think the Headmistress hasn’t changed in
the twenty years since, sir?”

“It is not her I am concerned about.” Snape flicked a hand in dismissal. “I am concerned with the fact that Lupin was a danger to you.”

“Because he was a Marauder.”

“Because he was a danger to you.” Snape stared at him pointedly. “Have you forgotten, Harry, that he suspected what was happening to you for a long time before he tried to do something about it? And even then, what he did was attack Black the moment he was free, not comfort you or apologize to you. The beast inside him wanted flesh. If he understands human emotions such as compassion, there is precious little evidence of it. Simply because he was mild, everyone assumed he was kind. I think that is false.”

“You go too far,” said Harry softly, narrowing his eyes. He almost wished he could have brought Snape to his conversation with Remus yesterday after all, even though he would have had to put Snape under a Silencing Charm to get anything productive said. “Remus was genuinely upset about having to betray me yesterday—”

“He did not have to betray you, Harry.” Snape’s voice now sounded like rain pounding on gravel. “He is weak, and always has been. He has only decided that he should give in to the beast now, instead of hiding from it. That is the only difference—”

“He chose,” said Harry. “I hate what he chose. I disagree with it. I hate that he thinks biting other people is all right. But you—you’re making it sound as if he was compelled to pick the path of rage and murder because he isn’t human.”

“He is not!”

Harry blinked a few times. The only sound for the next few moments was Snape’s harsh breath, rasping in and out of his lungs as if he had run a race. Harry sat, and thought, as best as he could in front of a prejudice he hadn’t even been suspecting he’d dig up.

“Well,” he said at last. “That explains a lot.”

Snape turned away from him, moving one hand absently through his hair. His bad leg trembled, and Harry felt a momentary twinge of sadness, that that wound would probably indicate Snape’s vulnerability for a long time—and not just by limiting his movement, the way it did now.

“Sir—”

“It is true,” said Snape lowly, never looking up. “Werewolves are not human, Harry. They are slaves of the beasts inside.” Harry might have believed him if not for the tremor underlying his voice. Snape wasn’t saying this in an effort to convince Harry about Remus. He was saying this because—

“Merlin,” Harry breathed. “You’re afraid of him. You’re afraid of all of them, and you haven’t wanted anyone to know.”

Snape’s gaze snapped to him. Harry saw anger and terror mixing there like crunching shards of glass. Snape’s façade had been utterly destroyed. Harry shook his head in silence, and asked his next question before he could think better of it.

“How in the world did you survive spying? You would have had to work beside Fenrir Greyback.”

Snape rebuilt his mask in a few places, though his voice still shook when he spoke. “Greyback followed Voldemort’s orders and did not bite fellow Death Eaters in human form. I trusted him to be terrified of the Dark Lord. If he’d touched me, he would have been deprived of the pleasure of future kills. And I could easily request to hunt elsewhere on full moon nights. The Dark Lord was—aware of what had happened to me because of Lupin. He even approved of my beliefs, because while he used werewolves, he considered them tainted. They are beasts to him. He may use Muggleborns, too, but that does not mean he will not kill and enslave them in the end.”

Harry nodded, understanding his mentor better than he had now. Snape hated feeling helpless. If he had a true and genuine fear, it would not be surprising that he concealed it for his life and never acknowledged that it was terror driving him. And, of course, while Dumbledore was alive, he would have had to hide his distaste if he wanted to work under a Headmaster who didn’t think werewolves were monsters.

But McGonagall’s already shown she’s different. Now, it’s a belief that’s going to cause him problems if he works with me.

“It must have cost you much to go into the Woodhouse battle on a full moon night,” he said.

Snape shook his head slightly. “The werewolves were in a different part of the valley, and under Wolfsbane. And by the time we realized it was an ambush and that we could actually be facing werewolves there, I believe that Greyback and his consort were already dead.” He sat silent for a moment, and then added, “And with you there, Harry, I could turn my terror
“I know.” Harry took a deep breath. “But, sir, now you’ll have to find a different set of tactics. I’m going to be working beside werewolves often as I try to find a solution for their problems, and that means you’ll be brought into contact with people you fear and hate often. I want you to know that I do sympathize with what happened to you because of James and Sirius, but I think that your prejudice against werewolves is wrong, stupid, and counterproductive.”

“They are beasts,” said Snape. “I say nothing, Harry, about it being their fault that they were bitten. The werewolves like Greyback are rare. I know that. But it changes them, the bite. Just as someone under the Imperius Curse may cause a great deal of damage that is not directly their fault, they will bring blood and ruin down if you work with them.”

Harry sighed. “You don’t think you can overcome this?”

Snape stared at him haughtily. “I don’t see why I should have to. My attitude is the more reasonable and sensible one.”

“You will have to because of me,” Harry told him. “I can assign you elsewhere, the way Voldemort did, but I know you won’t always want that, because of your desire to be at my side protecting me. Sooner or later, you’ll have to deal with a situation where you’re fighting beside me and werewolves are fighting beside me, in wolf form, even. Can you take that?”

Snape shut his eyes and said nothing for a long moment. Then he said, “I will try.”

“Thank you,” said Harry softly. He was still a bit shaken in the wake of Snape’s deep hatred and deep fear. He had not sensed a trace of that in Snape for so long. Of course, Snape was a master Occlumens, skilled at feeling only those emotions he wanted to feel—and it was possible that he had shown signs of it, and Harry had dismissed them as merely hatred for a Marauder, a companion of James Potter. Harry was desperately glad to have discovered this weakness now, rather than in the middle of battle.

*Of course*, he thought, as Snape opened his eyes and turned to face him, *that means that he’s going to strike back, try to equalize the secrets that are shared and spread around today.*

“I have answered your questions,” Snape said, voice almost normal. “And I want you to answer one of mine.”

Harry inclined his head.

“Why are you still so angry at me for filing child abuse charges against your parents and Dumbledore?” Snape asked quietly.

Harry felt himself freeze up for a moment. But Snape had shown incredible courage in admitting his own fear; could he show less? He lifted his head and said, “I don’t entirely disagree with what you did, now that I’ve had some months to think about it. I can see factors that I couldn’t when I was closer to the situation. I agree that Dumbledore should have gone to trial for what happened to Peter, at the least. And Connor could have filed charges against Lily for quiet abuse. That’s one of the few regrets I have in killing Dumbledore, you know?” he added. “That he did not come to trial. I think Peter did deserve to have everyone know he was cleared directly, instead of indirectly through his testimony in my trial.”

“And James?” Snape kept his voice neutral on the name, which Harry was sure must have taken a deal of effort.

Harry winced. Then he plunged forward, and said, “I—I tend to think that the child abuse charges you filed against him were still mostly a means of revenge, sir. I know you said that they weren’t. But without those charges of neglect, there was really nothing to arrest him for. You could have secured Dumbledore and Lily from doing any more damage to me, or anyone else, by telling the Minister of the crimes they’d committed against other people. You chose that route instead, and I often think it was merely to include James in the smearing.”

He looked up to see Snape watching him in silence. It seemed to be puzzled silence. Harry was vaguely surprised. He would have expected his guardian to at once begin denying that he’d done anything against James in the name of revenge; he’d said so before.

Then Snape said, “You still don’t think your child abuse should ever have been exposed, do you?” His voice was soft and amazed.

Harry bit his lip. Then he said, “I know you did it to protect me. And I agree that they deserved justice for their crimes. But I would have preferred if we could have done something in private that would have protected me and given them justice for their crimes. I agree that you would have had to take charge of it. I really wasn’t thinking straight at that point.” He produced a smile, hoping Snape would smile back. He didn’t. Harry pushed forward. “I didn’t want anyone to know I had been abused. I agree everything else had to happen, now, though, as I said, I’m still suspicious about your motives for including James. But the exposure of that particular crime didn’t need to happen.”

“Why not, Harry?”
“I just—I didn’t want it to.”

“How not, Harry?”

Harry sat back and closed his eyes. He was concentrating on holding his magic so that it wouldn’t make his chair explode.

“Because.”

“How not, Harry?”

“Because WHO CARES?”

Harry shouted that last, and then dropped back into his chair, panting. Snape said nothing at all, and whether it was to fill up the silence or for some other reason, Harry found himself pouring out words.

“I just—I could have healed in private. The people who needed to know about it, Draco and you and Connor and the Malfoys, knew about it. We could have done something with my parents and Dumbledore to punish them for that crime in private, and then dragged them up before the public for everything else. Then there wouldn’t be newspaper articles about me, and stupid, stupid interrogations with Madam Shiverwood, and people trying to use my gift for sacrifice against me. Everyone who needed to know already knew. And I can accept concern from you and Draco on that score—you love me, you know me personally—and I can accept Connor’s anger, since he didn’t know about it for a long time and I was trying to pretend, at that point, that at least James wasn’t guilty. But everyone else—I want them to go away. It’s all going to go smash in the end if they don’t look away. They have to see the principles I’m pushing forward, not me. They have to be willing to fight this war because of the idea that magical creatures deserve to be free and because they want to struggle against Voldemort, not because I’m the one leading them. It’s like the difference between this—” he waved his severed left wrist “—as a symbol and as a source of concern for them. It’s all right if they care about it because they think that Voldemort or his Death Eaters might inflict such horrible crimes on them. It’s not all right if they think of it as something I suffered and want me to get another hand because of that.

“And it’s the same thing with the trial. They could know that Dumbledore and Lily and James did evil things. They didn’t have to know that those things were abuse of me. I don’t want them to care too much. I can tolerate them looking at me as a symbol, as a leader, as a speaker, as a political player. Not as a victim.”

He stopped speaking, and sat, empty and drained, for a long moment. Snape’s voice flowed into the silence like water.

“Is that the reason you refuse to get another hand, Harry?”

Harry lifted his head and blinked at his guardian. “Yes,” he said quietly. “Getting another one would be an admission that I think of myself as crippled, or that I deserve to be pitied. I don’t want that.”

“You think you have to be strong enough to bear any adversity?”

Harry frowned. “In public, yes.” Isn’t that obvious? “In private, I can relax around you and Draco, and admit things I wouldn’t admit otherwise. But show me one leader who limps into battle with wounds bleeding all over him and asks for pity, and I’ll show you someone who’s going to die on the morrow—or in three seconds, if Voldemort is involved.”

“I think you would find that not many people share your opinion,” said Snape softly. “Wanting to be two-handed is not a pitiable thing, Harry, only a normal one.”

“And one that makes me too human to them,” Harry countered. “I’m only practicing politics, sir, and you said Friday that you were happy to see my political instincts growing. Isn’t this another instance of it? Presenting a strong front in public, no matter what I feel like in private?”

Snape controlled his exasperation and his fondness, both. Harry wouldn’t respond well to either right now.

And at least it explains a good deal about him. I wonder, though, if he will want to hear that there will always be some people who follow him because of who he is, not what he preaches, and that his moments of weakness can be inspiring, because of how he bears up under them?

It didn’t matter if he liked it or not. Snape would be remiss to keep it from him while they were being honest. “If someone chooses to admire you for yourself, Harry,” he said, “that is something you cannot force him out of.”

“Who said anything about forcing?” Harry tossed his head like a nervous horse, a gesture Snape thought he might have picked up from Regulus. “I’m only trying to make sure that it doesn’t become a plague.”

Affection leaked into Snape’s voice before he could stop himself. “You are allowed to think about yourself, Harry. If you
want a second hand, you are allowed to try to break the spells Bellatrix may have left on your wrist and replace it, rather than refuse it because you think all your attention has to go into the war and how you appear to other people.”

“I don’t think that,” Harry countered immediately. “After all, sir, I’m talking to you for a personal reason. I want to be able to trust you again.”

“So that I can also trust you,” said Snape. “So that you can also have someone who backs you in the war.”

Harry scowled at him.

“Will you think about getting yourself another hand?” Snape asked. “Not because of how it might look to others, but because you want one? If nothing else, it would be good practice for your courting ritual,” he added delicately, wondering why Draco had not told Harry this. Perhaps he had assumed Harry knew, or wanted it to be a surprise. “You are supposed to be thinking of your partner and yourself then, not the wider world.”

“I had guessed that,” said Harry. “And what makes you think that I want another hand?”

Snape raised his eyebrow. Harry sighed. “Yes, all right, fine,” he said, in a voice that was not quite a snap. “But I don’t miss it as much as I would have expected. The pain has caused me more trouble, since Voldemort likes to use the memory of it to taunt me, and it was the one that Dumbledore used to capture me in Capto Horrifer.”

“Will you think about it?” Snape asked. He was perfectly aware that Harry had agreed only that he might want his left hand back, not to thinking about getting his left hand back. Harry could use conversational tricks like that in his sleep, but could rarely get past him.

Harry gave him a single glance like broken glass. “Yes, I will,” he said. “And if we’re into thinking about sensitive subjects, will you think about never using compulsion on Draco again?”

_Masterfully turned, Harry_, Snape had to admit, as he found himself once more on the defensive. “I did it in the first place because I wished Draco to have some interests independent of you,” he said carefully. “I knew the book would put a compulsion on him. I did not think it would be as damaging as it turned out to be, and certainly I did not think he would be able to brew that potion as fast as he did and summon his ancestor’s ghost on Halloween. I underestimated Draco’s skill in Potions.”

“None of that excuses you lying directly to me,” said Harry, eyes furious. At least they didn’t hold the same blank, dead rage that Snape had seen last Midsummer night, when Harry tried to choke him to death with magic. “And you can’t claim that you were protecting me this time. Why did you do it?”

“I think you know the answer to that one,” said Snape quietly. It would involve admitting to fear again if he said it, and he thought he had done enough of that in this conversation.

“I want to hear you say it again.”

“I feared that you would not trust me if you heard that I had used compulsion, no matter what the purpose,” said Snape. The words stung his lips as they slid across them, but at least, this time, Snape had had the choice to say them, and hadn’t had the confession forced from him the way his terror of werewolves had been. “And you needed an adult to trust at that point, Harry. It does come back to protecting you, no matter what you think.”

Harry raised his head and studied him in silence for a moment. Then he said, “You need to trust me more, sir. I hated you for the compulsion, of course I did, but more for the lie. If you’d just told me from the beginning that you wanted Draco to concentrate on something besides me and that the instrument you chose was ultimately too risky, I could have accepted that, because it would have been a mistake, not a calculated deception. You think I’m going to turn away from loving you at any moment, and that’s not true.”

Snape closed his eyes. He didn’t think that, of course he didn’t think that, it was too soppy to be a thing he would think— But it was true. Why else hadn’t he told Harry about his Death Eater days, or shared how he knew so many of the wizards and witches who had been part of that first, failed meeting? Because he was afraid of Harry flinching away from him in disgust once he discovered some of the things Snape had done, both before and after he turned spy for the Light.

“Can you trust me that much?” Harry asked softly.

“I will try,” said Snape. He knew it would be hard. He would be struggling against his own nature, after all, and the bitter lessons he’d learned so young that they never stuck him as cynical any more, simply the truth of the world. Everything he loved was snatched away. Everything he knew as good turned out to be an empty mask stretched over corruption. It had
happened with his expectations about Hogwarts as a child, and the Death Eaters, and Dumbledore as the embodiment of Light. Someday, Snape knew, he would wake and find that Harry had gone, too, estranged from him forever by his own corruption.

A hand touched him, tilting his chin up and opening his eyes. Snape found himself looking directly into Harry’s face. And Harry had dropped the Occlumency barriers behind his eyes that usually contained his emotions, and opened the quicksilver pools.

Snape found himself swept into a mass of affection and love and admiration as strong as a riptide. Trust was a lesser current in it; as Harry had said, his ability to trust Snape had rather diminished since he brought the Potters and Dumbledore to trial. But it was still there, and Harry went on determinedly showing him the truth, strung between memories from the Chamber of Secrets all the way back to first year, that he loved Snape, valued him, and could trust him again fully, even if he did not now. He wouldn’t let Snape throw that away just because of his own insecurities.

It was intolerable that he not respond to that, and with a gesture of equal respect and honor. So Snape opened his own Occlumency pools. Harry had time for a startled gasp before he tumbled into the emotions that swam there.

_Fear_. That was everywhere, Harry saw. Snape was afraid of losing him, afraid of finding out that he had driven Harry away forever, afraid that an enemy would catch and kill Harry one of these days when one of them wasn’t quick enough, afraid that Harry would let threats get close to him because he loved people and forgave them too much. Fear, bordering on terror.

_Rage_. That danced past as a curtain of fire, not blue and gold like phoenix fire, but a red so deep it was almost black, and thus, Harry thought, almost the deep green of the Slytherin colors. Snape hated most of the world that would threaten Harry. Oh, he might have valued Harry at first because of vengeance on James Potter and Dumbledore, there was no doubt of that, but it had changed since then. Now he hated Remus as a threat, Voldemort as a threat, the political players in the Ministry as a threat, and was quite prepared to hate Lucius Malfoy as a threat if he showed himself so. That mingled with the fear, and explained, Harry thought dazedly, why Snape was apparently incapable of letting him investigate his own phoenix fire alone.

_Love_. That drove Snape, too, but it wove through the rage and the terror in sparkling threads, and so Snape could easily pretend it was something else. The world took away love, butchered it and slit its throat. He saw it happen with Harry as well as everyone else. Why should he believe that he would be safe if he showed it?

Harry found himself laughing helplessly as he fell back into his body. He closed his eyes and buried his face in Snape’s neck for a moment, embracing him, as he carefully rearranged his own Occlumency pools. He was sure that Snape was doing the same thing. It would have hurt for him to keep them open as long as he had.

“You can’t put me in an egg, you know,” Harry whispered. “You can’t keep me safe from every danger.”

“I know,” Snape said, voice muffled. “But you understand why I want to?”

“Better than I have.” Harry was a little dazed, but he could feel an edge of emotion skimming across his mind. _Merlin. Is that what it’s like, having a parent? Is that what a parent is? Then maybe I can be a son._

He was not entirely sure yet; the emotion was still tentative, darting and diving and dodging and playing games with him. But he was hopeful, now. If Snape’s emotions were some of what a parent might feel, then Harry thought his own emotions, which complemented them, might be what a son would feel.

_Maybe. Oh, maybe._

He sat back at last, and opened his eyes, staring directly into Snape’s, but not opening himself to Legilimency this time. The moment for that was past. He had given Snape reason to trust him. Time to see if it would work. “Can you trust me?” he asked quietly. “Not to abandon you because of some imagined sin, and to protect myself as well as you try to?”

Snape inclined his head just a hair. “I can,” he said. “I know that you could not—would not wish to back away, or harm me, because of—what I saw.”

Harry nodded, satisfied.

“And you?” Snape tilted his head in challenge, an old sneer flickering around the corners of his mouth. “Will you trust me not to worry unreasonably, and to do what I think is in the best interests of your safety, not out of old grudges or malice?”
“I think so,” said Harry. “Yes. I can.” He stared at Snape a moment more. He had to admit, he’d been humbled by the extent of Snape’s fear for his life. He knew Draco felt much the same way, but Draco was in love with him, and Harry could accept that because he experienced the same extremes of rage and distress when Draco got threatened. He also wanted to protect Snape, but his fear wasn’t exactly corresponding, because he trusted Snape to (mostly) protect himself. “Sir—you care more for me, and better for me, then my parents ever did,” he said.

Snape’s arms slid around him so abruptly, and squeezed so tightly, that Harry lost his breath. He leaned his head against Snape’s chest for a moment, though, and accepted the embrace, then returned it.

“That,” Snape whispered, directly into his ear, “is a precious gift.”

Harry closed his eyes and said nothing. Another tentative emotion had come to skim across his mind, stronger than hope and more uplifting than humility: exaltation.

“Oh, Merlin, I’ve got one person I can trust no matter what. I have someone to go to if everything, the werewolves and Draco and the battle on Midsummer and the revolution after it, gets to be too much. This is brilliant.

Chapter Seventy-Nine: Violent Dawns and Renewed Wards

Harry shaded his eyes with his hand, and carefully considered the golden light making its way from the east. He stood on top of the North Tower, which gave him the best view of the sunrise in Hogwarts, to see if what he’d noticed yesterday and the day before was really true.

Yes, he decided after a moment. The gold spilled across the sky in a distinct shape, flaming in the midst of all the clouds and gentler traceries of pink and blue and orange. Harry supposed someone could have cast a spell to create the shape, but three mornings in a row seemed excessive, especially since the shape looked like it reached across half Scotland at the least.

The shape was a gryphon’s wing.

_Well, the wild Dark announced its presence with violent storms_, Harry thought, stepping back from the edge of the Tower. _I suppose it’s not a surprise that the Light announces its presence with violent dawns_. That comforted him, somewhat. It confirmed that there was a storm of Light coming, and Midsummer Day was, if not actually proclaimed by the prophecy, still the best guess for when it would arrive, since that was the day when the Light was most powerful. And it would definitely come to Hogwarts; the prophecy had said so.

Harry snorted, then. Snape would have something to say about him putting so much trust in Divination.

He turned to go back below—he wouldn’t want to panic Draco by having his boyfriend wake up and find him gone—and started when he realized a cloaked figure was standing behind him. “Professor Lestrange,” he said with a small nod. “Is something wrong?”

Acies drifted past him and leaned on the Tower battlement, staring at the eastern sky. At least, Harry thought she was, since her head was turned in that direction. Since the hood covered her face completely, though, she could have been looking at something else and he would never have known.

Harry watched her thoughtfully. The revelation of her true identity at the spring equinox meeting hadn’t caused the stir Harry thought it would. Most parents seemed to have accepted that, since she had taught their children well so far, she would go on teaching them well. Or perhaps they were simply afraid to object to a witch who could summon dragons from New Zealand.

“Harry.”

Harry cocked his head. He had heard Acies sound like that only once before, when she came to tell him about the third prophecy. “Yes, ma’am?”

“Can you hear the singing?”

Harry closed his eyes and listened, focusing his magic towards the sky. He supposed there was a frenzied symphony playing on the edge of consciousness, but that was not a surprise, with Walpurgis coming up in a few weeks, and the wild Dark’s music circling closer to the earth as a consequence. For the first time, though, he made an effort to push his hearing beyond that, to take in some other kind of melody, if it existed. Perhaps it was audible only to ears that were stained with dragon.

_No. Wait_. He thought he could hear a song so joyous and savage that it cut into his ears like shards of glass. The only one he had ever heard to resemble it was the melody playing as he’d freed the Runespoors. Dark creatures, they’d been bound with a song of Light they couldn’t undo, the music that the turning of the moon and the sun and the stars played. Harry
remembered that song as soothing, though, not this cascade of sapphire notes that slipped out of his head the moment he heard them.

“Yes,” he breathed.

“I do not know if I can help you during the Midsummer battle,” Acies whispered, her voice the most choked Harry had ever heard it. “The songs come closer. The Light will sing on Midsummer. And the Dark will be singing beyond that, to counter its ancient enemy. Both of them will focus on Hogwarts, because there are two powerful wizards here. And I—the human and dragon have equal weight in my mind now, since I summoned the Antipodean Opaleye.”

Harry caught his breath. “You said that if you came too near to the great music, then you feared you’d change,” he said. “That the dragon would take over, the Singer responding to the songs.”

Acies nodded. “I am sorry. I had hoped to summon a dragon to aid you in the battle, but now, I fear—“ She shuddered and swayed and made a small, helpless sound, and Harry found that he pitied her, for the first time. She had always seemed so inhuman before that it was hard to pity her, to feel anything but sorrow and compassion for her as grand as she was.

“I understand,” said Harry. “If you summoned a dragon to aid me, that would tip the balance, and your own dragon would emerge.”

“It would,” said Acies softly. “And I am not ready to stop being human. Not yet.”

Harry gently touched her robe. He wasn’t sure if he’d made contact with her spine, though he thought he had. “Please don’t trouble yourself about it, Acies,” he said softly. “The help you’ve given me so far has been more than welcome. And I don’t want anyone to sacrifice themselves to my battle, my need.”

“Thank you,” Acies whispered without sound, and stood still as Harry took himself off the Tower and towards the Slytherin common room. Draco was probably awake by now, and muttering about how anyone normal would use the Easter holiday to sleep in, not go watching violent dawns from the tops of towers.

Harry was halfway back to the dungeons when he heard a low, vaguely familiar voice say from the hallway ahead, “Point Me Harry vates.”

Harry dropped into a crouch. He wasn’t sure how someone hostile could have got in past McGonagall’s reconstructed wards, but better safe than sorry—and she hadn’t finished the work completely, not yet. He spun smoothly around the corner, his hand already uplifted to bring down scorching whips of magic if they were needed, or a Body-Bind if they weren’t.

The person looking for him laughed and lowered his wand. “Good, Harry,” he said with a brief nod. “Prepared, eh? Good, good. Constant vigilance!”

Harry blinked and dropped his hand. “Auror Moody? Is something wrong at the Ministry?” He couldn’t imagine any other reason for Moody to be here. He wasn’t the kind of person one would choose to send on peaceful or diplomatic missions.

“Something wrong at the Ministry?” Moody’s face darkened like one of the clouds that had failed to show up in the sky this morning. “I’ll say there is. Spineless cowardice, rampant corruption, use of Dark magic as if it were going out of fashion tomorrow.” He shook his head. “Besides,” he added, voice taking on a sly cadence, “your information’s a little outdated, boy. You’re calling me by a title that I don’t have any more.”

Harry stared at him. “You stopped being an Auror?” He supposed it wasn’t much of a surprise. Moody had been retired when Mulciber captured him and used his hair to pose as the Defense teacher, and Moody might only have reentered the Ministry out of personal irritation. Since he’d been one of the original members of the Order of the Phoenix, maybe his disgust with Dumbledore had, in turn, overcome his irritation with Dark wizards. “Why?”

“Because of the Ministry,” Moody grunted. “And a Minister who won’t see what’s in front of his face when curs bite people. And a better position waiting for me.” He paused and fixed Harry with his normal eye; his magical one kept roving the corridor, looking, Harry supposed, for gaps and breaks in the stone, or traces of Dark magic. “If you’ll have me, of course.”

Harry blinked. “You—you came to join me.” At least he managed to not make it a question.

Moody cackled. “I did,” he said. “You’re prepared, boy, but you could be better-prepared. I heard about a dueling club you had. It needs teaching in techniques you wouldn’t know, because you’ve never had Auror training. And, of course, there’s the lovely little fact that Dark wizards surround you all the time. Your side needs a little of the Light.”

Harry laughed despite himself. “Can you get along with those Dark wizards?” he asked, remembering then that Moody had been responsible for capturing many of the Death Eaters.
“I got along with their cowardly cousins every day in the Ministry.”

Harry nodded, satisfied. “And you think your teaching can make the difference for the dueling club?” he asked.

“Put it this way, boy.” When Moody grinned, his face did distinctly disturbing things. “I made Evan Rosier retreat three times. Ask him about the scar down the inside of his left arm some time when he’s feeling chatty.”

“Welcome, then.” Harry held out his hand, and Moody clasped it.

“Good,” he said, and looked thoughtfully at Harry’s handless arm. “There are replacements for those, you know.”

Not you, too. Snape mentioned his hand at least once a day, now. Harry supposed some nagging was a small price to put up with for having both his guardian back and a new, powerful fighter joining them, though.

“I can’t do that right now,” he explained, as they began to walk to breakfast. “Bellatrix Lestrange used a certain ritual I don’t know to enchant the knife that cut my hand off…”

Rufus, for once, felt no better even when he’d had his morning tea.

Nursing the cup, he stared down at the paperwork in front of him. All he had to do was sign it, and that was the end of it. It would confirm the Wizengamot’s decision to force all registered werewolves to spend the nights of the full moon in Tullianum. The moment he signed it, the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures would begin creating Portkeys that would take their recipients straight to cells in Tullianum on the appointed nights. The Department of Magical Law Enforcement would make sure that the Portkeys got to their destinations.

Only on the appointed nights, of course. Rufus had provoked his first shouting match with Amelia Bones in three years by asking if she was sure that the Portkeys would work then and only then, and wouldn’t accidentally trap the werewolves beforehand. The fact that she couldn’t look him in the eye while she reassured him was really what made him feel sick to his stomach.

Why did I ever think that being Minister in a wartime situation was easy? The history he’d read certainly made it sound as though the Ministry in Grindelwald’s time had an easier time of it. It did what needed to be done, cleanly and without pause, and if it made mistakes, well, that was natural, and if it used more force than was strictly necessary, well, everyone understood; it was wartime. Rufus had always thought he was made to come into power in a time like that. He understood necessity. He should be able to swallow anything that Amelia Bones and the other Heads of Departments handed him, so long as it wasn’t idiocy that would lead only to someone else’s personal advancement and wouldn’t benefit the war.

Why am I balking now?

Someone rapped on the door of his office. Grateful to whoever it was for the interruption—Percy was attending Auror Training at the moment, and wasn’t available to serve as one—Rufus pushed aside the paperwork and looked up. “Enter.”

Auror Wilmot slid inside, his head cocked and a strong sense of agitation brewing in him. Well, Rufus couldn’t blame him for that. Nearly everyone had been on edge since Elder Gillyflower got bitten.

“The reports you asked for, sir,” he said, laying a pile of new paperwork gently on the edge of the desk. “Everyone involved in breaking up that illegal potions-brewing ring is done with theirs now.”

“Good,” said Rufus, with genuine relief, reaching over and flipping through the parchment. It was more of the same, and that made it comforting, familiar. Every two years or so, someone thought he could brew potions illegal on British soil but legal in most other wizarding communities, and evade the “prudish” Ministry while he did it. Usually, the trouble came from France or Ireland, but this brewer had been Basque, and it had taken them quite a bit longer to catch him.

He paused as he caught sight of a list of ingredients on the first page. “Demiguise hair?” he asked. “Demiguise hair?” he asked.

“No,” said Wilmot. “Apparently he thought the time had come for Britain to get its first taste of Morning After Potion.”

Rufus snorted. The Morning After Potion erased all details of embarrassing sexual encounters from one’s memory. It also gave the drinkers chronic heart conditions after two uses, and frequently caused explosions when it was brewing. “More like thirtieth,” he said absently, but went on staring at the list of ingredients. Demiguise hair, fairy wings, powdered bicorn horn... why do these sound familiar?

And then he knew, of course. Rufus stood up, eyes fastened on the list of ingredients. Wilmot jumped to attention, one hand on his wand.

“Sir!”
Rufus took a deep breath and studied the Auror carefully. He thought he could trust Wilmot to keep this quiet. He was, of course, part of the vast network of favors that guided the Ministry and which Rufus did his best to ignore, but he had no ties that would make blurring this secret out an irresistible temptation. At least, Rufus thought he didn’t. There did seem to be some people with blackmail material on Wilmot that he’d never been able to discover.

“Edmund,” he said, “I want you to move the confiscated Potions ingredients from the Auror offices to mine. Can you do that?” He could hardly stride into the Auror offices to do it himself.

Wilmot blinked. “Of course, sir.” He hesitated, then added, “May I ask why?”

Rufus nodded firmly. “I have a cousin who—would be interested in them.” And he did, although he hadn’t seen Robert in years. Robert was an accomplished Potions brewer, always whining about the scut work he had to do to keep himself from starving. Rufus thought the problem with his cousin was more that Robert couldn’t resist a challenge, and would brew complicated but inexpensive potions just to see if he could. “He’s been wanting to try his hand at making—a potion that uses these ingredients for years now. And I thought, well, there’s no reason that he couldn’t try with these, since we know they weren’t stolen, just bought on the black market.”

Wilmot stared at him some more. Rufus saw the connection spring into place in his mind. Wilmot wasn’t blind, or stupid.

“And what would happen to the potion once he made it?” Wilmot’s voice was gently strangled.

“Well, he’s mostly interested in making the potion,” said Rufus thoughtfully. “That’s more important to him than credit, or even money. I was thinking that, once he’s done with it, it could be moved away from his house and distributed to people who might need it. Quietly, of course. After all, it wouldn’t do for the Minister to be seen handing it out in the street.”

He nodded as he thought about it. Yes, it was the right thing to do. The main problem was that any public move he made right now could be criticized wildly, by either the British people or the werewolves—who were his people, too, at least if he followed Harry’s line of reasoning. But giving Wolfsbane away without linking himself directly to its production could make a difference to the temperament of some werewolves and spare him from that criticism. He could at least act privately, if not publicly.

He scrutinized Wilmot now, wondering if he would approve or disapprove of the plan. If his disapproval was plain, then Rufus would arrange matters differently. There were other people who would help, though none as unobtrusive; Tonks, for example, was more often considered the Minister’s “pet” because she guarded him so often.

But Wilmot stared at him as if he were seeing a vision of the Light. Rufus raised his eyebrows. Well. That is different from the way other people have looked at me today. He forced away the pang that came at the thought of accepting Alastor Moody’s resignation, and stared back.

“Will you do this for me, Edmund?” he asked.

Wilmot gave himself a little shake. “Of course, Minister,” he said. “I will do it gladly.” He stared for a moment more, and then added, “You’re a different man than I thought you were, sir.”

He opened the door and departed, leaving Rufus to sit behind his desk and feel a little better than before. He hesitated a long moment, and then scrawled a denial on the proposal to create Portkeys for the purpose of transporting werewolves. It would mean another shouting match with Amelia. At the moment, he felt more than equal to that.

Remus closed his eyes, and breathed.

He couldn’t remember the last time he’d breathed like this—no, wait, of course he could. It had been the last time he was near the presence of so many other werewolves, which would have been the summer four years ago. The summer three years ago had been spent testing the Wolfsbane and preparing to teach at Hogwarts, the summer two years ago had been spent at Lux Aeterna grieving for Sirius and trying to learn James, and last summer had been spent at the Sanctuary. And now the summer was almost come around again, and it looked like he’d be spending it—

Here.

Remus set his trunk to drift behind him and waited patiently. He stood in the rain, on a street that looked as if it had dirt rubbed into the sides of the buildings, but he didn’t care. At least there were no cars here, and no Muggles around. Muggles tended to move, slowly but surely, out of areas that werewolves inhabited. They might not even realize they were doing it, they certainly wouldn’t admit to what the prickling fear running up and down their spines meant, and they often actually
believed that their kind still inhabited these particular areas of London.

But they were gone from this one. It had been the home of Loki’s pack for over twenty years, and the wolf was deep in every wall, every doorway, every stone. Something in the back of Muggles’ brains knew what that meant, even if they didn’t admit it aloud, and kept them away.

“Remus.”

Remus turned with a faint smile to nod at the girl who’d found him. She’d been born Muggle, but had actually been bitten before she was a year old and managed to survive. She didn’t pay any attention to his floating trunk, instead eying him minutely, sniffing for any trace of tracking spells or other magic that could hurt the pack. Remus waited until she looked up at his face, made a brief, flickering moment of eye contact that was enough to welcome and not enough to challenge him, and then said, “Hullo, Camellia.”

“Hullo yourself,” Camellia retorted, shaking her long dark hair as she glanced from side to side. “Loki didn’t expect to see you here for another few months at least. Thought the blind wizards would wait that long before throwing you out.”

“Well. They didn’t.” And Remus could understand why, even though he thought they were doing the wrong thing, and had even tried to explain that. Minerva had told him that she didn’t trust him near children when he considered werewolves and their political agenda more important. Remus knew the truth, though. A werewolf learned early on to smell fear, and she was afraid. She feared he might bite them, and especially, that he might bite Harry, that part of Loki’s plan might be having the valtes become a werewolf and be more bound to help them than ever.

That was a groundless fear, but Remus couldn’t explain why it was groundless without explaining pack magic, and the existence of that would startle and unnerve Minerva far more than the existence of werewolves wanting equal rights to wizards.

“Come along,” Camellia told him, and started loping up the street, her baggy clothes swaying around her. “The others are waiting.”

Remus followed her, continuing to breathe deeply, deeply, in. The air wasn’t scented with musk, at least not in most places; after all, it was nearly five nights since the full moon, and the reek of transformed werewolves faded quickly into the rain. But it was wild, haunted with a different kind of magic, haunted with a companionship that ranged beyond bodies. The area around him was, mostly, a comfortless gray that Remus might have found depressing just a year ago. As it was, he found it cheering now, the kind of color a werewolf would see when transformed.

All of this might have been different, he thought absently, as Camellia guided him up a set of steps and into the hollowed-out space of what seemed like an abandoned house on the outside, but hummed with light and warmth and magic on the inside, if he hadn’t written a letter to Loki while he was at the Sanctuary. The Seers had encouraged him to do so, as part of coming to terms with his past. Remus really hadn’t expected an answer.

But Loki had given him one, a long letter full of news about the London packs and how the Ministry was pushing them to death. And Remus had written back, and Loki had written him, and gradually, Remus’s startlement had melted. He’d been wary of Loki as recently as November, when the other werewolf’s plans were still strange and new to him. But months of reasonable explanations had convinced him that Loki was right. Remus only wished that he’d been able to convince Harry, and that they hadn’t had to part ways over this.

He stepped into the house, which was enormous, both on the ground floor and in the number of stories it had. Men and women sprawled on the rugs looked up at him lazily; Camellia’s entrance had already warned them someone was coming. Remus felt his face soften further at the sight of people casually entwined, necks resting on each other’s, bodies draped over each other’s backs. Two children were wrestling in a corner of the room, but they were new members of the pack and probably still establishing their place in the hierarchy. Remus remembered the first time he’d entered this room when he was fourteen, the shock he’d had at meeting pair after pair of amber eyes. Now, the last of the tension he’d been harboring since Hogwarts dissipated completely.

“Remus.”

Remus turned and dropped to the floor as Loki moved towards him from a corner of the room. Loki stopped in front of him and bent, too, rubbing his cheek against Remus’s with a soft yip of greeting. Remus looked up at him. Loki looked the same as he ever did: white-blond hair to rival a Malfoy’s, amber eyes, a seamed and laughing face. His mate, who called herself Gudrun, peered over his shoulder, and then snorted.

“What’s Remus doing down there, Loki?” She punched her mate hard enough to stagger him. “Let him stand up, for Merlin’s sake.”
Loki moved back with a slight chuckle, and Remus gratefully stood. “Sorry,” Loki murmured. “I get lost in remembering, sometimes, when I look into someone’s eyes.”

Remus nodded, understanding completely. The connection Loki had with other werewolves as a pack leader ran more deeply than theirs with him, allowing him to see into their minds and be enveloped in their magical auras. He did tend to be distracted when he didn’t have to be sharp-eyed about a plan or an upcoming hunt.

“I have information for you,” Remus told him.

“I’ll fetch tea,” said Gudrun, and moved away to do that. Around them, the room relaxed and went back to its quiet companionship. Loki put his hand on Remus’s shoulder.

“The vates?” he asked.

“Refusing to understand,” said Remus sadly. Loki hadn’t assigned him to convince Harry, but he’d wanted to, wanted to make him understand that with their packs dying, they had no alternative but this. “At least, so far.”

Loki cocked his head, eyes blazing wildly bright, making him look fierce and dangerous, though he continued to stand still. “Well,” he murmured, “I have an idea for something that might convince him.”

Eagerly, Remus followed him to a corner to make his report, to hear his plan, and to breathe in the contained power that hung around Loki like a second scent. Being around the other werewolf, more than in this place or with the pack itself, made him feel at home.

Someone was testing her wards again. And by the image that the surveillance spells on the outside of her house were sending to her mind, Henrietta Bulstrode knew exactly who it was.

She considered her options, tapping her fingers against the book she’d been reading. She could stay here and ignore the testing, and eventually he’d leave. He’d tried again and again in the past few days, and all Henrietta had to do was tighten her magic—with ordinary slowness, as if she were merely doing maintenance, affecting never to notice him—and ignore it. If she did go out, then she could only use Dark Arts to defend herself, as per the vows she’d given to Harry.

Of course, with this one, there was really never any doubt that she’d need to defend herself. And reading up on Transfiguration, repairing the holes that still gaped in her education, had little to recommend it next to such a—challenge.

Henrietta stood and Apparated along the lines of the wards, appearing just outside them. No crack sounded when she did that, and so her visitor, standing on the rainswept grass as he incanted spell after spell at her defenses, remained unaware of her presence for a moment.

Only a moment, though. Then Evan Rosier turned around and gave her a fierce, feral smile. Henrietta gave back a faint shudder, one that didn’t contain fear. This is a wonderful way to get the blood moving.

“I suppose Harry warned you?” Rosier asked, swinging his wand in a lazy arc. “About needing to watch your back?”

“Yes, of course he did,” said Henrietta. “I’m surprised at you though, Evan, seeking me out like this. I thought you’d be subtler than that.”

There was no warning. One moment, Rosier stood there, relaxed as a great hunting cat in the sun, smiling at her; the next, he was swinging his wand forward, and a pain curse was erupting from the end of it, a vicious red line that would cause incurable burns if it touched her.

Henrietta arched an eyebrow as she reached out to her home. I thought he would have more imagination than that, as well as more subtlety.

She’d constructed a rune circle that ran all the way around her home, outside the wards. The runes were buried innocently in the ground, scribed on turned-over rocks or the undersides of leaves. Henrietta really wasn’t surprised Rosier had missed them. He could have watched her build the whole thing, and it would only have seemed as if she were doing a particularly enthusiastic bout of gardening.

The circle came to life, and lines of light, made of images of the transcribed runes, rose from all sides of it. They collided with the red curse Rosier had chosen and turned it into a flight of diamond dust and purple butterflies. Henrietta admitted the butterflies for a moment, then turned to smile at Rosier.

“Do you remember them, Evan?” she asked, deliberately making her voice breathy. “How prettily they fluttered around us as we fucked?”
His eyes darkened. Henrietta watched him, and smiled, and smiled. She still remembered the earth under her elbows as she
fucked him, all against his will, knowing he could kill her at any moment if her spells faltered and not caring. He hadn’t
wanted to fuck her, and he hadn’t wanted to hear the extra spells she whispered as she rode him, not because she had to but
just because she could. She’d raped him in the midst of a flight of purple butterflies.

His smile was gone, just as it had been that evening. He wasn’t used to other people getting the better of him. He was
speaking another Dark Arts curse now, probably not realizing that the rune circle would defeat anything he could dream up,
even his “special” spells, and so he didn’t make any move to counter Henrietta’s silent *Abscindo vestitus*.

His robes and trousers parted neatly around the waist, and tumbled down around his ankles. Henrietta learned nearer, and
laughed quietly to see the purple scar on the inside of his thigh. “Still carrying my love bite, Evan? I never realized you
cared so much.”

He struck then, and struck and struck, gone into the madness that always lurked behind his smile. Henrietta bounced curse
after curse. His creativity was impressive, but they meant little against her rune circle, which was brute strength crushing
every one of those “creative” spells. He screamed at her, too, without words, and Henrietta didn’t let that move her.

He vanished at last. Henrietta Apparated back inside her house and returned to reading about Transfiguration.

She needed to know as much about it as she could, since she intended to apply for the post of Transfiguration Professor at
Hogwarts next year. She would have applied for Defense Against the Dark Arts if she thought she would be accepted, but
she doubted McGonagall would let her teach that, even if Lestrange was gone by then. The Transfiguration post, however,
was effectively empty as the Headmistress struggled to cover it from her new office. This was the best way for Henrietta to
be close so that she could protect Harry.

“I think this will do,” said Harry, oblivious to how loud he sounded with the Silencing spell protecting his ears from the
mysterious creature’s song.

Draco winced from the volume, but had to admit Harry was right. They’d found a room on the second floor of Number
del ICT Twelve Grimmauld Place that would be perfect for Draco to carve his rune circle in: a wooden floor, no pests to eat up or
smudge his careful work, and traces of old preservation spells that came to life when they felt the new ones being cast and
would add an extra layer of protection to the circle. Draco knelt down and began to carve the first rune, one of binding.

Harry glanced aside from him, up the stairs towards the door where Narcissa had told Draco the creature was trapped. Draco
kept an eye on him, even though his mother was also here, gathering up artifacts from downstairs that might be useful, or
might be nuisances if they were left in the house, and Pettigrew was standing guard by the door upstairs. Harry wouldn’t
really be able to let the beast out.

Except that, of course, he still wanted to. And if he decided he should, then none of the three of them were going to be able
to stop him.

Draco forced the thoughts out of his mind with a sigh, and made himself concentrate on the runes. Mother had assured him
that the creature’s song was a subtle compulsion, but not irresistible, and Draco didn’t have to worry about it anyway, since
it was much more interested in Harry and the meal of his magic. His part was getting all the runes exactly right.

How mad is this plan?

Draco turned his mind into concentrated ice, and did that. The runes took shape under his knife, not twisted this time; he had
practiced the ones that had gone wrong in the Room of Requirement until he could have done them standing on his head
with the carving knife in his teeth. They had to be perfect, since they were part of the plan that Harry had created to trap
Voldemort on Midsummer Day, and they were going to be.

Really. Don’t think about that. Carve.

Draco forced that thought away, too, in case it disturbed his calculated serenity, and went right on cutting. Harry sat by his
side the entire time, now and then swaying and casting a glance upstairs. Draco touched his arm each time, and each time
Harry turned obediently back and paid attention to the circle, though since he hadn’t taken Ancient Runes it didn’t mean
much to him.

Finally, after more than two hours of cutting and checking and double-checking, it was done. Draco sat back on his heels
and looked at Harry. “What do you think?” he mouthed, in an exaggerated fashion, so that Harry could read his lips.
“It looks unbroken,” said Harry, and smiled at him. Draco set himself against the force of that smile; he thought he didn’t flush, only nodded and smiled back, but Harry was turning away in any case, and probably wouldn’t have seen it. “I’m sure it’ll work, Draco. I have faith in you.”

Draco’s nerve broke. He reached out and caught Harry’s left wrist, turning him back. Harry arched his brows, and Draco mouthed another question. “Are you sure we need to do this?”

Harry’s face softened, and he leaned nearer to touch Draco’s cheek and then kiss him gently on the side of the mouth. “Yes,” he said. “I know it seems complicated as hell, but it’s the only way to absolutely defang him and make sure he isn’t a danger for a time. I don’t think we can kill him yet, but the wizarding world has other problems to deal with right now. We don’t need Voldemort over the summer.”

Draco felt a surge of warmth in his stomach. Though of course Harry was doing this to free the northern goblins and to defeat the Dark Lord and to defend the school and for all the other right and honorable reasons, there was still a shadow of a suspicion in there that Harry had done it to give them both a quieter summer.

And Draco liked that. He liked that rather a lot.

A movement near the door of the room caught his eye, and he looked up to see his mother standing there with a silver object in her hand. She tipped it enough so that he could see what it was, and Draco felt the warmth turn into delight. It was perfect for his courting ritual with Harry. He nodded.

Harry turned to see what he was looking at, but by then, Narcissa had vanished.

“What was that all about?” Harry asked suspiciously.

Draco shook his head innocently, smiling when Harry’s glare sharpened. Then he held up both of his hands, fingers spread wide, in a signal that Harry understood perfectly well. He was the one to look away then, while Draco grinned.

Ten days until Walpurgis.

Minerva sat back, sipped at her tea for a moment, and let the peace warm its way into her bones.

From the top of the North Tower to the tunnels under Hogwarts that the Founders knew and had told her about, the school was hers. It hummed with the wards she’d woven slowly over the last two weeks of the Easter holiday, defensive spells based in strength and courage and stubbornness and determination not to be like Albus. These wards would not falter if she did. They were bound to the permanent magic of the school, much as the Room of Requirement and the Founders’ anchor-stones were. They wouldn’t let her spy on her students’ and professors’ movements even if she wanted to. They were focused on defense, on identifying hostile presences and caging them, on making sure that any student injured in an accident or a fight got immediate transportation to the hospital wing, on minimalizing the danger of magic as much as possible while increasing the wonder of it.

“Pleased with yourself?”

Minerva opened one eye. Godric stood in a corner of the office, obviously having arranged himself so he wouldn’t float through the stone floor, a bright grin on his face as he watched her.

“I am.” Minerva rubbed her face with one hand and yawned. “The children come back tomorrow, and they’ll be safer and more secure than they’ve been in—decades, probably.” She didn’t know if Albus really had begun altering the wards the moment he became Headmaster, but it wouldn’t surprise her.

“You should be proud,” said Godric softly. “You are a credit to the House of Gryffindor, Minerva.”

She opened both eyes at that, and frowned at him. “Is there something wrong, Godric?”

He smiled and glanced to the side. Minerva watched as a shape slowly coalesced there: brown-eyed, brown-haired, wearing a shapeless robe, and nervous as Neville Longbottom in a Potions practical. It was Helga Hufflepuff, come to meet her face-to-face at last.

“Only that you’ve impressed Helga,” said Godric. “She distrusted Albus before the rest of us, and nearly wrenched herself free from the school rather than serve an unworthy Headmaster. But you’ve convinced her that not all members of my House are proud idiots unable to see beyond the ends of their lives. Congratulations.” He bowed to both of them. “I’ll leave you two to get acquainted.”

He vanished. Helga and Minerva watched each other warily for a moment, until Minerva cleared her throat.
“I was wondering if you could come up with certain defenses for the Forbidden Forest,” she said. “We have an enemy skilled in Herbology now, but the trees are full of ancient magic of their own that makes establishing wards around them difficult.”

“I know,” said Helga, in a low, lovely voice, and floated towards her desk. “I have some ideas.”

Minerva relaxed again, and picked up her teacup. I may actually be worthy of not only Gryffindor’s legacy, but the Headmistress position after all. Here is to hope.

Chapter Eighty: Calling Up the Wild Magic

Harry rubbed irritably at his ears. It was all very well for the wild Dark to run around singing, but when he started hearing the song even in the middle of Arithmancy, then something had to be done.

“Mr.—Harry? Are you all right?”

Harry managed to give Vector a pained smile. “Yes, Professor.” He bent over his work again, trying to disregard the glances that other students were giving him. He could hardly blame them. After all, if something was wrong with him, then Voldemort might be about to attack the school, or an immense beast might appear out of nowhere and crash into it. Harry wondered how many of them considered him a ward, blaring before a danger actually reached them to give them time to hide.

A flare of irritation surged through him, and a white dove appeared out of nowhere above his head and fled towards the window, wings clattering. When it couldn't find exit there, it wheeled around and then flew up towards the ceiling. It perched there and began to coo. Professor Vector stared at it, and then at him. The other students said nothing, their hunched shoulders more eloquent than their mouths could be.

“Harry,” said the professor at last, voice clipped. “Do attempt to control yourself.”

“I will,” Harry whispered, feeling his ears burn. “It’s Walpurgis.” He turned a sharp glance on Draco when he realized that Draco was snickering behind his hand and not even trying to hide it. Draco gave him an innocent look, shaking his head.

“A dove, Harry?” he whispered. “And you can’t do anything better than that, then? At least a dragon wouldn’t raise doubts about what sweet and innocent dreams you have at night.”

“Shut it,” Harry muttered, and went back to his calculations. The dove uttered a few more experimental coos before tucking its head under its wing and going to sleep. Harry reminded himself to capture it after Arithmancy so he could release it outside.

His magic was creating birds and scents and miniature lightning storms any time he experienced a strong emotion, and it was still five days until Walpurgis. Harry dreaded to see what he would be doing by the time the last day of April actually arrived.

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Draco tapped the book with his finger and leaned over it one last time. The words it contained were practically etched with acid into his brain by now, but there might be one thing he’d forgotten, one requirement of the ritual that he’d let lapse from his mind because it wasn’t as interesting as the others. So he read it again.

_The formal courting ritual takes three years in total. It is best to begin on Walpurgis Night, for then not only is the wild magic close to the earth to see the lovers and give them its blessing, but emotions otherwise buried may also rise. Walpurgis calls to the magic in the blood and bone, and wizards and witches sing back to the sky. Even Light wizards are restless on that night, sensing the ancient communion that pertained to all before some turned their back on the spaces between the stars and proclaimed they would follow only the starlight._

Draco raised his eyebrows, as he always did. That was the only point on which he really distrusted this book. It claimed that all wizards had once been Dark and the Light came later. Draco didn’t think so. Some people had always been afraid, which meant there must always have been Light wizards in the world. He rolled over on an elbow and continued reading, unafraid that Harry would find him. Harry was off brewing potions with Snape. They did that more often now that they’d finally settled the stupid argument between them.

_On such a night, those who do not know each other, the newly introduced lover and beloved, may be more amenable to the marriage or joining than otherwise. Their parents should introduce them, and then leave them alone. A coupling on this night between new lovers would not be wise, but those performing the ritual will not wish to bed each other in any case._
“That’s what you think,” Draco muttered. Of course, the ritual had been intended to match partners in arranged marriages and joinings, initially. It made sense that two people suddenly forced together wouldn’t be that interested in leaping into bed.

The purpose of all the smaller rituals that are part of this courting—save the thirteenth and last, which is the actual marriage or joining, and should take place on the Walpurgis three years after the beginning of the ritual—is to create intense experiences that the partners may share together. This is the true purpose of the absence of parents, siblings, and other traditional guards for a young man or woman of marriageable age. If they participate, the ritual will go subtly awry, and attempt to include them in the partnering. Save in the case of Flora, Pomona, and Tertius Guile, such joinings are not usually successful.

Draco gave a shiver of distaste at the thought of getting Connor pulled into the ritual, or anyone else who might follow them in curiosity to see what was happening. He would definitely make sure that he and Harry were alone before he started the ritual after the dancing.

The lover will need to present his beloved with a gift important to the lover’s maternal bloodline, symbolizing the birth of a new and momentous link. This gift must be secured while the beloved is nearby, but not seen beforehand. The beloved will need to accept it and speak the required words that allow the ritual to proceed, “In blood we begin this marriage/joining, on earth, in the sight of the dark spaces between the stars.”

Draco nodded. He’d memorized the words, and he could easily prompt Harry, who knew nothing about them yet—Harry had not demanded to know any details of the rituals—to say them.

The rest of the details of the ritual were as he remembered them. Draco gently put the book aside and lay back on the bed, fighting the urge to laugh giddily and wrap his arms around himself.

Three days until Walpurgis Night.

Harry sat straight up in bed, and blinked at nothing. The dream tattered through his head, not having the clarity of a vision come from Voldemort, but not fading the way that most of his ordinary dreams did, either.

In it, a shining black wyvern with silver wings had threatened him. It had stalked him through a dark green clearing, and tried to sting him several times with its scorpion tail. Harry had avoided each strike, and said the most nonsensical things to the wyvern in turn, scolding it, as if it were a pet that he needed to hold back from hurting either him or itself. The wyvern had shrieked like a kettle in irritation each time he did so.

“Well, that was different,” he said aloud.

“What was different?” Draco’s voice just outside his bed-curtains made him start, Argutus blink and hiss sleepily, and the Many snake lift her head from the blankets, ready to bite anyone who threatened Harry. Harry swallowed and told himself that startlement was not the same thing as fear.

“A dream that was, for once, just an ordinary dream,” he said, keeping his voice low, and opened the curtains. Draco stood there with his wand in his hand and Luminos glinting on the end of it. Harry rolled his eyes. “Come in, for Merlin’s sake, before we wake Blaise up.” Blaise had tended to look particularly martyred in the past week whenever he was deprived of sleep, though that could be because he and Ginny were still having an ongoing argument, and he lay awake at night thinking up retorts.

Draco crawled into the bed with him, and let the curtains fall closed. He reached out to stroke Argutus’s head, and Argutus hissed happily. “His hands are always warmer than yours,” he told Harry.

“That’s nice,” said Harry absently, and turned back to Draco. “What’s the matter? Did you have a nightmare?”

Draco gave him an odd look. “No. Why do you ask?”

“Because you were standing outside the curtains as if you were waiting for me to wake up,” said Harry. “A bad dream might cause that, but I don’t know what else.”

“Because I heard you talking in your sleep, of course.” Draco abruptly grinned and leaned closer to him. “I thought I’d come over here and make sure that you weren’t moaning anyone else’s name but mine.”

Harry felt his cheeks flush, and knew from Draco’s satisfied look that he’d seen it. He didn’t really understand that part of their relationship yet, Harry had to admit. If anyone had asked him, he would have said that Draco would want a partner who could keep up with him in witty flirtation, rather than, as Harry did, only achieving it in certain moments. He had done
it at the alliance meeting, but only by taking Draco utterly off-guard with the public announcement of their courting ritual. Instead, Draco seemed to enjoy provoking any reaction he could out of Harry, whether that was stuttering or flushing or a poleaxed stare.

_Well, if I am not equal to him in that, I can try to be. And perhaps he’s not as obsessed with it as I think he is. He has never said anything to indicate that he wishes I’d be wittier._

“No, no one’s name but yours,” said Harry, and lowered his voice as he said it, to see what would happen. Draco blinked at him, his expression bearing a distinct hint of _That’s not fair_. Harry cocked his head at him and leaned in closer. “Or were you making sure of _that_ , instead? I’ve seen you reading all those books lately that you’ve been refusing to show me the titles of. Have you been studying incantations for certain kinds of dreams, Draco?”

“Of course not!” Draco exclaimed, as if he thought the accusation was serious. “Those are books about the ritual, Harry, and I just want to make sure that I’m doing everything right _and_ that I’m surprising you. That’s all.”

“Hmmm.” Harry told his impending panic, present mostly because he was sure to mess this up, to bugger off. “And what _kinds_ of surprises do you have for me, Draco?” He let his eyes flicker down Draco’s body, and abruptly Draco was the one looking poleaxed. Harry grinned at him, unable to maintain the front for much longer. _I can see why he likes doing this._

“Um,” said Draco, and looked at him some more. Then he said, “I think I’ll go back to bed now,” and opened the curtains, though he looked as if he wished that Harry would invite him to stay.

“I think that’s a good idea,” Harry agreed solemnly. “After all, we wouldn’t want to wake Blaise up with all our nocturnal activities.”

Draco blinked. Then he said, “Flirting isn’t a necessary part of the ritual, Harry.”

_Does he really think that I’d only do this because of that? Yes, he does, from that expression._ Harry sighed and reached out, letting his hand glance along the side of Draco’s cheek. “I know it’s not,” he whispered. “I’m doing this because I want to, Draco, and for no other reason.” He raised his eyebrows. “Do you really think that you could force me into doing something I didn’t want?”

“No, but your training——“

“My training has nothing to do with this part of it,” said Harry. “Go to sleep, Draco. After all, you’ll need all your strength tomorrow night.”

He watched in satisfaction as that made Draco stumble a little on his way back to the bed. Well it might. This was the first time Harry had ever tried to flirt seriously, and that he was choosing to do it the night before the courting ritual began would make it all the more significant to Draco.

_Well, good. I want it to be significant._

Harry slid back under the blankets and closed his eyes, to the delight of both Argutus and the Many snake.

_one day until Walpurgis._

Harry tensed when he received the _Daily Prophet_ the next morning. The headline on the front page concerned “shock tactics” that a werewolf group had used to try and force people to pay attention to them: vandalism on several shops in Diagon Alley, and enchantment of objects in each shop to chant slogans supporting werewolves’ rights. The story contained a quote from “former Minster of Magic Cornelius Fudge” on how awful the vandalism was, though, from the descriptions that Skeeter had chosen, Harry thought it sounded minor.

But _that’s not an excuse, is it?_ Harry thought, as he handed the paper over to Draco and began eating his sausages, with Argutus’s earnest help. _No, it’s not. Biting people might be their worst tactic, but they wouldn’t limit themselves to causing chaos and damage on the full moon nights alone._ Of course not.

_What they’re doing is dangerous and irresponsible. How long before it escalates from night raids and vandalism and minor spells to an all-out curse war? The werewolves might not even start that, Aurors might, but it would still result in dead people. And the moon is full again in two days._

He started to push his plate away from him, but Argutus was hanging off his shoulder, a bond that connected him to the plate, and objected with hisses loud enough to make several students look over at the Slytherin table. Harry flushed and let the Omen snake take a few bites from his fingers. Argutus immediately started crooning that he was the best friend a snake
Harry did not expect that Draco’s surprise would involve skipping Defense Against the Dark Arts. Draco firmly took his hand when Harry turned towards Acies’s classroom, though, and steered him up another corridor instead. Harry stumbled,
and looked at Draco with a frown.

“Don’t you have History of Magic now?” he whispered.

Draco snorted, never looking away from the corridor he’d been dragging Harry up, his eyes intently studying the stones ahead of him, as if he intended to take Harry to a place inside the walls. “As if Binns is going to notice that I’m gone, Harry.”

Harry shook his head. “Well, Professor Lestrange will definitely notice that I’m missing,” he whispered.

“Why are you whispering?” Draco lifted his eyebrows at him. “No one else is here. I’ve cast an aversion charm on the hallway. Ah!” He reached out and flicked his wand against the stones, and the wall softly rumbled and slid aside to reveal a small room Harry couldn’t remember seeing before, even on the Marauder’s Map.

The room was—ordinary, a bare stone box with four walls, and yet not ordinary. Harry cocked his head uneasily in several directions, trying to identify the source of the magic. It circled the chamber like the patrolling current of power in Woodhouse, but this was not a single, smooth, uninterrupted flow. Instead, it darted about like flashes of lightning, and evaded his eye. Harry thought it was place magic, though.

“Draco, what—”

“Shhh, Harry.” Draco hissed the words directly into his ear, as if he’d forgotten his own words about no intruders coming into the hallway. “Will you trust me for a moment? Let me show you what this is?”

“I’d trust you for a lifetime, Draco, and you know it,” said Harry. There went another flicker of magic, and he jumped. “I just want to know what this place is.”

“A room that my mother and father used when they were courting,” Draco said, and leaned his cheek against Harry’s. Harry realized in startlement that his arms were linked around his waist, and that they stood much closer together than Harry usually felt comfortable with. The magic of the room had distracted him so much that he hadn’t noticed. “Just watch. Please?”

The tone in the last word made Harry realize how long it had been since he and Draco had shared a moment like this. He was always worrying about something else, and surely Draco must find it wearing. He took a deep breath and forced himself to relax with a tiny nod.

The moment he did, the magic of the room seemed to notice them. Harry heard a deep sound, which might have been a purr or an amused chuckle, and then the air in front of them opened. Harry blinked as it bloomed with color, the tiny jabs of magic darting out from the walls to create an image of deep red, gold, silver, and green. The colors played around each other, refusing to assume solid form.

“I don’t see how this is of use to courting couples,” he muttered.

“Patience, Harry,” Draco murmured back. “You’ll see in a moment. And aren’t they beautiful enough in and of themselves?”

Harry had to admit they were. Some of the colors were similar to ones he’d seen in the skies while he watched the Light’s violent dawns, but they were all deeper, more jewel-toned. He let himself watch them and think of nothing else, and was surprised, when he next attended to it, by how relaxed his breathing had become. He leaned back against Draco, enjoying the warmth and pressure on his shoulders, neck, and spine.

The colors abruptly stopped brewing and scrambling, and then snapped into focus, forming an image so perfect that Harry caught his breath.

He saw himself—well, it had to be himself, because of the lightning bolt scar on his forehead and the messy black hair, even though he looked about ten years older—leaning back in a stone chair, his head against the supporting post of what looked to be a canopy made entirely of jade. The chair was molded to his body, as if it’d grown there. Older-Harry had his eyes closed, and Harry assumed he was asleep. The ground around him was patterned stone, traced with glowing blue; it might have been marble, but had a glossy sheen that didn’t resemble that rock.

Beyond the canopy post were plants that Harry didn’t recognize, though the greenery and their enormous red flowers were lush enough to bring tears to his eyes. Something sang lazily through the bushes, song wandering and dipping as if it had all the time in the world to reach a conclusion, or didn’t ever want to come to an end. And sunlight, sunlight, sunlight poured through the open sides of the—building? house?—he sat in, making the unfamiliar robes he wore shine like sunlight back. Harry could almost feel its warmth from here.

An older version of Draco paced into the image from the left, and paused, staring at the sleeping Older-Harry as if he were a
vision. Harry blinked and stared in turn. He had always assumed that Draco would look like Lucius when he grew; they had hair and eyes the same shade, after all, and it made sense that Draco would shed some of his childish gestures over time. Instead, Draco looked more like Narcissa, as if grace were written in every fiber of his being. He himself wore deep red robes tinged with gold, and Harry wondered what they signified in that place, since he doubted Draco would wear Gryffindor colors unless he could be sure of no one associating them with Gryffindor.

Draco touched the sleeping Harry’s shoulder and whispered something. Older-Harry must not have been asleep after all, because he reached his arms up, without opening his eyes, and wrapped them around Older-Draco’s neck. He pulled him down and engaged him in a kiss that was neither gentle nor fierce, but had an air of permanence as great as the stone around them. Older-Draco closed his eyes and leaned into it, and around them the sunlight slanted and the hidden creature sang and sang and sang.

Harry closed his eyes to block any unfortunate tears, and opened them to find the colors had melted, swirling, back into the walls, and the room had returned to its lightning jabs of magic, apparently content to ignore them again.

“What—what was that?” Harry whispered.

Draco swallowed several times behind him, then cleared his throat, as if he had been too choked up to concentrate for a moment. “That was a possible future, Harry,” he said. “A future where we could be happy. The room sees them and shows them to the courting couples who come in—or to other people, too. I’ve heard generals used it to show possible outcomes of war strategies”

“But there’s no guarantee that’ll happen,” Harry said, and shut his eyes once more.

He felt the rustle of soft hair beside his cheek as Draco shook his head. “No. When my parents used it, they saw my father as Minister of Magic and my mother raising twin daughters.” Draco snorted. “You can see how that turned out.”

“Well, it’ll be our responsibility to make what we can of that joy real, then,” Harry said firmly, and turned, mimicking the gesture of the older version of himself as best as he could, wrapping his arms around Draco’s neck and kissing him.

Draco wasn’t prepared for the sudden shift in weight, and he stumbled, landing with his back against the wall. He didn’t hesitate to return the kiss after that, though, and while it wasn’t quite the kiss the older versions of themselves had shared—those two men had known each other for so much longer—it was good enough, Harry thought, to be going on with. He stepped away from Draco and opened his eyes.

Draco was panting slightly, shifting around as though he didn’t know where to put his hands. He locked his eyes on Harry’s.

“Thank you,” Harry said quietly.

“Any time you want to repeat that,” Draco responded, “feel absolutely free. No need to ask permission.”

Harry laughed softly, and the sound seemed to mingle in his mind with the sound of remembered song.

Draco had to admit, he was eager to see what a relatively normal Walpurgis Night looked like, without the accompaniment of Voldemort trying to chain the wild Dark and Harry having to fight him. He studied the faces of those students gathered around Millicent as she held aloft the dark green stone that would transport them to the largest collection of Dark magic in Britain that night, but could see nothing save a kind of calm excitement. Harry was the exception, of course, but Harry was always the exception. He had a listening look on his face. Now and then he stirred and glanced about. Draco asked him once what he was hearing, and Harry smiled absently at him.

“A horn,” he said.

_Well, that doesn’t make sense._ But Draco didn’t say so. Harry had relaxed for the rest of the day after their morning encounter with the courting room, and as the night drew closer and closer, Draco had been able to remember that tonight was the first of his joining to Harry. That contented him for all his boyfriend’s odd behavior.

Now, as the silver traceries on the dark green stone began to rise and spin around them like falling stars, Draco thought the only thing he had to regret was the absence of his parents. Lucius had refused flatly to attend Walpurgis, with the first cold tone in his voice that Draco had heard for months, and Narcissa had told him she thought it would be best if she didn’t, either. They would appear for the beginning of the ritual afterwards, when they would “introduce” Draco to Harry, but then leave again. The dancing and the other, wilder parts of the night were not for them.

But Professor Snape was coming with them—of course—and he watched with narrowed, suspicious eyes as the magic of the stone spun them through nothingness, and then deposited them. Draco looked around in curiosity. Last year, they had
landed in a flower-covered field.

This time, they stood in the middle of a deep wood. Draco shivered a bit. The trees around them felt almost too alive, insisting on acknowledgment and recognition of their status as living beings. Their dark green leaves, the color of the stone Millicent still held, rustled and whispered and dipped. Draco thought that normal until he realized there was no wind to toss them.

Then silver light struck through the trees, nearly blinding him. Draco raised his head and saw the moon soaring lazily overhead. It was not quite full yet, but even so, its light shouldn’t have been that brilliant, Draco thought. This was more like the kind of moonlight Draco had imagined when his mother read bedtime stories to him, limning everything with a tracery more delicate and perfect than frost, turning the sky a deep blue in comparison to it.

*Well, for that matter, is this wood a real wood?* Draco had his doubts. For one thing, now that he was looking more closely at the trees, he could see that their bark was also dark green, though a paler color than their leaves. He didn’t think any living trees looked like that.

And then he realized it didn’t matter.

Joy had been stealing up on him for the past few minutes, and it overwhelmed him at the same moment as laughter broke from the other students around him. Even Snape loosed a chuckle, and then looked horrified at himself. Draco tilted his head up blindly, seeking the sky. He thought he knew what this was. He’d ridden some of the same immense emotions when Harry freed the wild Dark from Voldemort’s control last year.

But now the wild Dark didn’t have anything to worry about, and it poured down on them from the heavens with savage happiness.

Draco found himself trotting through the woods, and then running. He had no idea how he was managing to avoid the trees; he would never have run that fast at night normally, let alone in a strange place. But the moonlight and the trees spoke to him, and he ran, as if he were a werewolf. The air was thick with scents—not flowers, Draco thought, though he didn’t know what they came from if so. Birds, maybe. Birds flashed past them overhead, and ringing notes came down, sharp answers to their laughter.

Draco wondered for a moment if he should get control of himself, and then wondered why. His father wasn’t here to see him. The other people around him were too involved in their own joy to sneer at him for his. Blaise was actually pirouetting in a circle and humming under his breath. Draco turned forward and let himself run, delighting in the way his body responded as if he’d been doing this all his life.

They arrived so suddenly in a glade that Draco stumbled, trying to get used to the suddenly clear ground. The glade was entirely empty, as if the trees had been razed from it long ago, except for two things. One was a stream of water—silver, of course—which seemed to flow from a tree root on one side of the clearing and vanish into one on the other. The other was a white deer, just jerking its head up with a snort from the stream.

Draco froze as the deer’s golden eyes swept over him. Old, confused tales of white hinds and white stags jumbled in his head, and he didn’t know how to breathe or what to believe. This deer had golden antlers, presumably marking it as a stag, but they were higher and heavier than Draco thought they should be, and curved inward, making the dark space between them into a gaping void.

The deer curved away from them in the next moment, and Draco found himself following, along with all the others.

It was impossible prey to chase, and impossible to leave off chasing, because the wild Dark drove them. Every time Draco thought he was about to stumble and fall, he would look up and catch a glimpse of a ghostly coat as the deer ran ahead, or golden antlers blazing in the night like meteors, and find a new surge of strength. He didn’t know what would happen if he *did* catch the deer. He only knew that he wanted to run until that happened, that the creature seemed to have imprinted itself on his heart.

He had to slow at last, though, stumbling and gasping. Most of the others around him were doing the same thing; they used the breath they had left to laugh. Draco glanced around at them, and then frowned.

Harry was missing.

When he saw the white stag, Harry realized why he’d been hearing a hunting horn at odd moments all day. He was meant to follow it, and capture it, though what would happen after the capture he didn’t know.

He ran on after the others had stopped, following that glimpse of white and gold. He could only compare the experience to
the way he’d traveled the Forbidden Forest in third year, when Adalrico had just told him that Draco was in danger from
what turned out to be a Black magical artifact. Roots parted around his feet like shadows. Trees slid past him, wavering. The
ground itself seemed to support him and urge him back into the air. Harry felt wind cooling his brow when he started to
sweat, easing the ache in his muscles.
He was in the presence of magic wilder and stranger than he had felt on any other Walpurgis Night, and he was not sure
why. But his own magic answered it, coiling off his body, and the emotion he felt was not fear, but nearly pure happiness.
And determination. He was going to catch that deer.
He halted in another glade, as abruptly as he’d entered the one where the white stag had been drinking. The stag had
stopped running and was waiting for him, head up, cocked to the side as if the golden antlers were no heavier than light.
Harry swallowed. He wondered if it would charge him, and attempt to kick him with those enormous hooves or bury those
deadly antlers in his heart.
Instead, the stag came gravely forward and stopped in front of him. Harry stared into the golden eyes.
Strange, that they’re golden. Shouldn’t they be dark green or silver? Those are the colors that shine most often tonight.
The stag stamped a silver hoof, seeming irritated that Harry didn’t understand. Then the golden eyes widened, and Harry
found himself swept away within them, into a pinwheeling corridor of light and grace.
He understood in moments, then. The wild Dark did ordinarily favor the shades of dark green and silver on Walpurgis
Night, but it was giving him gold and white tonight, as a gift, a thanks, an apology, a token, for facing it on Midwinter night.
Harry understood in that moment that the wild Dark held no grudges. It could not have done so; that was against its nature.
It had struck back at Voldemort less for trying to hold it captive than because his trying to hold it captive had stung it, sent
its power recoiling, and given it a good excuse. Or perhaps that was what it said to him now, and it had believed a different
thing four months ago.
Harry put out his hand. He felt the stag’s cool nose touch it, breathing a breath like hoarfrost over it, and found himself out
of the golden eyes again, standing on his own two feet before it.
The deer breathed again, and traceries of dark green and silver coalesced on Harry’s fingers and palm. He stared at them,
dumbfounded. He recognized the insubstantial magic—flowers, birds, light—that Hawthorn had tossed into the air on the
first Walpurgis Night he’d attended. She had tossed them up and invoked the wild Dark because she’d survived the Darkest
magic that year, Fenrir Greyback’s bite.
Harry supposed this meant that he’d survived the Darkest magic on this particular year. Midwinter, again.
Phoenix song stirred in him as if in response. Harry suppressed it. The song of a creature of Light wasn’t appropriate right
now.
He raised his eyes to the stag’s face again. “Thank you,” he said quietly.
The stag reared in a long sweep like a wave, and then turned and plunged into the woods. This time, Harry felt no urge to
follow. The stag was beautiful precisely because it would never be caught, could not be taken alive. It could be killed, but
then the hunter would find that the beauty had fled where he could not follow and left only a lifeless corpse under his hands.
Harry suspected that the moment any white stag died, a new one came to life in the woods and began to run.
A bit bewildered, he shook his head and turned back to find the others, hearing Pansy’s words in his head again. This is the
time of year when it’s happiest, and it wants you to be happy, too.
It certainly seemed to want that, Harry had to admit, staring at the mass of what looked like dark green leaves and silver
petals in his hand.

Draco’s breathing eased when Harry came back out of the woods, his hand clasped around a shining mass. He smiled at
each of the people there, the grave, sweet smile Draco had once thought reserved for him alone. But he was so happy
tonight that he didn’t mind other people seeing it.
“This is Walpurgis Night,” Harry said clearly, holding up his hand. “This is the night that the magic returns, the night when
the magic renews, the night when the Dark cries out in its power. I claim the right to speak by virtue of having survived the
Darkest magic of anyone here this year.”
That caused most of the other people around them to lean forward and pay attention. No one disputed Harry’s claim, Draco
thought. Good. They had better not. If anyone else had survived Darker magic, it should have been a matter for *Daily Prophet* headlines.

“I am trying to understand both Dark and Light, and what they mean,” Harry said softly, almost as if he were talking to himself. “And I tend to think all the fixed definitions we use—wildness, compulsion, free will, solitude, cooperation—are wrong, at some level. Or they interact with the wild Dark and the wild Light in ways that we’ve ignored.

“Living in a fixed world is easier, I know, but it’s not real. I’m going to try not to ignore reality any more.”

He looked at Draco as he spoke. Draco stared back, enchanted at the joy in Harry’s face.

Harry cast his hand up, and the silver and green flurried from them, becoming a series of lightning bolts. “May we all be unbound!” he cried.

The green and silver lightning bolts swarmed over everyone there, encircling their wrists and their throats and their heads. Draco, staring in every direction, saw Blaise crowned as a king, Millicent with a torque around her throat, Hawthorn Parkinson with bracelets of wildness.

Harry smiled, and then the music came welling from nowhere, and the dancing began, and Draco did not have time to think of individual sights anymore, not when he was whirling with multiple partners, snatched apart and bound back together again by invisible magic, and the world had shattered and shivered into slivers of joy.

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**Chapter Eighty-One: Long and Sweet and Slow**

Harry closed his eyes and leaned back on the faint slope at the far side of the glade. The dancing had exhausted him, he’d thought at first, but then he realized that it had only exhausted his impulse to dance. He didn’t go through the dark doorway when it appeared. One moment of unbinding two years ago had been enough. His mind still swarmed with images that came from encountering the magic of Walpurgis, the memories of those dead witches and wizards who had had no magical heir to absorb their powers when they died. He smiled; one memory was of a wizard who had worked all his life to create a single golden rose that would never fade for the man he loved. And why not? That was as good a use of magic as any other, Harry thought.

“Harry.”

Awareness surged all over Harry’s body like the prickling brush of grass along his skin. He took a deep breath, and opened his eyes, and met Draco’s.

Draco stood in front of him, face illuminated by the fire someone had lit behind him when the dancing was done. Harry almost flinched at his expression. He would have expected excitement from Draco, or high solemnity; they were about to enter a ritual that would take them three years, after all. But instead there was an intent look on his face, as if he were seeing and thinking only of Harry in that moment.

Harry swallowed. He knew that he would spend this ritual in private with Draco, sharing the same space and thinking thoughts that revolved only around himself and Draco. And that, strangely, was the part that scared him the most. Without the wide world to bury himself in, there was nothing for him to hide behind, and nothing to make him think of things that weren’t personal. He would have to see just one person, who in turn would be seeing him. He would have to act in a way that most people found *normal*, and which Harry had never been able to achieve. Terror clawed at his throat, almost burying the anticipation.

Draco’s face softened then. “It’s all right, Harry,” he said quietly, and extended a hand. “Come, now. Mother and Father just Apparated in. And Snape is taking the place of a father to introduce you to me, isn’t that right?”

Harry nodded. That had been the one requirement Draco had to tell him about. In a traditional ritual, the parents would arrange matters without even taking their children to meet each other until it was time for the courting to begin. Since Harry had neither mother nor father to stand for him, Draco had to make sure he found someone. And Snape really was the best candidate.

“Then come on,” Draco coaxed, keeping his hand extended.

Harry reminded himself that he *had* chosen this, and terror or not, he wanted what would come after this. The want strangled the terror, and permitted him to reach up and take Draco’s hand.
Narcissa and Lucius were waiting for them. Draco had described the woods as precisely as he could to his father via the communication spell, and Lucius had recognized the place. Apparently this was a real forest after all, but so touched by the magic of Walpurgis Night as to be half-transformed.

Harry’s eyes were wider than Draco had ever seen them, and they flicked from side to side as if trying to insure that no one followed them. Now and then a muscle in his cheek twitched, or his hand rose and rubbed across his face as if he were trying to hold great emotions in. That was all right with Draco. He would have been more worried if Harry had been the calm, composed statue he often was in dangerous situations. That would have implied that he considered this just another uncomfortable necessity to be got through, an oath he had to take to secure an ally.

This was so much more than that, and while Draco knew Harry’s perceptions of it weren’t the same as his, he wanted them to match more closely with his than they normally did. He hadn’t touched Harry after that initial handclasp. The ritual said they weren’t supposed to. His fingers twitched with the urge to, though. And his mind rang with sweetness.

For once, they would be alone, without Harry’s stupid brother to interrupt them, or Professor Snape to insist that Harry needed to rest, or any yearmates stumbling in to go to sleep. Harry wouldn’t have an excuse to talk about anything but Draco and himself. That would be what was scaring him, of course, but Draco trusted him to have refused the ritual if he was too terrified to go through with it. He had to trust him that far, or they would never have an equal relationship. He would always be the shepherd, the parent, mistrusting Harry’s decisions the way Snape tended to do.

They caught up with Snape at the edge of the glade. He frowned at Draco and stared hard at Harry, but Harry met his eyes calmly enough and said, “Thank you for doing this, sir.”

That seemed to decide Snape. He nodded, once, and strode behind them. Draco eyed him and was impressed. Unless someone had known the professor of old and memorized the way he moved, it was hard to tell that he still limped.

They passed several small mounds and roots and holes in the ground that seemed to take forever in the dark; certainly they would have been smaller obstacles in daylight. The oddly brilliant light of the moon helped sustain them, though, as well as keeping them bathed in dark green and silver—Slytherin colors. Draco couldn’t imagine a better omen in a joining where both partners were Slytherins. Yes, Walpurgis Night had definitely been the right time to begin this ritual, though the romantic in Draco had thought Harry’s birthday might be the best choice at first.

Strength was flooding him as they walked. Draco couldn’t tell if it was emotional or magical, and he didn’t care. He lifted his head, and the moonlight made the hair on his arms and neck stand on end. The sky was dark blue, he realized, not dark green, introducing a third color into their world. That was all right. The dark blue didn’t have any particular significance in terms of Houses, since it was deeper than the Ravenclaw shade of blue, but they could adopt it and give it a significance. Perhaps they would exchange dark blue stones with each other in the pivot ritual of Halloween next year.

From ahead came the glimmer of white; Draco knew that was shining from his mother’s dark robes, hemmed with an edging as bright as diamond dust. She had shown them to him the day they went to Grimmauld Place over Easter holidays. Draco knew they symbolized new life, the rising generation, taking over from the old, since they imitated the colors of the night and the waxing moon. Of course, neither of his parents was old yet, but the symbolism was important.

Lucius was clad in plain black, though his hair, free and flowing to his shoulders, mimicked his wife’s robe hem. He turned and nodded to Draco. He stood beside Narcissa at the top of a small slope, Draco saw, dipping down into a tiny bowl of grass. He and Harry could lie in it side by side and have just a little room to spare.

Well, good. Since neither of us is going to be leaving that bowl for the rest of the night, and we’re not going to be playing Quidditch…

“Son,” Lucius greeted him as he came nearer.

“Father,” Draco returned. They were supposed to refer to each other by relationships for this part of the ritual, not names. He hoped Harry would remember that.

He moved over to stand between his parents. Harry walked to the opposite side of the bowl to stand with Snape at his right shoulder. Draco had thought he might look forlorn without a mother, but Harry just looked hesitant, a bit shy and eminently touchable.

Draco shook his head to stop thoughts like that, and locked his eyes with Harry’s as his father performed the introductions, flawlessly.

“I, Lucius Malfoy, present my son for this joining, the first of thirteen, begun on Walpurgis Night,” he murmured. “He was born on the fifth of June nearly sixteen years ago, and he has my consent for his ritual and his partner.” For a moment, his hand pressed heavily on Draco’s shoulder. “He is my magical heir.”
“I, Narcissa Black,” said his mother softly then, “present my son for this joining, the first of thirteen, begun on Walpurgis Night.” Draco flashed a tiny glance at her, and was startled by the unearthly joy in her face. Of course, Narcissa had told him that her main goal was to see him as happy as possible, and that she trusted Harry would make him that happy, but it was one thing to hear it and another to see it. “I bore him in pain and received him in joy on the fifth of June nearly sixteen years ago. May another now receive him as I did.” She bowed her head and stepped back.

Draco hoped that Snape would remember his part in the ritual, but he should have known better. After all, Snape could remember complicated Potions instructions off the top of his head. What had the potential to trip him up was the exact wording he had to use.

“I, Severus Snape,” he said, voice grinding like a whetstone on a sword, “present my—my son for this joining, the first of thirteen, begun on Walpurgis Night.” Draco wondered if Snape was aware of the expression on Harry’s face as he stared up at him, but he doubted it; Snape was too caught up in struggling through his own emotions. “He was born on the thirty-first of July nearly sixteen years ago, and he has my consent for his ritual and his partner.” Snape took a deep breath. “He is not my son by blood, but he is by love.”

Harry closed his eyes for a moment. Draco waited. Even his parents waited, with no sign of impatience. Draco could feel Lucius’s eyes on Snape. He wasn’t sure he wanted to see what they held, though.

Then the moment was past, and Draco felt the magic, called and shaped by the ritual, pouring into its mold, taking over around them. Gentle hands tugged on his robes, urging him forward, down the side of the slope and into the grassy bowl. Draco walked easily enough, glancing down now and then to catch a glimpse of the pullers. Bright golden eyes winked and flashed and vanished again. Draco could feel his parents and Snape both turning away, fulfilling the ritual’s instruction to leave them alone.

Harry stumbled a bit on his way down, but arrived at the same time Draco did. Draco put out his hands, letting them clasp Harry’s single one and rest on his left wrist. Then he closed his eyes. He’d practiced this, both over the Easter holidays and as Walpurgis approached, but he still hadn’t been entirely sure he could do it.

_Accio_, he commanded in his head, wandless and nonverbal, since he couldn’t move his hands. _Accio_ Arcturus’s ring.

The magic in the ritual helped; Draco could feel it swirling lazily around the sides of the bowl, turning its attention towards him, and then diving into his pockets. A moment later, the ring bumped at Draco’s side like an eager puppy. Draco took a deep breath that he hoped sounded like a sigh of anticipation and not a sigh of relief, and then shifted his fingers to clasp it. Harry stared at him as Draco took the ring in his right hand and held it up.

“This is a treasure of the Black bloodline, Harry,” he murmured, “the ring that my Cousin Arcturus supposedly proposed to his wife with. It comes from my mother. Her blood flows in my veins, and she bore me, and with this night a new joining between us is born. Do you accept my gift?” He held the ring out towards Harry, wondering if he remember the words that Draco had wound up whispering to him earlier this afternoon.

Harry remembered. His face was pale, not even counting the moonlight, but he nodded and whispered, “In blood we begin this joining, on earth, in the sight of the dark spaces between the stars.” He flexed his hand as much as he could, since it was resting under Draco’s left one, and Draco maneuvered enough to fit the ring over Harry’s finger without letting go of his hand. When it was in place, they both regarded it for a moment; Draco felt no need to hurry on to the next part of the joining, and of course Harry didn’t know what they were supposed to do next.

The ring was plain silver, a relatively thin band. The stone it bore was a jacinth, a deep reddish-purple gem that resembled heart’s blood. Supposedly, the moment Arcturus Black had given it to his wife was the one moment in his life when he had ever been serious.

And, technically of course, the ring was Harry’s already, along with all the other Black treasures, so it joined them in yet another circle, yet another cycle. Draco found himself satisfied with that. In fact, the whole evening so far filled him with deep satisfaction. Things were happening the way they were _supposed_ to, the way they _should_ and always had, despite Harry’s unconventional parents, despite Harry’s power, despite the fact that Draco knew his father would have acquired a frozen look at the mere thought of a Malfoy and a Potter joining five years ago. Draco had never felt more pureblood, more united to a tradition that stretched back for centuries and did not falter, and he had never felt more content in being so.

He stepped back, took a deep breath, and lifted his eyes to Harry’s face. “The gift is accepted,” he said, beginning the next part of the ritual. “The ordinary has begun its transformation into the extraordinary. What we share this night is between the two of us, _Harry._”

When he spoke his partner’s name, the magic of the ritual once more picked up. Tiny sparks appeared around them, then rose, shining like glints of light on water. They grew more and more prevalent as Draco watched, and evolved into a sheer curtain that shut them off from the outside world. In moments, there was only him, the grassy bowl, and Harry. The world
ended in a white-golden haze.

“What do I say?” Harry hissed at him. Draco looked at him and saw that his face was almost white. *Perhaps I should have insisted that he take some interest in the ritual after all.* But Draco had not wanted to insist. What mattered was that Harry wanted this, and the extent of his interest and desire wasn’t for Draco to dictate.

“Harry,” he said, again, and the light sparks danced as if they liked the sound. “From here on out, the experience and not the wording is what is important. My name, though. I’d like to hear that.”

Harry gave a little shudder, as if this were the first time they had moved past calling each other by surnames, and murmured, “Draco.”

The sparks twitched again, and then grew brighter and brighter, filling the glade with an odd mixture of daylight and moonlight. Draco nodded in satisfaction, and smiled a bit at the look of awe on Harry’s face. He wondered if Harry even knew he looked like that when he encountered a new magical object or process.

“Thank you,” he said softly. “Now, shall we begin?”

“That wasn’t the beginning yet?” Harry shivered in spite of himself. He’d already felt more focused on Draco than he ever had. He wasn’t sure if it was magic or not, but when he tried to think about other things—the werewolf problem, Snape’s voice as he said those ritual words, the decidedly odd look Lucius had given him—his thoughts slid away from that and circled back to Draco. Surely it could not get deeper or more intense. He didn’t know what he would do if it did.

“Not the beginning, not quite yet,” said Draco softly. His words had already altered in timber and tone from what they’d been a moment ago, though his voice had been quiet then, too. Now, he sounded as if he were much closer to Harry, though of course that was impossible. “But now.”

He lifted his head and looked over Harry’s shoulder. Harry turned, wondering if someone had managed to walk through the barrier after all.

But it wasn’t a person; it was an object. Harry blinked as he watched it resolve into a harp, the same color as the light that surrounded them. It hung in midair, strings vibrating. Then they began to play, and Harry heard a delicate tune he didn’t recognize. It was beautiful, as everything about the ritual had been, but Harry wondered what he was supposed to do with it, how he was supposed to respond.

“Harry,” said Draco, and Harry turned back. Draco’s expression had changed again. Now he wore a look of deep calm, and he bowed and extended both his hands. “Would you dance with me?”

Harry closed his eyes and stood still for a long moment. He could do this. He didn’t need to worry about tripping over his own feet, or making a fool of himself. Only Draco was here to see him, and he wouldn’t laugh.

“I don’t know the tune,” said Harry, even though he was already stepping forward, settling his hand on Draco’s shoulder. He wondered what to do with his other arm, until Draco clasped his left wrist in his right hand and stretched it away from his body.

“That’s all right,” Draco said, and a smile shadowed his face, playing around his lips, never quite forming. “I wanted this to happen since we never got to share a dance at the Yule Ball. The music will adapt itself to us, Harry. You don’t need to worry about that.” He actually closed his eyes as he began dancing, and Harry wondered if the intensity was overwhelming for him.

It was for Harry, though he and Draco weren’t actually dancing all that close together. Their feet shuffled more or less in time, and the grass rustled under it with soft damp sounds, and the light shone steadily, letting them see where they were going. Harry felt dew soaking his shoes, climbing up through the edges of his robes. He smelled something wild and clean that was probably the scent of plants growing untended.

And he was aware of the muscles flexing under his hand, shifting and twitching with more motions than Harry had known they were capable of as Draco switched positions and turned, and, once or twice, whirled sharply. He could hear Draco’s light, steady breathing, which seemed to grip Harry as much as his arms did. He could smell him, which wasn’t something Harry had much experience with at all. He smelled—like a human, really. Harry couldn’t describe it in poetic terms.

But they were close, and the warmth from Draco’s body seeped out to him to contrast with the coolness of the dew, and after some time Harry became aware that Draco had opened his eyes and was watching him, still with his face set in those calm, peaceful lines.
Harry swallowed, but didn’t look away. He hadn’t realized that Draco was capable of looking like this, not only calm but happy. He didn’t look as though he needed to rush off somewhere and do something else. He wasn’t worrying about homework, or that Harry’s life was in danger. When he cocked his head, it was because he wanted to and not because he was listening for the sounds of enemies.

Draco had gray eyes and a sharp face, Harry had always known that, but now he didn’t have to look quickly and then look away again. Now he could stare, and he fell into the staring, into how Draco’s chin and cheeks hooked together, into how his blond hair slid halfway down his brow when he turned his head, how his eyes had a direct stare when he focused them the way—

The way he was doing now.

Harry wouldn’t have cared if Draco was beautiful if the soul inside hadn’t attracted him; after all, Bellatrix Black Lestrange had been beautiful in her time, and Harry could imagine a beautiful Lucius killing without a pause. Lily had raised him not to care that much about physical beauty. He was never going to have a lover or a spouse anyway, not with all the time he had to devote to Connor, so who cared if he appreciated what the people around him looked like? What mattered with political allies was how he could persuade them and what it took to make them stay persuaded.

But this was the boy who had refused to leave him alone for the entirety of first year, even when Harry came up with what he thought were clever and creative solutions to drive him far, far away. This was the friend who had declared himself Harry’s friend again at the beginning of second year, after Harry had spent several weeks ignoring him. This was the comrade-in-arms who had followed him down into the Chamber of Secrets, even though he hated Connor and had every reason to be terrified of Riddle, because he didn’t want Harry to go alone. This was the thinker who had studied unconscious compulsion to see if Harry had influenced him unduly with his power, concluded that he might have but he could never know the full extent of it, and decided to stay Harry’s friend anyway. This was the stubborn, insistent terrier who’d picked up the pieces just as he promised he would when Harry came to Malfoy Manor after taking his mother’s magic, and tried his very hardest to accompany Harry to the Shrieking Shack, then sulked when he realized he couldn’t share directly in what had happened there.

This was the wizard impatient for power who'd made a potentially horrible mistake in summoning an ancestral ghost on Halloween, of all nights, and been lucky that she simply chose to give him empathy instead of kill him. This was the Malfoy who had swallowed being an empath and chosen to learn and live with it. This was the sulk boy who had decided that not telling Harry he was in love with him for months was a good idea, and who had then fought incredibly hard to convince Harry it was all right when he learned the truth on his own. This was the almost Gryffindorish Slytherin who had kissed him first and then refused to either panic or apologize, because neither would have fit what happened between them.

This was the pureblood wizard who had sworn vengeance on Bellatrix Lestrange and Voldemort for their actions against Harry, and then eagerly embraced his possession ability to do what damage he could to them. This was the idiot who’d thought that putting monitoring spells on Harry and yelling at him when he got into danger was also a good idea. This was the patient, self-controlled son of Lucius who had managed to force himself to wait for physical contact with Harry until he was ready for it. This was the chaos-rider who had faced his father rather suddenly and won just as sudden a victory. This was the son of Narcissa, whom Harry saw in the grace of his motion and the grace of his mind—more her son than Lucius’s, in the end, Harry thought, more Black than Malfoy, though without, hopefully, the tendency to go mad and not tell people important secrets that could lead to the saving of lives.

This was Draco.

Draco’s breath was coming short by the time Harry started concentrating on him as the person he was at that moment and not all the people he had been, and Harry tilted his own head. “Are you all right?” he asked. “Do you want to sit down?” His own limbs felt light enough, since the dancing hadn’t been strenuous work, but he had to admit he had no idea how long they’d been doing this.

“I—think it would be a good idea,” said Draco, and half-collapsed back on the sloping bank of the little dell. At once the harp stopped playing and floated back into the light. Harry assumed it floated back into the light, at least. He heard the music end, but he didn’t want to look away from Draco.

Why?

Because I don’t want to.

He reached out his hand and cupped Draco’s cheek, tilting his head to the side. Draco went with the motion. His eyes were wide and curious, the calmness fading from his face.

Harry leaned forward, closing his own eyes to see what would happen, and kissed Draco with steady determination. Draco didn’t hesitate before kissing back, but Harry hadn’t expected him to.
Draco did try to shift positions, but Harry nudged him with his left arm, and Draco remained where he was. Harry was comfortable like this, with both of their heads at the same height and himself the one touching Draco. It had been the other way around so often. Harry had known, intellectually and for a long time, that that would have to change.

Now he thought he was finally ready emotionally for it to happen. He wanted to touch Draco.

He kept his hand still on Draco’s face, but gently nudged at Draco’s lips with his tongue to get them to open. When they did, Harry catalogued how Draco’s cheek felt, flexing underneath his palm, the softness and warmth of his mouth, the fact that kissing him like this made sweetness fill his own head until he could barely think and a sharp feeling wake up at the base of his spine.

He opened his eyes, and met Draco’s stunned, half-drowning gray ones. He had gone from curious to completely surprised. Well, good, Harry thought. I should be able to surprise him once in a while, and not just because of the danger I rush into. He pulled away from the kiss and murmured, “Can I touch you? Anywhere I want? Is there anywhere that you wouldn’t feel comfortable with?”

“Merlin, Harry, no,” said Draco, and leaned forward, his legs drawing together and his arms folding on top of them to support his head as Harry began to run his hand over Draco’s shoulders. “I—whatever you want. Please.” Harry wasn’t entirely sure he was supposed to hear the words that followed after that. “I’ve been waiting for this for so long.”

Harry nodded, though Draco didn’t seem to see the gesture, and shuffled around on his knees to stroke Draco’s shoulders. Draco didn’t seem to know whether to melt into the caress or stay where he was and passive. Harry did see the skin at the corners of his eyes crinkle as he squeezed them shut.

Harry trailed his fingers down Draco’s shoulder blades and over his spine, light, quick motions to learn a back he thought he should already know well by now. He did it several times before he realized that something was wrong. He frowned and cocked his head, trying to figure out what it was, then nodded.

His magic calmly Vanished Draco’s robes and shirt. Draco started at that and made a small sound that—Harry paused. “Did you just squeak?” he asked incredulously.

“Because Malfoys don’t—ah, Harry.” That word was half a groan, and Draco dropped his head forward again. He turned enough to look at him through hazy, but decidedly indignant, gray eyes. “I did not squeak. I couldn’t have.”

“Sensitive skin?” Harry whispered, rearing up on his knees and leaning down to whisper in Draco’s ear. Draco gasped and squirmed.

“Sensitive ears, too, I see.” He bent his head further, not letting himself think of anything but reverence and the fog in his head, the one emotion for Draco and the other for himself, and kissed the side of Draco’s neck. Draco jumped as though someone had pinched his arse, and then uttered a low sound that had no name, but was distinctly one of pleasure. Harry grinned against his skin. “Maybe that’s the kind of noise Malfoys make,” he said.

Draco made a complicated rolling motion that ended up with Harry in his arms and half-sprawled on the slope of the glade. Draco stared into his eyes, and whispered, “Do you have the slightest idea what you’re doing to me?”

“Yes,” Harry said quietly, which, by the look on Draco’s face now, wasn’t the answer he’d expected. “I do. And I want to keep doing it, unless you don’t want me to.”

Draco closed his eyes and took a breath that made it seem as if he were trying to breathe water. “I—I can’t just yet, Harry,” he whispered. “There’s your training to think of, and the ritual, and—” He stopped.

“Draco,” said Harry, surprised at him. “It’s all right to admit that you’re nervous, too, you know.”

Draco blinked, then smiled. “I should have known you would pick up on that,” he muttered. “All right. Can—can I touch you back, Harry? It doesn’t seem fair that I’ve had so much of the intensity so far, and you’ve had precious little.”

“You’re underestimating how good it feels to touch you,” said Harry, while anticipation ran through him like a shudder of sunlight. “But yes. Please.” He shifted into a more comfortable position, sitting rather than lying, and waited.
Draco took a moment to look at Harry in silence. Harry watched him back, green eyes gentle, face more relaxed than Draco had ever seen it. And he gave an impatient little wriggle when Draco went on staring at him.

“You said you would,” he muttered.

Draco felt his mouth widen in what could have been either a smile or a smirk. ‘Yes, I did,” he said softly, and then leaned forward so that he could slide his hands directly beneath Harry’s robes, rounding the sides of his waist and skimming up to his chest. He didn’t try to remove Harry’s clothes. He wanted the sensation of touching him under the cloth, his movements sharply restricted, at least as much as Harry had wanted the sense of touching him without barriers.

Whenever his fingers prodded or pushed something that made Harry give any sort of sound or motion, Draco paused and repeated it, then repeated it again, until he was sure he would know the place again when he had Harry finally in bed. A map gradually formed under his fingers, and even when he closed his eyes, he found he imagined it more as sensations of softness, warmth, small dips and hollows, rather than getting a visual image. That was all right. He would be proud and pleased to know Harry with more than one sense, and he already knew what he looked like.

Harry’s breaths were fast and soft as Draco touched him, faster as the touching went on. He’d let his head loll to the side and his eyes shut. Probably he’d done it to make his enjoyment of the sensations more intense, but it also showed how utterly vulnerable he was, and how much he didn’t care about that. He trusted Draco with a part of himself that no one else ever got to see. Draco felt two lazy spirals of fire turn in him at the thought of that, one in his chest and one in his groin. And no one else ever will get to see it.

Finally, he pulled his hands out from beneath Harry’s robe and slid them up to his neck and face. Just as Harry’s eyes opened, he pulled him into another kiss, while his fingers drifted down the side of his neck. He’d noticed one place that always made Harry shiver absently when his robe collar or an insect brushed it. If he could just find it again…

A faint shudder from Harry, and Draco knew he’d found it. He sat back, breaking the kiss so suddenly that Harry had no time to react, and then dropped his head and fastened his mouth on the place.

Harry let out a sharp, shocked cry of pleasure. Draco opened his mouth a bit, and used his tongue and teeth, in absurdly light touches that nevertheless made Harry jerk and twist around, grabbing him.

“Draco, Merlin, enough!” he said. His eyes were brilliant green, flaring like Draco had only seen them flare in the Woodhouse battle, right after he’d killed Fenrir Greyback and Draco had killed his consort. “Come here, damn it.”

He tackled him, and for a moment they rolled confusedly down the tiny hill, winding up again at the bottom of the glade. Harry waited until they stopped moving before he insistently kissed Draco, his mouth fastening on his in a half-biting motion that Draco wouldn’t have expected.

Draco wrapped his arms around Harry and kissed back, riding out the fierce contact, until it melted into one like they’d shared in the courting room. Even that, Draco thought, was only a shadow of the one their future images had shared, and he felt a different kind of warmth in his chest at the thought that they still had something to grow towards. Wonderful as this was, it wouldn’t be the same forever.

Harry lifted his head after a moment, and smiled down at him. His mouth was sloppy, his hair sloppier, his face so flushed that he looked as if he’d swallowed a vial of Pepperup Potion, and he obviously didn’t care.

"Did you know," he said, “that you make me really, really, really happy?”

Draco swallowed, and told himself that neither Blacks nor Malfoys had license to cry right now. But he did give a grin that hurt his face and probably made him look quite as ridiculous as if he’d cried.

Harry stooped over him and kissed him one more time, then sat up. “Come on,” he said, and snapped his fingers. Draco’s robes and shirt appeared again, draped over the place on the bank where they’d sat to touch each other. “The ritual is over.”

Draco smiled. Yes, it was; the melting of the light wall around them would have signified that if nothing else. But Harry had no question in his voice. He was simply self-confident enough to feel that they’d been taken out of the world and were now coming back, and not to question his judgment. This, despite the fact that he hadn’t studied the ritual, and a year ago he wouldn’t have dared to assume something like that without Draco telling him so.

The most wonderful thing about him, Draco thought, watching as Harry stood looking up at the moon for a moment while he put his clothes back on, is that I don’t think he’ll ever be done. Next year’s ritual will be different, and not just because it’s further along in the courting. He’ll be different. He never stays the same. What was his mother thinking, believing she could chain him in one shape for the rest of his life?

Harry turned and caught him staring. He gave him an easy smile and stretched out a hand, pulling Draco to his feet in one
smooth motion.

“Come on,” he murmured. “I can feel Snape’s magic back in the place where we danced. He’s waiting for us.”

He moved his hand to Draco’s shoulder for a moment and squeezed, then turned and walked out of the glade. The silver ring on his finger glinted as the moonlight caught it.

Draco closed his eyes and let the intensity run out of him like pure water out of a cup. For a moment, he lingered in the space the ritual had created, amid deep green grass and bright silver moonlight and dark blue sky, while happiness filled him like a herd of galloping unicorns.

Then he opened his eyes and hastened after his partner.

Chapter Eighty-Two: Of Man and Wolf

Harry sat down at the Slytherin table, and wondered how long it would take everyone to notice. Millicent was first, it turned out, as Harry reached for the pumpkin juice and the lights in the Great Hall made silver light dance off his finger. Her hand shot out and gripped his wrist, holding it still.

Harry grinned and let her examine his ring. It was a bit annoying, not being able to reach for something else while his hand was held like this, but he was enjoying the expression of sheer shock and disbelief on Millicent’s face.

“That’s a jacinth, Harry, isn’t it?” she asked at last, never taking her eyes from the red-purple stone.

“It is,” Harry said agreeably, and wriggled his fingers. Millicent let his hand go, and he fetched the jug of pumpkin juice and poured some into his glass, while all the while her gaze tried to drill holes in the side of his head. “Meant to symbolize heart’s blood, at least in this particular shade. I know a jacinth might come in other colors, and I can’t remember what those mean.”

“You actually do—” Millicent stopped for a moment as though she had to reconsider what she was saying, and then murmured, “You really do mean to complete this joining ritual with Draco, then?”

Harry blinked. That wasn’t the reaction he’d expected her to have. “Yes, of course I do,” he said. “Unless you tell me that you and Draco have been secretly arranged to be married from birth?”

“If we had been,” Draco said, dropping into place on the other side of him, “I would have killed her and hidden her body by now. Then it would be off to the Manor to Obliviate my parents. Really, Harry, don’t you know any of the traditional steps to getting yourself free of an unwanted marriage?”

Millicent laughed, but it looked almost as if she were doing it in spite of herself. Her gaze was calculating as it shifted back and forth between Harry and Draco. “It’s not that,” she said. “Nothing like that. It’s just—it has to be the three-year ritual, since you started it on Walpurgis Night.”

“Very good, Bulstrode,” Draco drawled, helping himself to kippers. Harry wondered if he was the only one who noticed the tension in Draco’s shoulders, and underlying the light voice. “I suppose the next incredible fact you’ll tell me is that this day used to be called Beltane.”

“You don’t understand, Draco,” said Millicent, and then swept a bow to him that had no trace of mockery in it. “I’m very happy for you both. I think it’s a wonderful idea. I’m going to suggest it to Pierre, in fact, though I think we’ll want to wait a few years before we begin even that.”

“Pierre?” Harry asked.

“Yes, Pierre Delacour.” Millicent flashed him a smug smile. “He attended your little meeting on the equinox. It seems that he’s impressed by strength.”

“Well, congratulations then,” said Harry. He wondered if he should be more put off by the idea of Millicent deciding to marry someone she’d evidently just met, but then shrugged. If Millicent was happy, why should the idea concern him? Just because it wasn’t something he’d do didn’t mean it was wrong. “But what is it that you’re so surprised about, if you don’t care who Draco joins with or who I do?”

“I didn’t think you would have the strength of mind to do this, Harry, especially so soon,” said Millicent quietly. “To fight a war, to make allies, and maybe even to make a political marriage or joining—I thought all of those were in your power. But not this.”
“I—thank you,” said Harry, wondering if he ought to be complimented or insulted. Then again, Millicent was the one who had caught him cutting his own arm to practice healing spells. Perhaps he should simply be grateful that she had kept her promise not to tell anyone about that, and not surprised that she would think his training still strong. “And, well, it is.”

“Congratulations,” Millicent repeated solemnly, and turned back to her breakfast.

Blaise noticed next, yawning and stretching so much that his eyes were scrunched shut when he sat down. Then he opened them, caught sight of Harry’s ring, and appeared to jump a foot in the air.

“It’s true, then?” he asked when he came down, as if he hadn’t just shown surprise that still had Draco snickering. His large dark eyes studied Harry as if he expected his face to peel off and reveal one of the Weasley twins beneath. “You really are getting joined, and to a Malfoy?”

“The only one available, yes,” said Harry, and exchanged an amused look with Draco. “I rather think Lucius and Narcissa would be angry with me if I hinted I was joining with one of them.”

“Not what I meant,” said Blaise, and went on studying them, eyes so narrow that Draco finally spoke.

“And did you mean, Blaise?”

The other boy blinked, as though awakening from a dream. “Nothing in particular,” he said, and began pouring pumpkin juice as if saving the world from Voldemort depended on how much juice he could get into a glass. Harry chewed around his sausages now—Argutus had liked sunbathing in the entrance hall too much to join him this morning—and watched him. He supposed Blaise was trying to decide where he stood. His mother was Harry’s formal ally now, an oath sworn while they’d been at the equinox gathering. Blaise had not joined in the oath, and neither had he come onto the stage with his mother when Harry introduced her to his potential allies.

I don’t really think he’d join Voldemort. But he’s known me from the beginning, and he’s not in love with me like Draco is, and he doesn’t have the personality of a follower like Greg and Vince do. I’m not surprised that he has trouble deciding how to relate to me.

Somehow, perhaps because other people were paying closer attention to the Slytherin table than Harry had thought or because Millicent hadn’t bothered to keep her voice quiet, the news spread. Harry had several people congratulate him before the end of breakfast, including Cho, Ginny—who pretended Blaise didn’t exist—and Zacharias. Zacharias, of course, nodded sagely and said, “I suppose it’s the next best thing.”

“What is?” Harry asked, amused, sure he could enjoy what was coming, even if Draco didn’t.

“That you’re getting joined to a Dark wizard. We could have used you on the Light side.” Zacharias cocked his head and eyed Harry. “If you were a bit more intelligent, Harry, we might have made a go of it.”

“Sod off, Smith,” said Draco, with unexpected viciousness. Harry rolled his eyes and nudged Draco’s shoulder with his. Zacharias was being pompous because that was the way he was, and whether Draco was jealous or angry at the implied insult to Harry, he should know that Zacharias wouldn’t change his mind for either circumstance.

“As you wish, Malfoy,” said Zacharias. “And I wish you luck in trying to control him. You should have realized by now that Harry does whatever he wants, and he’s as much Light as Dark.” He nodded to Harry and then trotted off towards the other side of the Great Hall to fetch Hermione.

“What did he mean by that?” Draco demanded.

“I think he thought that you were angry at the implication that I’d join with a Light wizard,” Harry murmured, and bit into his eggs. He had to admit that they tasted a little better than they used to, when his main impression of them was “slippery.” Perhaps avoiding porridge and trying food that had more flavor was working to overcome his training after all. “Not at anything else that he might have said.”

“I wasn’t,” said Draco. “Not at all. I’m angry because that isn’t supposed to happen.”

“What isn’t?” Harry eyed Draco curiously. He didn’t know much about the history of the ritual, or how other people were supposed to receive the joined couple once their joining had been announced. Perhaps Zacharias really had just delivered a stinging insult under the cover of a few innocent words.

“He’s not supposed to joke about that,” said Draco. “This ritual is a solemn one, and I’m doing everything right. He has no right to imply that this is just a joining like others.”

Harry cleared his throat to hide his amusement. So it’s his Malfoy pride that’s stung, I should have known. “Draco, of course we can’t expect anyone else to take it as seriously as we do. They’re not the ones getting joined.”
“So you do take it seriously, then?” Draco turned on him like a whirlwind.

Harry blinked, but he could see what Draco needed, even if he wasn’t entirely sure why he needed it. He leaned forward and kissed him gently. Draco didn’t melt against him, but he did relax enough to listen when Harry pulled away again.

“More seriously than anything else I’ve ever done,” said Harry. And that was true. With other things he’d done, including securing allies and fighting in battles, he’d known he could do them because he’d trained for them. A certain amount of ease, even carelessness, was part of his manner around them. But outside the confines of the ritual, being Draco’s known partner would be a constant challenge. He still didn’t know how to act normal; he missed numerous small cues, and he tended to interpret others’ emotions differently than Draco would. So he had to pay attention to this, take it seriously, in order to survive it and make it pleasant.

Draco’s face flushed slightly, and he nodded. “Thank you, Harry,” he said. “I really shouldn’t have doubted you.”

Harry patted his shoulder. “Finish your breakfast,” he said. “You should eat all of it, really. After all, OWLS are coming up. Kippers improve the memory.”

“They do not,” said Draco, but nevertheless started eating his kippers.

Harry returned to his own breakfast, aware of the pressure of eyes from all sides. There would be people like Zacharias and Blaise thinking of their joining in a political light, Harry knew, as well as those who sincerely wished them well. There would even be those who murmured that he ought to have considered joining to someone from a dedicated Light family, just to balance the pressure of the Dark allies around him. Yes, that was an unreasonable demand to make of a normal person, but Harry wasn’t a normal person, and Lords and Lord-level wizards had to watch what they did.

Harry didn’t care. They were perfectly free to stare and mutter all they liked, so long as none of it entailed their trying to actually separate him from Draco. He would write to Laura Gloryflower and ask her what she thought he should do to balance the Dark around him with a bit of Light. Moody had arrived, but he had such a reputation that most of the northern Light families, and his other, more tentative allies, wouldn’t be satisfied with just that.

The next day breathed tension, and Harry really couldn’t blame anyone. It was the second of May, normally not in anyone’s pantheon of special days. It was a day closer to Midsummer, but the number of people who knew about that was very carefully small; Harry had talked to his allies, of course, and to some of the older students in the dueling club whom he trusted to be able to help him, but he wasn’t about to start spreading the plan around like rain yet.

But it was the first night of the full moon, the first full moon since Elder Gillyflower was bitten. Most people were on edge for a werewolf attack. The Daily Prophet contained another interview with the captive werewolf Evergreen. The Wizengamot was still trying to get answers out of him instead of just sending him to Tullianum, because of his age. He spoke vague prophetic hints, and smiled. It was driving everyone mad, evidently, even Rita Skeeter.

Harry almost expected to get a letter. He had just hoped it would be from Remus, and that it would contain a promise of there being no attacks tonight, no reason to make Harry fear the full moon as if he were a werewolf himself. But it wasn’t from Remus. The handwriting was unfamiliar, spiky, elegant, and Harry could hear the fear that the writer was trying so desperately to hide.

May 2nd, 1996

Dear Harry:

I have left this until the last minute because I still believed I would be able to get help elsewhere. Now I learn that I cannot. I thought I had true friends, given their outrage over what had happened to me, and now I learn they are less true as the moon approaches. I—am not pleased about that, and not pleased about writing you, either, but you are the only source of Wolfsbane I know.

I have heard that you will brew the potion for anyone who asks. I do not ask that you give it to me for free. I can pay. My friends have been unaccountably slow to strip her property from the newest registered werewolf, the only kindness they have shown me. They say that I can survive confinement in Tullianum without it, but I have been studying. I know that the first full moon is often the hardest, that ten percent of all new werewolves lose their minds then and bite themselves to death if they do not have Wolfsbane.

And, of course, neither Amelia Bones nor anyone else who is willing to pass laws to avenge me will actually be seen distributing the potion to me, in case it leads to “unfortunate images.”

I am begging you, and I do not like begging. I will come to Hogwarts this afternoon—in secret, so that you do not have to
fear the political repercussions from your werewolf friends for giving me the potion. If you have a vial of Wolfsbane on hand, please meet me near the lake when classes end. You may bring whatever guards you like with you, to protect you and assure you that I am trustworthy. If you do not have the potion, then I will accept Amelia’s invitation to Tullianum tonight and let whatever is coming come.

Sincerely,
Emily Gillyflower,
Former Wizengamot Elder, now Werewolf.

Harry let out a harsh breath as he finished the letter, and shook his head. He did have some Wolfsbane he’d brewed and not used, because Remus now had the money to afford his own—and he had insisted on buying it elsewhere last month. He could oblige the Elder. What made him angry wasn’t even her haughty tone, mixed with broken pleading, but the fact that she’d been put in this position in the first place.

How is she really different from Hawthorn, whom Greyback bit because she wouldn’t oblige him in his attempts to resurrect Voldemort? How can I say that Evergreen is different from Fenrir, or Loki different from Voldemort?

Of course, his mind and his common sense wouldn’t let him think like that. Loki did seem to have a cause he believed in wholeheartedly and absolutely, while Harry thought Voldemort’s cause was himself, whatever nonsense he spouted about pureblood superiority. And, of course, Hawthorn’s bite had been meant to remain secret, a shameful thing, while the werewolves seemed to have been prepared either to blackmail Gillyflower or to roll with things if she told the Wizengamot she was bitten. But it didn’t excuse making other people victims, taking away their wills.

“Harry.”

Harry blinked and slowly opened his eyes. He started to realize that he was seeing the world through a blue curtain of phoenix fire. The bench beneath him was smoldering, but slowly, as if the wood wanted to savor such a wonderful experience as burning in the sweet flames. Draco had a hand outstretched to him, his eyes calm and his breathing a bit fast.

“Well, that’s one of the keys to phoenix fire, then,” Harry muttered as he forced the flames back inside his skin. “Righteous anger. It’s probably what Fawkes was feeling when he died.”

Draco nodded, and murmured *Finite Incantatem* at the bench, ending its burning. Then he shook his head at Harry. “You’re a mess,” he said. “And you need new clothes, these are all covered with ash. Let’s go back to the common room, and you can tell me all about it.”

Harry cast a quick *Tempus* charm. They should have just enough time to do that if they hurried, he thought, and he could still get to Defense Against the Dark Arts. “All right,” he said shortly, standing.

Draco turned to him the moment they were out of the room, and raised an eyebrow. Harry looked down at the parchment. The outer edges had crisped, taking a few letters off some words, but the majority was still readable. He held it out to Draco, and watched him read it, with a faint frown.

“I suppose it sounds genuine,” said Draco, reluctantly. “After all, if it was a trap, she would have probably asked you to come alone. But I still think we should have Professor Snape with us, and Moody. Hopefully it’ll be just an exchange, and you can give her the Wolfsbane, and she’ll leave. If not, we’ll be ready.”

Harry nodded. “That’s what I thought. I can’t ignore this if it is genuine; she could use her bitterness to speak about how I’m ignoring werewolves after I promised to fight for their rights. But I’m not taking the chance that it’s a trap the way that the vision of my aunt and cousin was.”

Draco gave him a harsh kiss, which left Harry blinking. “Good,” said Draco fiercely. “I don’t want you in any avoidable danger again, Harry. I know you can take care of yourself, but I can’t stand the damage to my heart. Really, do you want me to die of fear before I’m sixteen years old?”

The weight he gave the words made the retort Harry could have used slip his mind. “You’re going to be sixteen on June fifth,” he said slowly.

“How kind of you to remember!” Draco tilted his head as he steered Harry firmly into the Slytherin common room; Harry had a tendency to forget walking when he was caught up in a point. “Are you going to remember that my father’s a truce-dance ally to you for an encore? Of course, now you can’t, since I just gave the game away.”

“Shut it,” said Harry. “You’re confirmed as the Malfoy magical heir now. Lucius would have let people know. So that means that you should be holding the actual festival to celebrate the confirmation on your birthday.”
“Yes.” Draco pushed Harry towards his trunk, seeming determined to watch as Harry changed his ash-smeared robes. Harry talked to keep himself from thinking about it.

“That’s a Wednesday, though,” he said, quickly adding days. “Would I be right in assuming that you’ll hold the festival the weekend before?”

“You would.” Draco’s eyes, when Harry looked at him, were slit with amusement.

“And you’re going to need my presence there, aren’t you?” Harry finished in resignation, grimacing a bit. “The joined partner of the Malfoy magical heir can hardly be absent.”

Draco grinned faintly. “I was wondering when you would get to that part,” he said. “Yes, Harry, you’ll have to take part, but we have a month. I can give you all the etiquette lessons you’ll need, and tell you who’s most likely to attend. My father has most of the invitations accepted by now. There probably won’t be as many guests as there usually are, since traditionally part of the festival is to present a magical heir as a candidate for a marriage or joining, and there’s no need for that now. And some of them will be people you know, like Millicent and Pansy.”

Harry felt a surge of renewed confidence. If Pansy attended, then people might not spend the whole night staring at him after all. “Were you planning on telling me this at some point?” he asked.

“I wanted to see if you would figure it out on your own.” Draco was unrepentant. “If you hadn’t done it by Saturday, then yes, I would have told you.”

“Prat,” Harry said.

“That’s why you love me,” said Draco. “I’ll talk to Professor Snape about Elder Gillyflower, Harry. He may even have a few suggestions for guards that I don’t. At least we’re meeting inside the wards, so we know that no one can Apparate in, grab you, and then Apparate out again.”

Harry nodded absently, and made sure, again, that he had his book for Defense Against the Dark Arts. Acies wouldn’t scold him for missing the class on Tuesday, he knew, but he still didn’t like to disappoint her.

Snape could feel every bit of his skin bristling as he strode beside Harry on his way to the lake. Part of that was due to the presence of Moody, on Harry’s other side, but Snape had worked beside the man in the Order of the Phoenix for some years and learned to tolerate him. No, most of it was due to the fact that they were going to meet a woman who was a werewolf.

Snape refused to allow his breath to come short. He had also refused Harry’s offer, made in private, to stay behind so that he didn’t have to confront the source of his terror. He had hidden that fear for almost twenty years; not even Dumbledore knew what it had cost him to work beside Lupin. He was not about to betray himself now, and let Harry go into danger alone.

It was dangerous even if this was not a setup, as Snape was half-convinced this was. Werewolves changed when they received the bite, even as he had told Harry. And tonight the full moon would rise. Even Lupin, supposedly “tame,” had more than once gone a bit mad around that time. Emily Gillyflower might think she wanted the Wolfsbane now—and she had helpfully chosen a time that would both avoid letting Harry miss any classes and let her Apparate back home with the potion before moonrise—but she might change her mind as the afternoon traveled on.

McGonagall had checked the wards, and reassured Harry that the anti-Apparition ones were up, and that she had also received a letter from Elder Gillyflower, requesting formal permission to come onto school grounds. The new wards were working better than even the old ones had for years. Minerva had them spread through the Forbidden Forest, to warn her of anyone with hostile intentions approaching from that direction, and mantled thickly around the lake and the Quidditch Pitch —both open areas where someone might try to break through the wards and Apparate in. Snape was confident that she had done the best she could to see the school, and the children within it, safe.

Harry carried the vial of Wolfsbane Potion in his hand, and walked with his head up, his steps alert. Not alert enough for Snape, of course, but he was coming to understand that, while Harry appreciated his protectiveness, he would rarely indulge it. They had come, and Harry had three people who would defend him with their lives—Snake was sure of that with Moody, because he had seen the old Auror look at Harry as he used to look at Dumbledore. Without Harry’s agreeing to stay behind walls and wards, it would have to be enough.

And there was a woman waiting for them at the lake, huddled into a cloak. Actually, it was as good as early May weather could often be persuaded to get; yesterday’s sunlight had been a welcome exception. The sky was gray, but it was warm and not raining. But Elder Gillyflower acted as though the world hated her.

_Perhaps she thinks that way since the bite_, Snape thought, and constrained himself from pity as he had blocked fear off.
Yes, she was a victim, but in a few hours she would be capable of making other people victims.

The woman raised her head when she saw Harry, and Snape saw her nostrils flare as she sniffed. Even new-made werewolves started using their new senses. Snape put his distaste in an Occlumency pool and watched as Harry walked briskly up to the woman. Her eyes were brown, which meant they would only slowly become amber enough to be noticed, Snape knew.

“Elder Emily Gillyflower?” Harry asked.

The woman nodded. She was thin and frail, looking as if she’d recently lost weight when the cloak shifted a little. She had long gray hair that she might once have bound up in pride, and now coiled in a messy braid on the back of her head. “Yes,” she whispered. “I—you came. I didn’t think you would.”

“Of course I did,” said Harry. He held out the potion. Gillyflower’s eyes closed as she took it.

“Thank you,” she said, and then spent a moment looking at Harry. “You know that I did nothing to deserve this?” she asked suddenly. Her voice was rapid. “I never cared particularly for werewolves, and I helped pass the laws that condemned them, but I never walked around saying that I wanted them all hunted down.” She slammed her mouth shut then, as if she were afraid of rattling on too much and losing her composure.

Harry’s eyes were full of compassion as he bowed, Snape saw. “I know, ma’am,” he answered. “And I think it’s admirable that you bared what they’d done to you instead of keeping it secret and letting them make a pawn of you with it.”


And then the Disillusionment Charms dropped.

They were Disillusionment Charms of a kind Snape had never encountered before, and that was the only excuse he could think of for his not sensing them, let alone Moody’s not seeing through them. Two women revealed themselves as crouched in the grass at Elder Gillyflower’s feet. They unfolded as they came at Snape and Moody, moving with graceful, limber speed that revealed well enough what they were. The girl facing Snape had ragged black hair, and amber eyes, and her teeth bared.

Terror choked him alive, and his wand didn’t move fast enough. He heard a shout and a crack from the side as Moody cast a spell and had it fail. These were werewolves a few hours from the full moon. Most magic wasn’t going to work on them.

Harry cried out, and Snape felt the first lash of his Wandless magic. The werewolf who’d grabbed him spun around, presenting her shoulder broadside to the power. She wore wildness like an aura, and the magic struck and rolled off her. From that alone, Snape knew she must have been a werewolf since she was a child.

She would be in control of her body, in control of the werewolf’s senses and strength and resistance to magic, in a way that no one come to lycanthropy as an adult could be. Snape tried to reason that out in his head, and use the reason to shock himself out of his fear.

He could not. There was hot breath near his neck, bared teeth, arms stronger than a human’s holding him. And there was the woman saying in a low, controlled voice, “Tell the vates to stop calling his magic. Now. Or I will infect you.”

Snape managed to raise his voice. “Harry,” he said, and it was a horrible croak. “Harry, stop trying to rescue us, or she’ll bite.”

Harry didn’t respond. Snape forced his eyes open, wondering if they’d taken him, too.

He saw Harry standing as still as still, staring at the werewolf who had sprung up behind him and grabbed Draco. This one was a man, a stranger, but wearing that same wildness as the other two. He was much taller than Draco, and his teeth were locked, oh so gently, in the skin of Draco’s throat. He hadn’t broken the skin. Not yet. His amber eyes watched Harry. On the other side of him, the second female werewolf had downed Moody, her jaws having bitten straight through his wooden leg. She crouched on his chest and showed her teeth an inch from his eye. Moody, veteran of a hundred battles, lay quietly, but Snape could read rage in that quietude.

Harry turned at a call from the direction of the Forbidden Forest. Snape faced it, and saw a group of people loping towards them. In the lead was a wizard, his face somewhere between forty and ageless, his hair shining as pale as Draco’s.

“Harry vates,” he said, and halted a reasonable distance away and bowed. “My name is Loki. I think you have heard of me.”

Harry made a sound that was a reasonable imitation of a growl. Loki let his tongue loll out the side of his mouth in that laughing gesture werewolves had and Snape hated.

“You may well ask yourself how we got onto the grounds,” he said. “And the answer is that we have no hostile intentions
towards you, *vates*. We could pass the wards in the Forest."

“That will be changing.” Harry spoke the words like rocks hurled against glass. Snape clung to the image of his face to keep from drowning in his own fear. He thought he could edge his hand towards his wand, just a bit, just a little, until the werewolf holding him snarled in warning, and all his bones seemed to dissolve.

“Undoubtedly,” said Loki pleasantly. “But not for right now. We came to prove to you that we have no hostile intentions towards you, and that will remain true. We *could* hurt your loved ones right now. We could infect them, or kill them. You know this. Yet we haven’t.”

“How,” Harry breathed, “does taking them hostage prove you’re not hostile?”

“Well, it doesn’t in and of itself, I’ll admit that,” said Loki. “But it does from moment to moment. We’ve taken them only so that you have to listen, Harry, not to make you afraid. You’re not afraid, are you? You’re angry?”

“You could say that.”

And Harry burst into blue flames, just as he had at the breakfast table that morning. Loki cocked his head to the side and sniffed appreciatively, then panted again. “I have heard that you were part phoenix,” he said. “And now I have seen it.”

“What do you want?” Harry demanded. “You must realize that I’m hardly non-hostile towards you, right now.” Snape could feel his wandless magic snarling and spinning around him, a fierce beast on a short leash. He tried to think about fearing that, instead of the teeth near his neck. He couldn’t. It was impossible. He felt hurt and sick, and his breath came short now despite all his efforts to keep it deep. He was light-headed.

“We want to show you that we can’t be ignored,” said Loki. “And to prove to you that even with the opportunity for damage, we’ll still hold back. And to show off some of the pack magic to you. How do you suppose we concealed three of our pack from you, Harry, and from your powerful Dark wizard mentor—*he bowed to Snape*—and from an Auror with an eye capable of seeing through Invisibility Cloaks?”

Harry was silent.

“Because I am here,” said Loki. “And the magic of those werewolves who have been lycanthropes from children, as I have, when bonded into a true pack with a true pack leader, is not unlike the magic of a Lord or Lady with a group of companions focused tightly around them. Our minds feed into one another, and we strengthen the spells that we each perform. Those Disillusionment Charms were essentially ten charms piled on top of each other.”

“You’re saying that these are your Death Eaters, then.” Harry used his voice like a whip.

“You are trying to make me angry, aren’t you?” Loki asked mildly. “You won’t succeed, Harry. No one has made me lose my temper in twenty years. I am not Fenrir Greyback. I serve no cause but that of werewolves.”

“And I would have helped you,” said Harry. “I swore an oath. But I did not say that I would help you immediately.”

“Even in the face of such provocation?”

“The provocation was yours;” Harry said, and Snape could be glad of the cold anger in his voice, even with two of the people he most loved held hostage behind him. “You bit an Elder of the Wizengamot.”

Loki abruptly cocked his head and turned to look at Elder Gillyflower. “Oh, dear,” he murmured. “Was she telling you tales, Harry? Saying that she’d never done anything to hurt us? That she’s just a victim?” Snape saw that the Elder had closed her eyes again.

He had to close his own as the werewolf holding him snarled in apparently uncontrollable anger. He could survive this. He could. He would, because Harry needed him.

“That is not true,” said Loki. “Yes, we did bite her, and we compelled her by certain threats to come here today and not tell you of the packmates we sent with her. But she’s part of the group of witches and wizards that would most like to see us gone, Harry. She was feeling out a few other Elders of the Wizengamot, trying to gather enough support to make werewolf hunting legal again, and not just for Ministry Departments.” His voice deepened, but still there seemed to be amusement in it instead of all the other emotions Snape would have expected. “She murdered a packmate of mine two years ago. Claimed that he was breaking into her home to attack her. Yes, of course he was. That’s why they found him locked into a room of his own house, awaiting moonrise.”

Harry was silent for a long moment. Then he said, “I—heard nothing about this.”

“Of course you didn’t,” said Loki mildly. “Why would you have? There *were* sympathetic Aurors on the case, of course, but the moment they found out the victim was a werewolf, they hushed it up. This was in the days of Fudge, you understand,
and Elder Gillyflower there was an important part of his support base. Of course they couldn’t have such a potentially embarrassing case staining her reputation. And he grew fur and howled on the full moon. So, who cared?”

“Why did you wait until now to seek vengeance, if this is true?” Harry asked.

“We waited,” said Loki, and snapped his teeth. “Scrimgeour is in power now. We thought he might be more sympathetic. My packmate’s family tried to get the case reopened. We thought Scrimgeour might dismiss Elder Gillyflower, since she was one of Fudge’s cronies. We thought you might do something, if you could be got to hear about this.

“And then we realized that, no, Scrimgeour didn’t intend to do anything—he was much more interested in cleaning up the Aurors than the Wizengamot—and you weren’t a political player. We had to retreat and wait for the right moment. The moment is here, now that you’re Black heir and made an oath to help us.” Loki paused and looked at Harry expectantly.

“We choose our victims carefully,” he added. “There will be no shortage of them, since so many people have wronged us, and it was not even seen as wrong at the time.”

“How do I know this is true?” Harry asked.

Loki laughed. “My name is Fenrir—Loki,” he said, the word apparently forced from him. “I’ve taken Veritaserum, Harry. I told you, we wanted you to understand. Everything, absolutely everything, that I have told you today is true. We simply won’t be ignored any longer. Telling the truth isn’t enough, but we thought it could help you listen, once we made you pay attention.”

Snape studied the werewolf more closely, seizing another focus to be rid of his terror, and noticed his slightly glazed eyes and the way he stood very straight, keeping himself from listing to one side with an effort. Yes, he had taken Veritaserum.

“Who is your victim for this full moon?” Harry demanded.

“No one,” said Loki. “This action was planned instead.”

“And for the next?”

“A woman in the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures,” said Loki, his eyes never wavering from Harry’s. “One of those Umbridge planted during her tenure. Her name’s Melissa Rosewood. You will not believe what damage she has done to us, including having a bitten Muggle teenager die ‘accidentally’ in her care. But, of course, no one cares. You were outraged when harm happened to the Many snakes because of Umbridge’s new edicts. You set Tybalt Starrise to digging her out. But you did not care about us.”

“I never knew,” said Harry.

“Ah,” said Loki. “I thought so. This is merely making sure you look.” He glanced at the werewolves holding Snape, Moody, and Draco. “Remember this, vates,” he said. “We will give you time, now, time to do what you can. We have not even chosen a victim for July. After all, I fully expect you to protect Melissa Rosewood when June’s full moon comes. But if you do nothing to help us, then we will choose new victims.”

“I could detain you now,” said Harry. His magic was snarling and trembling around him still, Snape saw. “Why not? It would be the most useful course, and no one would blame me, not after the tactics you’ve used against me.”

“You don’t want to do that,” said Loki softly.

“And why not?”

“Because my packmates will bite those you love if you do anything to harm or capture me, or indeed do anything but wait until I am safely away into the Forest.” Loki’s eyes flashed. “And because none of us have taken Wolfsbane.”

Snape felt his calm wrenched away from him. His muscles tensed. He was going to struggle, wise idea or not. The werewolf holding him snarled again, though, and he found his muscles cramping out of terror, holding him still perforce.

“I see,” said Harry after a long moment.

Loki nodded to him, his tongue lolling again. This time, what Snape noticed was the length and sharpness of the teeth the tongue lollled past. “Yes. We have enough time to go home and drink it before the moon rises—barely. But delay us at all, and you will have a pack of maddened werewolves on school grounds. Werewolves I can make invisible, mind, until they are close to their targets.”

Harry closed his eyes and stood still. “Go, then.”

“I am glad that you’ve seen sense. I hope you continue to see it,” Loki said mildly, and then turned and began to lope away across the grass to the Forest, followed by his pack. Snape watched, since Harry didn’t seem inclined to. They never
stopped or looked aside. They melted into the trees within a few minutes.

Harry turned and looked at the three werewolves who’d lingered.

The woman holding Snape vanished. Snape stumbled, and then sat down hard. He glanced over, and saw that Elder Gillyflower, the woman on top of Moody, and the man holding Draco had also gone, as suddenly as if they’d Apparated. Harry stood with his eyes wide, his magic visible in the air around him as a bright aura, even through the blue phoenix flame that was slowly crisping his clothes. Then he shook his head in frustration, obviously unable to sense them. The phoenix fire at last died.

_That pack magic is terrifying_, Snape thought, in an effort to make himself forget that what he had really feared was hot breath in his ear and the suggestion of teeth against his neck.

He looked up to see Harry talking softly with Draco, one arm around his shoulders. Then he turned and hesitated. _He wants to see what happened to me, Snape thought, but he is wary of making me look weak in front of Moody._

“I am well,” he said quietly.

Harry’s gaze was anxious, devouring, but he forced himself to take Snape’s word for it, and nodded. Then he turned to Moody, repairing his wooden leg and fixing it back into place. The old Auror was swearing foully enough to cause air pollution, Snape thought.

He looked back at the grass where the werewolves had stood. Only faint depressions in it showed they had ever been there. Snape took a deep breath, and his fear turned a corner and became black and boiling hatred.

_They shall not touch me again, _he thought. _Never again. And they shall not touch Harry. I will find a way to stop this._

His wandless magic, no longer confined by fear, whirled around him and tore up the grass with invisible claws. Snape still nodded curtly to Harry’s concerned gaze, but he indulged his magic with a few more twists and turns and bouts of destruction.

_I shall find a way to stop them._

_I hate them._

Harry closed his eyes and held himself still. He would explode in rage otherwise, and he couldn’t afford that.

Yes, Snape could be angry. Harry had seen how angry he was on his return to the castle. He’d been forced to face his worst fear today, and more than that, he’d seen the creatures of that fear use him to manipulate Harry. It would be strange if he were not furious.

Yes, Draco could be angry, once he got over the fear. He was writing his father right now, and Harry couldn’t find a word to say against that. He had never expected to have Lucius Malfoy’s support in his fight for werewolves’ rights anyway, and though it would be bad to have his active opposition, his truce-dance alliance with Harry would restrict what he could do.

Yes, Moody had been angry, and had furiously put the dueling club through its paces, but that could be a good thing, with Midsummer coming. And they hadn’t been too exhausted to pass on good news. Ron had told Harry tonight that he’d written home about the dueling club under Moody, and his family had been impressed enough, either by the account or by the fact that an old Order member had joined Harry, that his brothers Bill and Charlie, both fairly powerful wizards, were now considering coming to Hogwarts to fight on Midsummer.

But Harry was a Lord-level wizard, and if he let go now, with his rage whispering words of blood and hatred inside him like a werewolf’s web, then he stood a good chance of destroying the Slytherin common room.

He’d been fighting the anger ever since that afternoon. Blaise had taken one look when he and Draco returned from the dueling club and fled their bedroom. Draco hadn’t spoken to Harry, but he lay on his bed and stared at him.

Harry counted his breaths, and tried to think past his fog of absolute dislike for Loki.

_I can’t let this make me hate all werewolves, or even all werewolves in that pack. They’re doing what they think best. They have a reason for choosing their victims, even if it’s not a reason I agree with. Loki could have had his pack bite Snape and Draco, it would have been easy, but he didn’t. I think he did want to just get my attention and talk with me, and he doesn’t really care if I hate him personally, so long as I’m looking more intensely at the Ministry’s interactions with werewolves._

_But I hate him._
Harry forced down the phoenix fire that wanted to blaze around him. He’d already ruined a good portion of the bench at the Slytherin table and two sets of robes today. He didn’t want to set fire to anything else.

But remembering the mixture of loathing and terror that had run through him like fire and acid intertwined when he faced Loki made it difficult. He kept trying to put the emotions in Occlumency pools, and they kept slipping away from him. He kept thinking that he should be able to put aside personal likes and dislikes and just concentrate on the larger political issues, and he kept failing.

“That’s enough of that,” he heard someone say, and then Draco’s arms slipped around him and held him tightly.

“Draco,” Harry whispered, feeling the Darkest parts of his magic squeal in glee at the thought of tearing apart warm skin and flesh and muscle. “Don’t.”

“I’m not frightened of you, Harry,” Draco whispered into his ear. “And you have the right to feel what you’re feeling. How many times have we told you that?” His voice was half-teasing. “Do you need to go see Vera again?”

“No, I need to see Snape,” Harry said. He’d been waiting because he needed to be able to play the role of comforter and sympathetic listener when he went to Snape’s offices, and that meant getting past his own emotions. He hadn’t expected them to refuse to go away.

“Not yet,” said Draco. “Harry, you can hate them. I wish you hadn’t sworn that oath, but you did. I wish you didn’t have to help them, but you do—to an extent. That doesn’t mean you can’t hate their leader personally, and wish to kill him. You’re too honorable to start hating Mrs. Parkinson because she has the same curse as that weakling Lupin and that beast Loki. You’re going to work around this, and you’re going to end this mess, one way or the other.”

End it...

And Harry knew what he wanted to do. His breathing eased, and his hatred eased, too, because he could well imagine that the course of action he’d just decided on would be one Loki couldn’t accept and yet couldn’t argue against without betraying his packmates. The Darker parts of his magic, distracted now, chuckled at the thought of causing an enemy pain.

“Thanks, Draco,” he whispered, drawing back with a kiss to Draco’s cheek. “You just gave me an idea that made me feel a whole lot better.”

Draco sat back and stared at him. “What?”

“I’m going to find a cure for lycanthropy,” Harry said. “Not Wolfsbane, but something that actually gets rid of the web. That would put an end to not only the persecution of werewolves, but their ability to say that they have no other options but horrible treatment or violent revolution.”

Draco frowned. “Can you do that? You told me the werewolves thought of the webs as living things you wouldn’t kill.”

“That is why it needs research,” said Harry fiercely. “But I am going to figure out some way around this, as you put it, even if the webs are living creatures. This is—I can’t just give up helping the werewolves, and I can’t tolerate the vulnerability that Loki made me feel today. And it’s a much better option than just pushing for the imprisonment of some werewolves, which would make the banshees in the Ministry think I’m on their side, and the punishment of those who hurt werewolves, which would make Loki think I support him. I’m on my own side.”

Draco smiled at him. “Excellent.” He gave his shoulder a little push. “You’re always at your best when you have a plan. Now go talk to Snape, and then come back so I can give you etiquette lessons to prepare you for the festival.”

“I mean it, you know,” said Harry, and lingered a moment to touch his cheek. “You were the one who gave me the idea. You have more faith in me than I do in myself. I love you.”

Draco blinked a moment, then said, “I hope so, since you’re wearing a Black ring. And since I love you, too. Prat. Get going.”

Harry grinned at him and trotted out of the room. Draco would be all right. Moody was already all right, veteran of a hundred situations that had damaged him much worse. Snape needed him now. Harry would write a letter to Scrimgeour, telling him about Melissa Rosewood, when that was done.

And after that, he would start helping the werewolves, whether they liked the way he did it or not.

Chapter Eighty-Three: Riddle Me This

Harry waited a week before he tried to approach Snape about the next part of his plan in the Midsummer battle. When he
had visited Snape the night of Loki’s attack, he’d been in a frightening rage. He’d said a few things that Harry would have thought unforgivable if this was any normal mood, and actually flung a potion that he found less than perfect across the room so that it slammed into the wall, breaking the glass vial and splattering potentially dangerous liquid everywhere. Luckily, his wandless magic had cleaned up the potion even as it fell.

Then, the next few days, Snape had come close to losing his temper when he saw Harry reading books about werewolves. Harry had quietly removed himself from his guardian’s line of sight during those days. He couldn’t tell if Snape was more upset over the fact that he’d felt such fear or the fact that Loki’s pack had used him against Harry, but either way, more time needed to pass before he could come to terms with it, that was clear.

But a week was as long as Harry felt he could wait, and besides, he had received an important letter from Scrimgeour in the meantime. It thanked him for the information about Melissa Rosewood. She’d been arrested and questioned, which had the double effect of punishing her and keeping her safe from werewolf bites behind the thick walls of Tullianum. What Loki said seemed to have been true, beyond that. No new werewolf victims were reported after May’s full moon, though of course the Ministry took credit for that, bragging that their new laws intimidated werewolves enough to stay inside on that night instead of running free.

Scrimgeour had actually denied the Wizengamot’s notion of confining werewolves in Tullianum. That had caused quite a buzz in the Ministry, but the Daily Prophet was frustratingly short on details, and Scrimgeour hadn’t mentioned them in his own letter to Harry, either.

He had confirmed a suspicion Harry had, and that was all that Harry needed for this particular plan.

“Sir?” Harry put his head around the door of Snape’s offices. “Are you busy?”

Snape turned sharply away from the cauldron he was working at. Harry saw the liquid inside the cauldron; it shimmered a silvery color and had an unfamiliar smell. Harry’s gut tightened with worry. He remembered how much trouble Snape’s Meleager Potion had caused last year. Generally, when Snape felt inspired to invent potions, the cause was vengeance.

“Sir,” he said again, this time with a different tone in his voice.

Snape closed his eyes for a long moment. Then he opened them and held Harry’s gaze. “I will not send this by owl to any werewolf alive, even Lupin,” he said. “You have my word on that, Harry.” He waved his wand at the cauldron, casting a spell that would hold the potion in its current state. “I am merely creating it in order to make myself feel better. That is all.”

Harry nodded, and forced himself to accept that. Though the potion was silver, the color of the one metal that could truly hurt werewolves, he had to believe him, because Snape had earned that much trust. Only when Harry heard about a werewolf dying of a mysterious disease or poison would he think Snape had actually done something with the potion.

“What did you wish to see me about?” Snape asked, using a forced lightness of tone to carry them past the subject.

Harry hid a grim smile. If Snape had only known, there was no need for that tone. He was going to forget all about his potion in just a moment.

“I need your help to make my mind into a trap for Voldemort,” said Harry casually, and laid his book and Scrimgeour’s letter carefully on the nearby table.

Snape said nothing for a long moment. When Harry looked up, he found those dark eyes pinning him, wide with disbelief. Snape seemed to realize he was showing emotions other than contempt, and the incredulity vanished in the next moment. He sneered, and said, “And you would come to me for help on this because—you are suffering from delusions and believe that I will actually permit such a thing to happen?”

“It’s the best option,” said Harry. “I’ve thought it through. I have to make Voldemort come to Hogwarts on Midsummer Day. Otherwise, he has no reason to do so. He won’t try to trap the highest Light the way he did the wild Dark. It’ll be watching for that, after the trick he played on it last year. I have to make the trap perfect. And to do that, I need to lure him with knowledge of the full prophecy.”

“You will not actually reveal this.” Snape’s voice was as solid as iron.

“Not the real one, no,” said Harry, with a faint smile in his direction. “I’m asking Acies to help me come up with a false one, one that includes just enough truth to make Voldemort believe that I’m the most likely candidate to defeat him, and to have that defeat—or his ultimate victory—come at Hogwarts on Midsummer Day. That’ll pull him, sir. That corridor he was dreaming of, with the locked doors? The only ordinary dream of his that I ever shared? I saw a crest on one of the doors the last time I dreamed it, and wrote to Scrimgeour. He confirmed what I saw. That corridor is in the Department of Mysteries at the Ministry. They have a Hall of Prophecy. That’s what Voldemort is after, I think, some knowledge of the prophecy that concerns us. He wants it. And he believes in it. If he believes that the prophecy says his stand or fall will
happen here, on Midsummer, he’ll come.”

“And you must use your mind as a trap for that?” Snape leaned back against his desk. “Let the Opalline family be useful, for once. Let them pass the information to those who might pass it on to the Dark Lord.”

“I did consider that,” Harry said quietly. “I also considered leaking the news around someone who doesn’t like me, and who could carry the story to the Daily Prophet. But aside from telling all and sundry that something important is happening at Hogwarts on that day—and Merlin knows, we’d get idiots wanting to watch and idiots wanting to help—Voldemort wouldn’t just accept it. He’d break into my mind first thing, to confirm my knowledge of it. And when he realized I didn’t believe in that as the real prophecy, he wouldn’t, either.”

“And you believe you can fool the Dark Lord.” Snape’s voice was soft enough that Harry couldn’t tell which emotion was most prevalent in it. “The most skilled Leglimens alive.”

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“With your help,” said Harry. “You fooled him for a year, didn’t you? So either you’re the most skilled Occlumens alive, or at least in Britain, or he’s just not good enough to get through your defenses. That’s why I need your aid, sir. I’ll need shields to make him think I believe the false prophecy and that I don’t want him in my mind and am fighting furiously to get him out, and shields to defend me from taking a second tearing the way I did with Tom Riddle.”

“And how do you intend to attract his attention in the first place?” Snape asked. “Understand that your response should not include the words ‘venture into the Dark Lord’s mind’ in any combination.”

Harry grinned at him. “No, sir.” He lifted the book he’d laid down so that Snape could see the title. Dreaming the Dark: Potions of the Night.

Snape looked at him levelly. “I would expect some fifteen-year-old students to use that book extensively, Harry,” he said. “Not you.”

Harry felt his ears turn hot, but he managed to shrug. “It’s the modification of the potions I’m interested in,” he said. “Is it.”

“Yes.” Harry forced himself to straighten and meet his guardian’s eyes. “Frankly, I don’t need Draco dreaming about me any more than he already does.” He flipped through the book. “But I want to modify one of the most common potions in here, so that I dream obsessively enough about the false prophecy to inspire Voldemort to cross the barrier. And when he does, we’ll be ready.” He met Snape’s eyes and waited.

Snape said nothing, and still said nothing, and still said nothing. Harry hid a smile. Snape always did seem to underestimate Harry’s patience, not realizing that Harry had had all the patience drummed into him that he could ever wish for by his childhood. He waited, and at last Snape broke.

“You realize this will take an enormous amount of work,” Snape said at last. “The modified potion, the Occlumency shields buried in your mind, and a link from your mind to mine, so that I can be awake and ready to bolster your shields in a moment, whenever the Dark Lord chooses to come through the connection.”

“I do know that, sir,” said Harry softly.

Snape paced back and forth for a moment, his robes trailing behind him, and said, “Much as I hate to admit it, you are right, Harry. I see no other way to lure the Dark Lord into this trap on Midsummer without telling everyone what we are doing.”

His grimace went from resigned to stern in a moment, and he shot a sharp look at Harry. “But I will prepare every step with you. There will be nothing that you do without my permission and my knowledge.”

Harry bowed his head. “That’s what I was hoping for, sir. I know that you’re a much more accomplished Occlumens than I am, and the last time I had him running loose through my head, he hurt me badly.” He shuddered to think of how his mind had felt after his battle with Tom Riddle in second year. “I am only choosing my thoughts for the battlefield because I have no other choice. And now I can tell Draco,” he added, feeling himself brighten. “I didn’t want to yet, because he’d try to persuade me out of it. When he hears that you’ve agreed, then he’ll be more ready to trust me.”

“Why does Draco need to be a part of it?” Snape asked, frowning.

“He doesn’t need to, not in the way that you do, sir,” Harry said, picking up the book and Scrimgeour’s letter. “But I’d like him linked to my mind, so that he can get a closer look at Voldemort’s mind and how it works. After all, he’ll need to possess him come Midsummer.”

“That is the part, of all in this mad plan of yours, that I am the most uneasy about,” Snape murmured.

Harry laughed, though he didn’t feel much like doing so. “There’s a reason that we only told Narcissa about that part, and
not Lucius. Draco’s mother can accept that he’s an adult now, and can make his own decisions like this. Lucius would think he had to protect his heir first and foremost.”

“He may be right,” Snape said. “Draco may not be ready.”

“We won’t know for certain if we don’t let him practice,” said Harry. “And this is the best chance that he’ll ever have to practice. I don’t think Voldemort will stand tamely around and respond to pleas to let Draco possess him, sir.”

Snape said nothing, staring at the wall. Harry had no idea what those dark eyes were seeing; there were plenty of horrible memories that could be candidates, after all. Then Snape nodded abruptly and swirled towards him, moving in a cocoon of robes.

“I will require you to speak one more time with Draco,” he said, “to make sure he understands every implication of what he is doing. Then I will aid you in shaping your mind into the kind of trap this requires.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Harry quietly, and took his leave.

Draco was a bit irritated Harry felt the need to ask him if he was sure, until he realized that it was Snape who’d told Harry to ask the question. Then what he mostly felt was nervous relief.

“Snape agreed to help you in this, then?” he asked. Harry, sitting on his own bed across from Draco, nodded.

“He said that you’ll be in danger, and of course he’s right.” Harry leaned forward, staring at him intently. Draco tried not to show how giddy he felt to be the center of Harry’s attention, even if Harry wasn’t doing it for a romantic reason. “So he wants to make sure you understand we’re facing the Dark Lord in my mind, through a series of Occlumency traps, and that you risk possession yourself, or pain from the battle, or even just his notice and enmity, which is painful enough.” Harry’s hand rubbed absently at the stump of his left wrist. “Do you agree?”

“Of course I do,” said Draco. “It’s the only reason I think your luring him into your mind is a good idea at all, Harry, because I’ll be there and Snape will.”

Harry nodded. “I’m grateful to you both,” he said. “Snape thinks it will take a week to build up the traps in my mind to the point where they stand a good chance of fooling Voldemort. In the meantime, I’m going to brew the potions that will emphasize my dreams, and—”

“Practice etiquette lessons with me,” Draco finished gleefully. “After all, the fifth of June is coming up even faster than Midsummer, Harry.”

Harry blinked, opened his mouth, and then closed it again and shook his head. “Honestly, I forgot,” he said.

Draco stifled irritation. Of course he forgot. Making an impression on purebloods has always been a matter of study for him, not something to take pride in. He covered his feelings with a smile and held out his arm. “There is the way we’ll enter the festival, for example,” he said. “It’s the appropriate gesture for our ages, our sexes, the ritual we’re using, and—”

And then he stopped, and realized that Harry was not the only one who stood a chance of being embarrassed at a festival like this. His embarrassments might be more private, but they would happen.

“What, Draco?” Harry had chosen now to use his hardest stare, it seemed, as if he would pry the answers out of Draco’s head.

“Um,” said Draco, and looked away. “The fact that you have a Muggleborn parent, and I’m pureblood.”

“It implies that you’re doing me a favor by joining with me, doesn’t it?” Harry asked.

Draco sighed. “Yes, it does.”

Harry said nothing. When Draco looked back at him, he was shrugging and leaping off the bed. “Well, then,” he said, and held out his hand, fingers folded back in almost the right position. It was the one that would be standard for a younger wizard being escorted by an older wizard. “This one?”

“And you really don’t mind?”

Harry gave him a patient look. “I don’t mind in that I know I can’t change people’s beliefs overnight, Draco,” he said. “I
mind in that I think it’s stupid, and I won’t act like a lapdog around other wizards just because they’re pureblood and I’m 
not. I appreciate it in that someone else might think my adhering to tradition means that I consider myself inferior, and that 
I’ll do whatever you say just because you’re pureblood.” Harry smiled, a twisted grin that Draco could get used to seeing 
more often. “And that will be an advantage, if anyone falls into that trap.”

Draco chuckled. “You do realize that all the people at the festival but you will be pureblood?” he asked.

“I wouldn’t have expected your father to invite anyone else,” said Harry, eyes calm.

Draco took a deep breath. “I—some of them you haven’t met before, though it includes the families of some of your allies, 
and the Bulstrodes and the Parkinsons, of course.”

“Get to the point, Draco.”

Draco paused. “They won’t know what to think of you,” he said bluntly. “You’re powerful, but you’re a halfblood. You 
won’t Declare, but you’re willingly binding yourself to a Dark family and entering a room full of Dark wizards and witches. 
You have a prophecy declaring that you’ll defeat Voldemort, but you’re crippled.” He looked at Harry’s lone hand. “Not 
everyone is as intelligent as my father, Harry. Some of them will despise you for that alone.”

“And I know that,” said Harry, sounding mildly impatient now. “I realized long ago that I couldn’t control everything 
another person might think about me, Draco. I can adjust impressions and guide my own behavior, but there could be 
someone in the crowd with individual notions of what that means which would never even occur to me, and certainly aren’t 
the ones I would wish to promote. The mistake people like your father make is in thinking the façade they present is what 
everyone else really sees and believes in. It isn’t. In fact, that just lends those people who can pretend to believe in the 
façade an advantage over those presenting it.”

Draco frowned at him.

“What?” Harry asked.

“You don’t act Slytherin all that often,” Draco murmured. “And yet, you’re perfectly capable of it.”

“I don’t see a reason to,” Harry said simply. “When it’s necessary, then I’ll do it. But the rest of the time, I would much 
rather act like me, and either have others accept me as I am, or conduct bargains and trades on the set of principles that 
everyone understands.” He cocked his head. “There’s a reason I haven’t Declared, Draco. I’m not committing myself to just 
one sort of magic, true, because that would be limiting, but I’m not committing myself to one set of methods, either.”

Draco felt a bit of his worry ease. Harry was going to do just fine at his festival.

“Now,” he said, “when we’ve entered, then we’ll turn to the right and make a crossing of the whole room, so everyone can 
see you. Be sure to smile—mysteriously. We don’t want everyone able to guess what you’re feeling on the night when we 
first appear in public as a future joined couple. And then—“

He stirred, slowly, feeling as though he were awakening from a much deeper sleep than was actually the case. He could feel 
the images playing in his head, stemming from Harry’s mind.

The boy would not stop dreaming.

It was especially tantalizing because Lord Voldemort could feel that the dreams were about a prophecy. He could not catch 
the words, but he could catch glimpses of light, and the boy’s nervous anxiety and excitement. He had only recently figured 
out the whole of the prophecy, it seemed, and was now hoarding it to himself, trusting Lord Voldemort not to figure it out in 
time.

But he would. Oh, he would. He was not a hunter for nothing.

He had not touched the long grass that shrouded his connection to the boy’s mind since his blinding. He hated the boy too 
much. He would destroy him if he stepped into his mind. And that could not be, not yet. These things must be done 
properly. If the boy was a scooped-out hollow shell, and yet still alive, then he might manifest some strange and unknown 
power.

Lord Voldemort understood much, but not enough, of what had happened in Godric’s Hollow the night he had gone hunting 
the boy. He knew he had made the boy his magical heir. He knew that the rebounded Killing Curse had come from Harry, 
and not his brother. He knew Harry’s Avada Kedavra had struck him in the moment that he was casting his second Killing 
Curse at Harry’s brother; a moment sooner or later, and the twin would have been either unmarked or dead.
But there had to be more to the matter, more than a magical accident, even a bizarre one. Hunters like Lord Voldemort were not taken down by magical accidents. It did not happen.

It was the turn of a prophecy, and he did not know the whole prophecy. He had not, at first, thought it important that he should. He had known that someone born at the end of July was his enemy. That was sufficient, and certain events had proven correctly that Harry was his chosen foe. But when he woke next to the cup last year after Harry had wounded him and sent him fleeing for his life from the graveyard, he realized, grimly, that there was more to it than that. A chosen foe should not have been able to wound him so badly in a situation where there were no magical accidents to save his life. He should have read the whole prophecy from Harry’s mind when he had the chance.

He had not. And now Harry was thinking of the prophecy, and not attending to their connection through his scar, doubtless thinking that Lord Voldemort was too frightened of him to return.

_That is not true._

He had a snake to serve as his eyes now. He had Indigena Yaxley researching Falco Parkinson and breeding plants that would dig underground and through solid stone and wards for him. He had his Death Eaters bringing in new recruits every day. He was Lord Voldemort, old and strong, strong, strong!

He parted the long grass that protected the Occlumency connection and stepped through into the maze of Harry’s mind.

Snape jerked awake as the mental bond went taut like a bowstring. He closed his eyes and reached along it, and felt Harry whispering to him, under the cover of the first and strongest shield they had built, _He’s here, sir._

And he was. Snape knew the presence of the Dark Lord in his own mind from three years’ worth of it, two of loyalty and one of spying. He had never noticed how foul it was until after he had turned to the Light, and it had only grown fouler since the Dark Lord returned—a consequence, Snape thought, of unicorn blood and the resurrection ritual he had used. He might think he was being subtle, but to one who knew what to look for, his presence was like a fist in the gut.

_Dreaming?_ He asked that of Harry, his attention fixed on his former Lord as he stalked slowly along the pathways of Harry’s mind. The dream was playing insistently, and featured triumphant images of Harry landing on sun-soaked grass, waving his hands—for in the dream he had two—and shouting to everyone that Voldemort was dead.

_Yes._ They had practiced this, too, Snape sliding careful, thin shields between Harry’s dreaming and his conscious brain, enabling him to talk to Snape and Draco along the bonds Snape had established without making it seem as if he were awake—because he wasn’t, really.

_Good._ Snape could feel the gathering power of Voldemort’s Legilimency, and knew he would strike out in a moment, trying to rip the truth from Harry. He would see no need to disguise his presence. He would want Harry to fear, to know that his enemy knew his plans and wither in the agony of it. _Is Draco ready?_ _Here, Professor._ Draco’s voice resounded in the mental “air” between them, deep and steady and determined.

_Good._ Snape braced himself as the first strike came down.

Draco had never seen anything like it.

Oh, he’d been in Harry’s mind before, but he hadn’t seen it like _this_, a swirling steel skeleton covered with leaves. There were no webs in sight, unless one counted the Occlumency shields Snape had created. They were everywhere, making the mental world glittering and sharp-edged—though only if one knew they existed. Draco was sure the Dark Lord didn’t see the traps, or he would never have come ahead.

The view was so _mixed_, even so, with every glint of light a trap, every shadow a place where Harry’s real thoughts hid, every “open” and “true” image a deceit for Voldemort to think he was grasping a closely-guarded secret. Draco shivered a bit, and then reminded himself that the traps were not intended for him. They were meant to snare Voldemort.

And now he could feel the Dark Lord’s mind.

Draco did not think he would have felt drawn to this power, even if he were meeting Voldemort in solid form—he had felt nothing but panic and horror and rage when the Dark Lord took Harry prisoner in the graveyard on Midwinter—but he could see why some purebloods might have followed him. There was a certain edge to that magic that was missing even from Harry’s. He had grown powerful again since Harry struck at him in the Chamber of Secrets, and he would do anything
to his enemies, a claim Harry couldn’t make. Draco supposed a certain kind of wizard might feel that kissing the hem of the Dark Lord’s robes and murmuring fawning, sycophantic phrases was worth the feeling that that power could be turned on one’s enemies.

It still appalled him to think that his father had once been one of those wizards, though.

The Dark Lord abruptly stopped walking; Draco’s eye translated it that way, anyway, although he knew that imagination made up vision, here, and it was far more likely that Voldemort had probably just stopped spreading his Legilimency through Harry’s mind. Draco heard laughter, and then a strike came out and down, a sharp blade of thought meant to scrape Harry, send him reeling in pain, and bring memories of the prophecy to the surface.

Draco took a deep breath—or so he imagined—and then jumped along the bond that tied his mind to Harry’s.

There was a sense of reeling, dizzy motion from him, too, and he felt Voldemort cry out in fury as he slammed into his mind. This was not at all like possessing Dumbledore. They had both been Lord-level wizards taken by surprise.

But Voldemort had been Dark far longer, and he had no compunction against hurting his opponents. Draco screamed, he was sure he did, as the pressure came down on him and tried to tear him apart. Pain ripped him from his hold on the Dark Lord’s thoughts and sent him backwards.

And then Voldemort spoke directly to him, and Draco wondered how Harry stood having that voice in his head.

*You dare? You dare to possess me?*

Draco felt Voldemort following him, surging along the bond, trying to gain access to his own thoughts. He couldn’t allow that, and he built up what protections he could, slipping and diving and dodging as he had with Dumbledore, hoping Harry would “wake up” soon.

And then he did.

Harry waited. It was hard, feeling the foulness creep through and contaminate his mind, knowing that Voldemort would probably hurt either him or Draco, but it was necessary. This wouldn’t look completely innocent to his enemy when or if he noticed the bonds that connected Snape and Draco to Harry’s mind. Therefore, the second best option was to make it look like a trap that had failed—as if they had tried to keep the knowledge of the false prophecy from Tom Riddle and hadn’t been able to.

He moved, though, when he felt Draco’s unsuccessful possession attempt and Voldemort following him.

He concentrated, and most of the Occlumency shields in his head pivoted, revealing to Voldemort just how many dark mirrors surrounded him. Or so it would seem. It was only Harry’s own shields that moved. The stronger ones, which Snape had created for him, remained immobile.

Voldemort hissed, distracted, as Harry had hoped he would be. And this is what you set to hold me, he said. To baffle me. You are weaker than I thought.

He reached out, a thick tendril of Legilimency that Harry saw as tipped with barbs, seeking to hook up specific memories. Harry hoped Snape would have the sense to keep still, hold the shields in defensive postures, and let Harry take the damage. Even he couldn’t face the Dark Lord like this, and if he appeared so suddenly from his hiding place, then Voldemort might suspect the truth.

Harry screamed in pain, as Voldemort wanted, and it did hurt quite a bit as that claw dug downward. He flurried memories in front of Voldemort like butterflies, one of the earliest protective techniques Snape had taught him. They were ripped aside like curtains, of course. Harry had known they would be.

Downward and downward he rolled, luring Voldemort on, pretending to be shocked and frightened that his traps didn’t work. Voldemort roared in triumph and then performed a Legilimency technique that Harry hadn’t heard of before, which summoned memories of a specific event towards him.

Harry screamed and let it happen. He would have to trust Snape’s shields now. They were thickest around his memories of the true prophecies, both the one that supposedly predicted him as the defeater of the Dark Lord and the one that Acies had recited to him. Harry had to hope they were weighted heavily enough not to go flying to Voldemort.

He did try to snatch at one of them, of course, the carefully constructed image of the false prophecy, and Voldemort laughed and called it with a variation of the Summoning Charm, adding insult to injury.
Harry watched as the memory sprang to life, himself leaning close to Acies, as if she were the one who had told him the truth. She nodded to him, her eyes still hidden. Harry had hoped that would make it more mysterious to Voldemort. He did not dare show him that Peter knew the true prophecy.

“What your parents recited to you was not the truth, Harry,” she whispered. “There is more to the words that guide your fate.”

“More? Are you certain?” Harry’s voice in the memory was startled, breathy—not the way he would have really reacted, had this happened, but perfectly in tune with Voldemort’s reaction, since he thought prophecies were so important.

“More,” said Acies, with a firm nod. “This is the prophecy.” She settled back and began to recite.

Harry had gone to some trouble with this bit of doggerel, since he wanted it to be worthy of Trelawney. There was also the fact that Voldemort knew the first few lines of the true prophecy; Snape, in his spying on Dumbledore before he turned to the Light, had carried them to him. Mix truth with impressive-sounding nonsense, and Harry hoped it might pass.

“The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches…” Acies intoned. “Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies…”

That was as much as Voldemort had heard, and what came afterwards was pure fancy, pure invention. Harry didn’t think Trelawney herself could have given it the pompous tone that Acies did.

“Born whole, he yet shall become divided,” Acies whispered. “In heart and in body, in magic and in soul.”

Harry was startled to feel a surge of fear from Voldemort when he heard those words. What is that all about? But he had to keep his startlement buried and his outrage uppermost, to fool Voldemort into thinking it mattered that he could see this memory, so he shoved the thought away.

“He must become divided, to defeat the Dark Lord,” Acies said. “And he shall face the one who first divided him and gave his permission for the second dividing on the day of longest light, when the dawns shall blaze and the gryphon shall shine forth in the sky. The divisions of heart and soul shall happen there, and with all four complete, the one with the power to defeat the Dark Lord shall come down with the weapon of the eagle and tear him apart in front of the eagle’s last roosting place. O guard him, O shield him, for he must be divided ere the world be made whole—and only on that day of light and division may he be divided, or killed in his half-wholeness.”

Harry in the memory bowed his head and sighed. “Wow,” he whispered.

Harry, crouched under his Occlumency shields, could feel Voldemort’s mind working purposefully, and knew what conclusions he would be coming to. A storm of the Light was coming, and the Light’s symbol was a gryphon. Ravenclaw’s House symbol was an eagle, and it was common knowledge, or at least a common legend, that Rowena Ravenclaw had come back to Hogwarts to die. Everything would point towards the fatal day being this Midsummer, in front of Hogwarts, and Harry killing Voldemort with some weapon of Ravenclaw’s.

And, of course, Voldemort had split Harry’s magic in making Harry his magical heir, and divided his body in giving permission for Bellatrix to cut off his hand. But the wording of the prophecy suggested there was a chance to kill Harry before the other two divisions happened—though only on Midsummer.

Harry felt the moment when the Dark Lord made his decision, and laughed aloud. You have not kept this from me, he hissed in Harry’s head, his voice vibrating like a snake. You will lose.

Harry let out a cry of loss and rage, but he wanted to sob with relief, though even that emotion got tucked away beneath Snape’s shields at once. It had worked.

Voldemort laughed again, and vanished from Harry’s head, sealing the Occlumency connection between them so that Harry couldn’t follow.

Harry swam towards the surface of his mind at once, wanting to see how Draco felt.

Draco felt bloody horrible, that was how he felt.

He’d barely opened his eyes—he was lying on his own bed, since the Dark Lord’s attack had come in the middle of the night, exactly as Harry predicted it would—when Professor Snape came into the room like wrath embodied and hissed at him, “Do you have any idea what you risked, you stupid boy?”

Draco found himself responding not as a comrade-in-arms, though Snape had treated him that way when they were planning
this trap, but as a Slytherin student facing his Head of House. He lowered his eyes and ventured, “Sir, I was supposed to practice—”

Snape cast a Silencing Charm before Draco could finish, blocking their conversation from a curious, sleepy Blaise, who’d poked his head out of his own curtains. “Yes, you were supposed to practice possession,” Snape whisper-hissed, “while the Dark Lord was occupied with the false prophecy, you stupid boy, and not before he had even started to fall into the trap! You could have revealed my own presence. You certainly made Harry move earlier than he had planned. And you could have been killed or possessed yourself.”

Draco winced and shut his eyes. His head pounded furiously, as though someone had tried squeezing his brain through a funnel. “I’m sorry, sir,” he murmured, and rested his head in his hands. “Can I get a headache potion?”

“I should withhold it from you,” Snape hissed, “to teach you what happens to spoiled little boys who disobey.” But his hands were already moving, pulling a vial from his pocket and holding it out to Draco. Draco downed it, and was relieved to feel the pain diminish, though only by half.

“The rest of the damage is mental,” said Snape, and seized his chin, holding him roughly still. “A skilled Occlumens must fix it.”

He dived into Draco’s mind with what didn’t feel like skill, rearranging his memories in what Draco supposed was the correct order, pulling and tugging at the edge of what felt like gaping holes, and once causing images of the house elves cleaning the Manor to flash in front of Draco’s eyes. Draco supposed that was analogous to taking out the foulness that contact with Voldemort must have left.

Snape let go of his chin and looked away from him, and Draco sighed. His head still hurt, but it was the memory of the pain that hurt more, and how he had reacted to the notion that Voldemort was about to hurt Harry. He had lunged into danger like a brainless Gryffindor.

“Draco?”

He turned his head, and saw Harry climbing off the bed and coming towards him. Draco assumed a pathetic expression that he wouldn’t have dared try with only Snape there, and heard his Head of House stifle a growl as Harry gently stroked Draco’s hair and then took his chin in a far gentler grip than Snape had managed.

“All right?” Harry whispered.

“I will be,” Draco said, and then aired what had bothered him most, after the pain. “I couldn’t possess him, Harry. I don’t know how I can accomplish what we have to on Midsummer Day.”

“We’ll go on training,” Harry promised. “We’ll find a way, Draco. And if worst comes to worst, then I have another idea.”

“Why didn’t you say so?” Draco demanded. He’d been sure that everything depended on his possessing Voldemort.

“Because I don’t know if it will work,” said Harry, with a slight frown. “I don’t know if you can possess objects, even ones that have at least a partial self-awareness. We’ll practice, though.” He stepped back and looked up at Snape. “How did I do, sir?”

“Look me in the eye.”

Harry complied, and Draco watched Snape anxiously; Harry had planned to take some damage, of course, to convince Voldemort that he’d resisted the abduction of the prophecy memory as well as he could, but that didn’t mean this was good. Snape studied Harry’s eyes for a moment, then nodded, the smallest amount of relaxation appearing in his face. “The wounds are healable, Harry.”

“Good,” said Harry. “I’ll get to healing them. If you’ll end the bonds you and Draco have with me, sir?”

Snape cast a quick, efficient spell, and Draco sighed as the greater sense of connection he’d experienced to Harry in the past few days fell away. Then he lost the sigh as Harry flung his arms around him and embraced him.

“You were brilliant, Draco,” Harry murmured into his shoulder. “I think you convinced him that this was a trap that failed even more than I did. Thank you.”

Draco beamed, and quite carefully did not look at his Head of House, whom he was sure would not be as approving. “Thank you, Harry,” he said, and leaned into the embrace, soaking up the accolades of faith and belief that he no doubt deserved.

Lord Voldemort opened his eyes—or, rather, he linked his consciousness to the mind of his snake once more. The young
flesh-serpent crawled over to his throne and stared up at his face, letting him see the joy that twisted it. It was an odd experience, looking at one’s own features, but he had quickly grown used to it. All attempts to bring back his own eyes had been in vain.

_I have the prophecy. I know what will happen. And it is essential that it be prevented._

Even apart from the prophecy, Lord Voldemort would not permit someone else to divide his soul as he had done. That was his own sacred and protective art of immortality. But it was what would happen if he could not kill Harry in time. And he could do that on only one day and in only one place.

_On Midsummer Day, I go to Hogwarts._

**Chapter Eighty-Four: Midsummer Breathing Down Their Necks**

“Then begin,” the woman from the Wizarding Examinations Authority said, and leaned back as if that were the conclusion of her task. Harry could see her eyes, however, alert and confident beneath half-lowered lids. She would be watching, and anyone who thought himself able to get away with cheating in the Potions Practical because of her sleepiness would be sadly mistaken.

Harry took a deep breath and began to mix the Draught of Peace. The powdered moonstone slipped between his fingers like sand, and he reminded himself that his hand had no reason to shake. He’d already asked for and received permission to use a Levitation Charm as a second hand. The proctor had added alarms to alert her if he used any magic that would speed the cooling of the potion or interfere with another student’s work, which Harry thought entirely fair.

He cleared his mind, carefully, of all thoughts of the future, all thoughts of the coming battle, all thoughts of whether he would even have a future in which the Potions OWL he earned might matter. He dropped straight into the sea of calm that let him brew his best potions. If he could maintain this state when he was mixing experimental ones, he thought as his magic skimmed the syrup of hellebore towards him so he could examine its consistency, then he might achieve more with them. But there, he was always enthusiastic, more eager to see the end result than in evaluating how best to get there, and he made frequent mistakes.

He started mixing the Draught of Peace, quietly certain that he would produce a good potion.

“They’re—beautiful.”

Harry grinned over his shoulder. He had never thought he would live to hear Zacharias Smith stunned.

“Aren’t they?” he asked happily, and bowed to the horse in the lead. It studied him for a moment, then dipped its head back and let him step nearer so that he could stroke its neck. Laura had told him that the Gloryflowers had created these horses on the model of hippogriffs, partially to stop an enemy simply seizing a riderless one in a battle and mounting it. They would not accept anyone who hadn’t bowed in polite introduction beforehand.

The horses were all made of gold, or more precisely, Harry thought, gold-colored metal, stamping and shifting and snorting like the real thing. Their hooves, crafted of silver, rang softly on the floor of the Room of Requirement. Their nostrils flared, and they turned their heads rapidly towards new sounds, their ears flagging up and down like banners. Harry hadn’t decided what their pale manes and tails were made of yet. Braided diamonds, it looked like, but couldn’t be.

They didn’t look _exactly_ like real horses—for one thing, no real horses had necks that swan-like or legs that long and loping, built like a cheetah’s, for speed—but they were close enough to make the riders whom Zacharias had gathered stare at them in clear longing. Harry stepped back with a little nod. “You’re welcome to them,” he said. “You’ll need to bow and wait for them to bow back before you can ride them, though.”

The first person to move forward wasn’t one of the Light wizards Zacharias had found, though, but a sixth-year Slytherin prefect, Catrina Flint-Digsby, the one who had laughed when Marietta Edgecombe was still in the hospital wing. She walked straight to the horse Harry had already convinced to accept him, and bowed in turn, murmuring her name. The horse eyed her back. Harry held his breath. He didn’t _think_ Laura would have done anything against her magical animals accepting Dark riders, but since the Gloryflowers were a Light family, they might have introduced precautions into the model that they’d forgotten to tell Harry about.

The horse snorted in recognition a moment later, though, and let Catrina come near enough to stroke its neck. She beamed,
“Begin.”

Harry eyed the snail in front of him and took a deep breath. He had plenty of practice with Vanishing things when he could just use his wandless magic; focus and will were the important components there. For the Transfiguration Practical, though, he had to use his wand, and he already knew he should have practiced more. The length of cypress felt unfamiliar and uncertain in his hand.

But he had practiced this in McGonagall’s class—though not as much as he should have—and he knew he could do it. He pointed his wand at the snail and concentrated on intoning the Vanishing Spell. This was only the first part of the Transfiguration OWL. He could and would pass it, if only because the harder parts were coming up.

The snail Vanished obediently. The proctor nodded to him and wrote something down on his chart, then pushed a teacup in front of Harry. “Make this into a dove, Harry,” he said encouragingly. He was the first of those from the Wizarding Examinations Authority who didn’t look as if he’d bitten into a raw lemon when asked to call Harry by something other than a last name.

Harry took another deep breath. The days when he’d done this spell with McGonagall watching him and Hermione achieving success in the background—first in the class, of course—seemed very far away. But he remembered the incantation, and spoke it confidently enough. “Pocillum transformo columbae!”

The teacup shuddered and grew wings, the part of the change Harry had always found hardest, and the one on which he’d been concentrating the most. The rounded portion of the cup turned into a rounded body, and Harry held his breath as the
handle became a delicate neck and head. The dove looked up at him and cooed as though asking whether it could have food. The proctor picked it up and gently turned it around. Then he smiled sympathetically, and showed Harry that the body was still hollow on the underside, the dove missing its feet. This didn’t seem to distress the dove at all, which kept cooing and looking around the Great Hall.

Harry felt his face flush in embarrassment. The proctor merely wrote down something on his list and turned around to retrieve a needle for Harry to Transfigure into a goldfish.

“I’ve tightened the wards,” McGonagall told Harry, as she poured tea into cups for them both. “After some searching, Helga helped me find what I’d been missing. Loki could pass through the Forbidden Forest because he had no hostile intentions towards the school. He could have had hostile intentions towards an individual person within it, like you or Professor Snape, and the wards would not have kept him out. We made the wards too focused on Hogwarts as a collective entity.”

McGonagall sighed and sipped at her tea. “I am sorry this happened, Harry. You cannot know how sorry.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Harry said quietly, and then hesitated as he sat back with the teacup warming his hand. He hadn’t asked her for details before, but now curiosity burned and ate at him. “Headmistress,” he said finally, and McGonagall looked up from contemplating eternity in the depths of her teacup. “What exactly did Remus say to you, the day that he left?”

McGonagall’s mouth tightened. “He argued that surely he deserved some trust, since I had known him for so long,” she muttered, and Harry could see the glint of anger in her eyes. “He was a Gryffindor, one of my own students, and someone I chose to hire even though I knew the laws against werewolf employment. I’d defied the Ministry for him. How could I force him away now, when that would send an unfortunate message to both the Ministry and the werewolves?”

Harry frowned. He didn’t like the arguments himself, but he could see why they would have persuaded McGonagall. “Why didn’t they work?” he asked aloud, then realized he hadn’t meant to ask the question that way. McGonagall waved him off when he tried to apologize, however.

“I asked him, in several ways, what he intended,” said McGonagall. “Each time, he told me that he could not reveal anything of Loki’s plans or his own, that it was involved in aspects of werewolf life no ordinary wizard could understand, and which he would desecrate if he tried to explain. He wanted me to trust him for trust alone. Finally, I asked him, bluntly, whether he would bite a student if Loki told him to, whether the students were actually safe with him here on full moon nights—not safe in the sense that he would not take Wolfsbane, but safe in the sense that he would not go prowling, fully in control of his actions, and bite someone who didn’t want to be bitten.”

Harry swallowed. “And what did he say?”

“He couldn’t answer me.” McGonagall smiled bitterly. “He mumbled something else about pack magic and werewolf life, but he would not guarantee me that my students were absolutely safe. I sacked him at once.”

Harry felt a more bitter burn of betrayal than he had when Remus actually left. Once, Remus would have understood how deep a violation of free will that was, to bite someone who didn’t want to be bitten. Even if he had accepted his curse now, he had suffered under it for a long time; Fenrir Greyback had bitten Remus because Remus’s father had offended him. It had been a punishment for his family, and a horrible heaping of injustice on the head of a young boy who couldn’t have influenced his father’s actions one way or the other. Now Remus was proposing to do the same thing, and he would not even explain why.

Harry wondered what would have happened if Loki had ordered Remus to bite someone in the school. Would he have done it and still expected to retain his position as Head of Gryffindor House, because that was just “what had to be done?”

His cup abruptly shattered, and he looked down in surprise as hot tea dripped across his fingers, mingling with shards of porcelain. “Sorry,” he murmured to McGonagall, and Vanished them.

“It’s all right,” said McGonagall. “I had a hard time refraining from Transfiguring him into a cushion and sending him to the Hufflepuff common room.”

Harry smiled, but in his mind, he carefully checked Remus off any possible list of allies. He still loved him, but he could not trust him.

Binns is useless, Harry thought, frowning at his History of Magic written exam.
The old ghost drawled on and on about goblin rebellions, and almost nothing interesting. The questions on the exam, of course, concerned much more than goblin rebellions. There were questions on wizard-giant relationships, when the Ministry of Magic had first formed, who certain famous wizards and witches were, and details of the First War with Voldemort, to name just a few. Harry idly wondered if the people who’d written the exam had ever thought themselves ridiculous as they carefully scribbled out “You-Know-Who.”

Luckily, his own reading in history as a child let him know some of the questions, and with others, he had heard that brilliant if madly irrelevant details could often distract the examiners; they would accept a load of bollocks if it was an intelligent-sounding load of bollocks. He’d see what adding obscure ideas about giants would do to distract them from the dates.

With a will, he set to work.

Harry eyed the letter he’d received with trepidation. He’d put off reading it until everything else he could possibly do was done. And even now, he didn’t like the fact that it bore the seal of Griffinsnest. He knew who it would be from. He sighed and split the seal.

To his surprise, the letter began with a polite salutation, and contained more emotions than the scolding tone he’d expected.

May 22nd, 1996

Dear Harry:

You may be startled to receive such a letter from me, given that the issue of the linchpins has been settled between you and my family. It is true that I have no control of the Griffinsnest linchpins when working against my family combined. They agreed at the equinox meeting to allow you to attach our linchpins to magic instead of the earth, and I must abide by that decision.

But I can make your life difficult. As you probably know by now, werewolves killed both my parents. Both were killings by ‘accepted’ werewolves, which is the term I use to refer to lycanthropes who either willingly took the bite or have grown accustomed to the curse in the years since. Both did it as part of an obscure ritual held in some organized packs, known as the Grand Hunt. The object is to go after difficult targets—fully-trained wizards, in this case—and prove how superior their curse renders them. They did not have Wolfsbane, of course, so they made sure they were in the vicinity of my parents when the transformation and the rage took them.

I caught both monsters in wizard form. I challenged them to the same duel that Augustus Starrise used on Adalrico Bulstrode, so that they had no choice but to face me. I finished each of them by driving a silver knife into their hearts in the confines of the duel. So, while they killed my parents in accordance with their own rituals, I killed them in accordance with customs accepted by wizarding society for centuries.

That is the reason I am unable to object to your transference of the linchpins, however repugnant I find your politics. You honored the duel Starrise called, when I know that you could have interfered. You would have honored the way I slew the murderers of my parents. There is a wizard within you whom I wish to work with, one who forgoes vengeance for himself but will not twist the minds of others so that they also forego it.

But I know that werewolves run by your side, and I hear now that you are starting to fight for them more prominently. I have contacts in the Ministry who assure me that one pack of accepted werewolves is bragging they have you under control, despite the biting of Elder Gillyflower. I am sorry, but I cannot stand beside one who bows to monsters like the ones who killed my parents, who indulges them despite their vicious and violent tactics.

I am writing you because I wish to know the truth, and I trust you to answer me honestly. Do you bow to such werewolves? If you do, then I am your sworn foe from that moment forward. If you do not, then I may be able to help you.

Yours in the Light,

Gloriana Griffinsnest.

Harry sat back and frowned for a moment. He wondered if he really should tell her what he planned, then shrugged. If nothing else, she was not going to be the one to expose his tactics to Loki’s pack.

And he could feel the boiling anger beginning to surge in him at the mere thought that Loki was bragging about having him under control. Didn’t the idiot see that would only hurt his own cause, in at least two ways? Others would refuse to trust Harry as an independent political power, taking him no more seriously than they’d taken Cornelius Fudge, and would probably be extremely reluctant to help him fight for werewolves’ rights. And other groups might think they could seize
control of Harry by use of the same tactics, or even that they had to, to counter Loki’s influence.

But then, Harry thought, as he pulled out parchment to draft his response to Gloriana, leaning on his Defense Against the Dark Arts textbook, I do not give Loki much credit for intelligence. Determination, yes. But it’s no wonder that he spun this contest into violence as soon as he could, and threatened me to make me pay attention to him. Violence is all he truly understands.

When his letter was finished, Harry sat back and read it over before he sent it off with Hedwig.

Dear Mrs. Griffinsnest:

I thank you for writing me instead of simply assuming that the rumors you hear about me are true. There has been too much of that lately, and in fact it is the cause of the trouble in the Ministry.

I am under the control of no werewolf pack. Loki, the leader who claims that it is so, has threatened me with infection for people I love if I do not do as he wishes, and also promised to bite someone on the full moon of each month. The biting of Elder Gillyflower in April was only the first such attack. Elder Gillyflower was guilty of crimes against werewolves, and so was their target for June—who is now under the Ministry’s protection and prosecution—but there is no telling whether they might not turn to biting innocents in time.

I do not care more for werewolves’ rights than the rights of ordinary wizards and witches, or other magical creatures, and that is where Loki has made his mistake. I care for them equally. To be truly under his control, I would have to be convinced that he was right. I am not, and that will bite him in the end.

I have a plan that is two-pronged. The first is working on a cure for lycanthropy. Loki dares to imply that he speaks for all werewolves in threatening me. That is not true. At most, to use your terms, he speaks for accepted werewolves, and not those who hate and resist their curse. I wish to have a cure on hand so that those werewolves who wish to be free of the curse can, and to show that Loki’s claims are false.

The second part of the plan does involve fighting for werewolves’ rights, yes. I will understand if you can no longer give me the time of day once you read this. However, ma’am, consider this: When all laws are fair, when all rights of werewolves and wizards are equal, then werewolves will be protected far more than they are now. They will be able to have jobs and custody of their own children.

And they will be tried and sent to prison under the same laws. If Loki continues his course, then, once the laws are fair, he can be arrested and tried for use of Dark magic and war crimes. I will see him in Tullianum someday—not because he is a werewolf, not even because he threatened those I love or manipulated me, but because that is what would happen to a non-werewolf wizard using these same tactics.

I wish to end the endless cycle of vengeance. I enjoy wizard duels no more than Grand Hunts. It is your choice, however, if you wish to help me, beyond allowing the linchpin plan to proceed.

Yours sincerely,

Harry.

Harry nodded, and stood to walk to the Owlery.

“Protego!” Harry could have done this in his sleep. Without doubt, his Defense Against the Dark Arts practical was the easiest so far.

The curse coming at him from the box that the proctor had enchanted to cast random spells bounced; the proctor had to duck as it whizzed past her head. She stood again and smiled at him, writing something down on the chart that she held.

“Excellent, Mr. Pot—Harry.” She peered at him inquiringly. “What would you do if you could not use a shield that bounced back the curses, for fear of hitting your comrades in battle?”

Harry grinned at her and held up his hand, dropping the Protego. The next curse out of the box was a nasty one, meant to burn the skin so badly that normal healing spells would simply slide off it and leave the person writhing in pain. Harry knew it wouldn’t have come out of the box if the proctor didn’t think him able to handle it; the boxes adjusted themselves depending on the skill level of the student being examined.

“Haurio!” he called, and the jade-green shield formed around his hand, spreading out from his wand. The curse hit the shield, which ate it calmly. Harry turned an inquiring gaze on the proctor. “Like that, Madam?”
“Yes, exactly!” She seemed almost flustered as she scribbled, and Harry wondered if the rest of the examinations had been boring so far. He almost hoped so. He was enjoying this, and he’d like to secure at least one O.

“Well?” Harry asked, as Draco sat back and blinked at nothing. The rune circle around the bed shone frantically, as if Draco’s venture into possession this time had agitated it. “How was that?”

“Very definitely—strange,” said Draco, and ducked his head as if trying to escape Harry’s gaze. “You’re right. Possessing an object, even one that’s self-aware like that one, is very different from possessing a human brain. For one thing, she has a very strong sense of herself as female, but no name. The people I possessed always knew who they were. There’s one part of your mind that sings your name over and over. She doesn’t see why she needs one.”

Harry nodded and laid the Midsummer knife down on the bed. The Light blade glinted in protest, but subsided the moment his hand was no longer touching it. “Do you think you could make it float or stab if you had to?”

“It won’t be easy.” Draco locked his hands behind his head as he thought about it. Harry told himself to stop staring at Draco’s fingers and having random thoughts about them. “But easier than possessing the Dark Lord, I think. Yes, I can.”

“Thank Merlin.” Harry smiled at him and changed the subject from battle. They’d been practicing this for hours, and Draco’s head had to be ringing with worry over what would happen when Midsummer actually arrived. “How are your OWLs coming?”

Draco gave a shaky groan and moved his hands in front of his face. “Terrible!” he wailed.


“All right, all right,” Draco muttered. “Defense Against the Dark Arts and Potions weren’t bad. But I couldn’t make sense of the History of Magic exam. I should know better than that, shouldn’t I? I had parents who gave me a good education in it. And then I stare at a list of dates and find out I don’t know anything.”

Harry laughed. “I know the feeling. They really should hire someone other than Binns. Of course, I’m not sure that he wouldn’t show up in the History classroom and natter on and on even if they did.”

Draco sighed. “Don’t remind me. It didn’t help knowing that even if I’d stayed awake in that class, it wouldn’t have helped.” He brooded for a moment, then brightened as he added, “But I’ve revised so much for my Charms practical that I’m mouthing the incantations in my sleep. That’s got to count for something, right?”

“Well, let’s see.” Harry turned so that he faced Draco fully. “Get your wand, and I’ll practice with you.”

“That is—bright enough, I think.” The proctor had one hand shielding his eyes.

“Sorry, sir,” said Harry, abashed. He looked down at the rat he’d been supposed to turn purple with the Color Change Charm. It had worked, but Harry wasn’t accustomed to using his wand for this, either, and he’d turned the rat such a brilliant purple that it looked like the sun was glowing from inside it. He shielded his own eyes as the proctor murmured a few cross-sounding words and managed to reduce the rat’s color.

“I’d say that you don’t know your own strength,” said the wizard, with a faint frown at him. He’d seemed either intimidated by or outright afraid of Harry throughout most of the practical, but this time adopted a fatherly tone. “Best to get a handle on that before you try any Charms work in the field, son.”

“I know,” Harry apologetically, as he readied himself for the next Charm. “Usually, I just do it wandlessly.”

The proctor choked, and turned green.

“What do you say, Harry?”

Harry eyed Moody calculatingly. The old Auror had told him to stay behind when he’d dismissed the dueling club, and Harry had, once the usual complement of wounds, bumps, and bruises from Moody’s intensive training were healed, and the rest of the students had staggered out the door, moaning. Harry had thought Moody wanted, once again, to express his doubts about the members of the club actually fighting in the battle. He hadn’t expected this.
“You’re offering me a duel?” he asked Moody.

“Yes.” Moody grinned wolfishly as he pulled out his wand. “You don’t get a chance to have a proper one often, do you, boy? It’s charging about and wandless magic this and draining Voldemort that. But even if your purpose is going to be just to fend him off on Midsummer—” Moody sounded as if he had his doubts of that “—you should still have some dueling instruction.”

“I thought that was what you were giving me with the others,” Harry protested.

“Have to hold myself to their pace there, don’t I?” Moody was prowling in a circle that made Harry instinctively want to fall into a defensive crouch. “Don’t dare use some of the spells I could, just in case they get badly hurt and go wailing to their parents about the mad old Auror.” He tilted his head to the side, and his grin widened. “You can take it, though, boy. Know you can.”

“All right,” said Harry. “Wand, or not?”

“Will you use one when you’re fighting?”

“Probably not,” Harry had to admit. He concentrated on Moody’s circling, and waited. Moody’s first spell was non-verbal, of course, a curse that exploded a few inches from Harry and tried to shower him with purple light he knew he didn’t want touching his bare skin. Harry rolled swiftly backwards; this was one of those curses, like the Blood Whip, that would make shields explode. He had to put some distance between himself and it.

Moody conjured a wind that blew the purple flakes after him. Harry continued his rolling, until he knew he would fetch up against the far wall of the classroom if he kept moving. He tucked his knees beneath his body and called up a contrary gust of wind. It scattered the purple flakes harmlessly to the ground and drove at Moody, actually spinning him a step backward before he conjured a shield. His wooden leg clicked on the floor with a satisfying sound.

Moody was laughing, and called, “That’s why you can lose duels, boy, because you turn to offensive magic too late, and defensive magic too often!” He used a wave of his hand to make Harry think he was throwing a curse that could be stopped by a Haurio, and Harry actually had the green shield surrounding his hand before he realized Moody had fooled him. The curse coming at him was the Blood Whip.

Harry turned his back and took the pain, hissing as it carved lines into his skin, while he reached for a spell he thought Moody wouldn’t suspect. “Teredo,” he whispered.

That would probably take a few minutes to take effect, so in the meantime he had wounds on his back that limited his mobility, a fully-armed opponent stalking towards him, and the need to use offensive magic—though since it wasn’t a real duel, he had to hold back, or he could easily kill Moody.

He concentrated on something that would show he was trying while also being something Moody could defeat easily, and conjured a whirling cyclone of diamond blades, which swept over his shoulders and towards Moody. Harry turned to see what the old Auror would do.

Moody’s wand moved impossibly fast as he conjured half a dozen small shields in the air, blocking the blades. Then he grunted at Harry, said, “Another lesson you have to learn is to prepare your next spell instead of watching your enemy,” and clenched his hand in no spell gesture Harry knew.

A time-delayed spell, he realized a moment later, as bursts of light in front of his eyes blinded him; Moody had spoken two incantations, one for this spell, the second to keep it waiting until he made the hand gesture. Well, it had been a good move. Harry couldn’t see anything but burning afterimages when he opened his eyes.

Harry decided to stop worrying about hurting the Auror. He obviously had no worry about hurting Harry.

“Sectumsempra!” he called, and threw his hand over his shoulder towards the place where Moody had last been.

Moody cursed creatively. From the thump of his leg, Harry knew he’d dodged the curse. “What was that, boy?” he demanded.

Harry hurriedly read the spell Snape had invented, no wonder you’ve never seen it before, Harry wanted to say, but decided to hit Moody with quick spells instead, ones that would keep him moving.

“A spell Snape invented, no wonder you’ve never seen it before, Harry wanted to say, but decided to hit Moody with quick spells instead, ones that would keep him moving.

“Ventus! Ardesco! Solem adversum intueri! Serpensortia!”

He heard the snake conjured at the end of that spell hiss inquiringly at him, asking him what he wanted it to do, and Harry hissed back, “Bite the old man.”
Harry narrowed his eyes in thought. He’d scribbled down every fact about Saturn’s rings that he could remember, and he still wasn’t sure if it was enough for the written portion of the Astronomy OWL.

Draco, of course, would be smug. He’d learned more than enough star-lore when he was a child, thanks to his mother’s heritage, and he was probably finished already, or putting the last touches on a perfect essay. Harry shook his head and told himself to think about Saturn instead of Draco’s smile.

It didn’t help that he’d never been interested in the stars, at least not the way that centaurs and Professor Sinistra were. If star-lore had been a condition of gathering allies, he would have learned it, and likewise if magic concerning the heavens had been the kind he needed to learn to defend himself. But neither was true. Star-lore was really most useful for predicting the future and learning about history, not day-to-day survival in a war. Harry had always placed the knowledge that would let him survive, once to protect his brother and then to defeat Voldemort, first in his mind, above all other kinds.

He decided to write down what he could about Saturn’s position at this time of year. Merlin knew he remembered that, from all the dawns lately that he’d stood on the North Tower and stared towards the east, awaiting Midsummer and its storm.

“He had no right to do it.”

Harry sighed and leaned back against his chair. He and Peter were sitting in a room on the fifth floor that most people avoided, since Peeves tended to haunt it. Peter had performed a complicated curse that Harry had never heard of, which caused an image of the Bloody Baron to float in the air. Peeves took one look and fled, shrieking. Peter had admitted, when Harry pressed him, that he’d been the one Gryffindor House usually assigned to get rid of the poltergeist when they were still in school, and make sure he didn’t interfere with any of the Marauders’ plans.

Peter had Transfigured several of the broken chairs into whole ones, with a skill Harry envied but supposed he should expect from a wizard who had mastered the Animagus transformation by the time he was sixteen, and connected the room’s hearth to the school’s Floo network in moments. From there, it’d been a simple matter for him to call down to the kitchens and ask a house elf to prepare tea. And then they had sipped it and talked as Harry told him, in detail, about Remus. Peter had come to the school to help prepare for the battle; without Regulus, he was lonely in the Black houses.

Peter had listened to the story of Remus, without interrupting, and then made his strange declaration. Harry felt a knot of tension at the base of his spine uncoil. He had expected Peter to take Remus’s side, really, since they were such old friends.

“I can understand why he did it,” Harry said, striving to keep his tone neutral. “He had his sense of belonging stripped away from him again and again—first when he was bitten, and then when you got sent to Azkaban. And then, even when you showed that you weren’t a sacrifice anymore, Sirius died, and James was a git.” Harry shrugged. “So there were his friends gone. What was he like in the Sanctuary?”

“Better,” said Peter. “But not perfect. The Seers don’t try to make everyone the same as a ‘normal’ wizard, you know. They
look at our souls and suggest ways to heal the gaps.” Peter sipped from his tea, though it seemed an effort for him to open his mouth, which was set in a tight, angry line, long enough to get the tea down. “They suggested that Remus heal himself by coming to terms with his past—writing Snape, for example, though I don’t know if he ever did that. Writing James. Writing werewolves.” Peter sighed through his nose. “And it worked so well that he found a new sense of belonging, a new set of friends, and chose them.”

Harry frowned. “Then I don’t see why he had no right to do what he did.”

Peter twitched his nose in the manner of a rat sitting up its haunches to sniff the air for danger. “Because Remus has never learned that one sense of belonging doesn’t have to cut out others,” he muttered. “First he was an outcast, and he let that define him. Then he was our friend, and that was so important that he was able to ignore Sirius’s steadily more deranged behavior, and stay afraid of his own rage. He was thirty-four years old in your third year, Harry, and he’d never come to terms with the fact that he was a werewolf.” Peter shook his head. “And then he did, and scarpered as if that meant no one else was capable of understanding him anymore. Well, of course we weren’t, if he didn’t explain!”

“He betrayed you, he acted as if his old friends should just give up demanding anything of him while at the same time wanting them to trust him, and he’s acting like an idiot.” Peter ran a hand agitatedly through his hair. “It’s always one thing or another with Remus, the extremes, never the middle. If he could just remember that sometimes people are two or three things and not one, he’d be better off.” He drank more of his tea, moodily.

Harry shrugged a bit. He didn’t see it the same way, but then, he hadn’t been friends with Remus since they were both children. “I wouldn’t mind so much if he had just told me that things had changed,” he muttered. “Instead, he left me to figure it out on my own.”

Peter rapped his fingers on his cup. “I hope for his sake that this pack is true,” he said, enough bitterness in his voice to scald a cat. “That they’ll be his friends and not just use him. If not, I think Remus might break.”

He took a deep breath and then straightened himself with a shake, as if the motion would put all mention of Remus behind them, turning to Harry with a bright smile. “Now. I’m staying to help with the battle, after all, so let me show you how well I can call rats.”

Harry peered into the depths of the crystal ball, and wished the Divination exam allowed someone to dream prophetic dreams instead. He was good at that, at least if he was allowed to talk about the Dark Lord and his plans for Great Britain. The proctor for this exam was a humorless woman who only seemed to accept a certain list of pre-designated symbols as “real” glimpses into the future.

Trying to clear his mind the way he would for Occlumency, Harry let his gaze drift downward into the crystal. Supposedly, this was how one used one’s “inner eye,” too. Trelawney’s insipid, simpering voice would be in his head in a minute if he thought like that, though, so Harry forced that away and concentrated on the present.

“Well?” the proctor prompted, long before Harry was ready with a complete lie. “What do you See?”

*Well, when in doubt, go for the dramatic performance.* Harry gave a violent start and shiver, and then shrank back from the crystal ball. He lifted his eyes to the woman’s startled face. “Death,” he choked out. “My own!”

The proctor sat up and reached for her quill. “What symbols?”

“A Grim,” said Harry, choosing it easily, since Sirius’s dog form had looked like that. “A great black dog, walking slowly through a fog-drenched forest. It turned and looked out of the crystal at me, and I knew its eyes were beckoning me on to a deeper vision.” Harry put his hand to his face and shuddered dramatically. Inwardly, he was congratulating himself. Visions-within-visions were supposed to be difficult to pull off. If she believed him, he ought to get a higher mark than he would have otherwise.

“And what did you See within its eyes?” *Scratch, scratch,* went her quill.

“Myself, caught in a storm of light,” said Harry, improvising quickly. “It was fading behind me, like the last sunset I’d ever see. I stood in front of a great snake and watched him slithering towards me. He had lightning bolts in his mouth, and around his tail he bore a bloody rose.”

“And what do those symbols mean?” Yes, there really was an undertone of excitement in the woman’s voice. Harry refrained from rolling his eyes, but it was a near thing.

“The snake means great danger,” said Harry. “And since I am enemy to Lord Voldemort, it means that he will deal my death. But he will do it by turning my own weapons against me.” He lifted his fringe so that the woman could see his
lightning bolt scar. “Those are the lightning bolts. And the bloody rose around its tail—“ He strained his memory for a moment. He knew the symbol was mentioned in Unfogging the Future, he could even see the page number that mentioned it, but his mind was as blank as the crystal ball for a moment while he struggled to remember.

“What?” the examiner asked.

“The bloody rose means something dangerous disguised as something sweet!” Harry was afraid that he shouted that last part, but he was vastly relieved to have remembered it. “Lord Voldemort will try to lure me into a trap that won’t look like a trap.”

“Remember this vision, Harry,” the woman said, her voice radiating importance. “It may be all that stands between you and You-Know-Who in the end.”

Harry bowed his head as if that had only now occurred to him. “Yes, ma’am.”

He grinned as her quill scratched wildly. If that’s not at least an E, I’ll eat my hand.

“I appreciate this, Luna,” said Harry, handing the final text of the article to her.

“You don’t need to thank me, Harry,” said Luna. She peered at the article for a moment as though she didn’t know what it meant, then nodded and accepted it. “You’re kind to the walls, you know. You don’t stomp on the floors the way some of the other students do when they’re angry.” Luna frowned absently. “I wish they would stop that. They don’t know what memories they’re putting into the castle.” She focused on him again. “You’re a good person, Harry.”

Harry knew he blushed. “Thanks, Luna.” He nodded at the article. “Do you know when it’ll run in the Quibbler?”

“Daddy ought to be able to print it in a few days or so.” Luna gazed dreamily into the middle distance now. “I’m glad. I’ll take a copy to everyone who wants it, including Professor Snape and the Headmistress.” She shivered. “Even though I don’t like being in the Headmistress’s office.”

Harry indulged his curiosity. The article detailing his support for werewolves’ rights in his own words was finally finished, and he didn’t have another exam today. “Why not?”

“I went there to tell her it was Gilbert Rovenan who’d used the Entrail-Expelling Curse on you, because the furniture said so,” said Luna. “And her office was unfriendly. I do not know if it was the window, or the door, or the fireplace, or the desk, or the moving staircase. But something in it hated the whole world.”

Harry frowned. Odd as Luna’s intuitions were, they seemed usually trustworthy. “Perhaps it was Dumbledore’s influence,” he muttered. “I’ll tell the Headmistress, Luna, just in case it’s a curse she’s overlooked.”

“It’s something that hates the whole world,” Luna repeated earnestly. “Tell her to look for that.”

“I will.” Harry waved farewell as he moved in the direction of McGonagall’s office. It was a long way from Ravenclaw Tower to the dungeons anyway. He might as well take this one more short diversion. “Thanks again for printing the article!”

“Of course,” said Luna, with dead seriousness. “It’s right that you should be for werewolves’ rights. Werewolves are much less dangerous than Wrackspurts.”

Argh. No. Two times sixteen is not twenty-eight. Harry carefully erased the calculation that would have made his whole Arithmancy problem come out wrong.

He cast a brief glance at the other students in the room, all bent over their own exams. Most of them looked like he felt, half-hysterical with weariness. They’d spent days frantically revising for this exam; out of the subjects studied at Hogwarts, only Ancient Runes was commonly regarded as harder than Arithmancy. Well, Harry supposed Potions was harder for most students, but only because of Snape, and only because they didn’t concentrate.

Hermione, of course, was the sole exception to the frantic scribbling of her classmates. Harry didn’t think she’d erased once, and her face shone as she wrote careful number after careful number. Harry shook his head. Connor had told him horror stories about Hermione and the “study parties” she’d organized for the rest of Gryffindor Tower. They would be all glad when the OWLs were done with and Hermione couldn’t badger the rest of them to study anymore.

I wonder if Connor realizes that next year she’ll organize study parties around the idea of getting ahead on the NEWTs? Harry thought in amusement, and turned back to his exam, mind rested for the small bout of thinking about other things.
Harry had just sat down at the Slytherin table for breakfast—he’d come from wishing Connor good luck in the Gryffindor-Ravenclaw Quidditch game, which was today—when the post owl landed on his arm. Harry took its weight with a gasp. It was a great horned owl, and far heavier even than Hedwig. It arranged its feathers with a few quick preens, and extended its leg insistently to him, reminding Harry for a moment of the king cobra he’d released in the Forbidden Forest.

The parchment of the letter bore the seal of Griffinsnest. Harry blinked. He hadn’t expected an answer from Gloriana so quickly. He wondered if it was good news as he persuaded the owl to hop to his shoulder and opened the letter.

June 1st, 1996

Dear Harry:

I understand your plan to struggle for werewolves’ rights. Though I cannot but think there will be more attacks, more bloodshed, and more victims cursed with lycanthropy before all is done, I would be remiss if I did not lend you information that may help you in fighting Loki’s pack. Here is what I know about what I call ‘accepted’ werewolves:

- All accepted werewolves have spent time in the company of other accepted werewolves. Children bitten young, cast out of their homes, and taken in by a pack are the most common candidates for this position. Sometimes it happens with an adult who goes seeking the company of her ‘own kind.’ Werewolves who do not regularly associate with other cursed individuals do not develop this willingness to embrace the curse.

- Accepted werewolves demonstrate a greater strength and fluidity of body than any wizard. They can walk more silently, curl up in smaller places without claustrophobia, and endure greater extremes of heat and cold. You will know already about their enhanced senses, which are part of the burden of the curse for any werewolf.

- Accepted werewolves often take mates. Despite the many silly legends human wizards have about this—you would not believe how many I had to sort through when I was researching lycanthropy—this means little more than intense monogamy in practice. I have encountered no mated couple who had children of their own, unless the woman had borne them before taking the bite. Unborn children cannot survive the violent monthly transformations of a female werewolf. For this reason, accepted werewolves sometimes bite those of their female enemies they wish to condemn to childlessness.

- Accepted werewolves form pack structures that they claim imitate packs among natural wolves. Do not be fooled by this. A wolf alpha can be replaced when his strength fails, or when a cleverer subordinate defeats him in a dominance fight. The alpha of a werewolf pack typically cannot. His position is a combination of charisma, magical strength, and what I call “fascination.” The magic of other accepted werewolves focuses on him and binds with his. They will not challenge him unless his magical strength is somehow drained. However, killing him beheads the pack, and usually forces it to break apart.

- Pack magic has the following effects: very powerful layered spells, as the werewolves’ magic combines, most often used to shield their presence from their prey; prevention of Apparition by ordinary wizards; increasing the strength of individuals, so that they may be able to smash through stone and steel; focusing the ‘packmind,’ so that the werewolves act and react as their leader does.

- I have been unable to learn as much as I would like about pack culture; they keep it secret, and usually live in places a witch like myself has no access to. I have learned that it is largely communal, dedicated to opening the wizarding world up to the Muggle one—the philosophy being that their own packs show that wizards and Muggles can live in harmony—and deeply invested in vengeance. They will punish those they see as acting against them, the murderers of their mates, and so on. The custom about which I know the most, for obvious reasons, is the Grand Hunt to prove the superiority of werewolves. This involves competing pairs, sometimes mates but usually not, choosing intentionally difficult targets on the night of the full moon. Mostly, these contests are to the death, with the werewolf who causes the most damage and gets away winning. Occasionally, if the victim survives but is infected, the contest moves to persuading the victim to become an accepted werewolf.

I trust I have given you enough to be going on with, vates. Please let me know if you need any more information.

Yours in the Light,

Gloriana Griffinsnest.

“Pleased?” Draco asked, learning over his shoulder to see the letter.

“And why shouldn’t I be?” Harry responded, passing the letter to him so that he could actually eat his breakfast while Draco read it. “There were no new victims bitten last night, which probably means Loki is keeping his word about their target for
this having been Melissa Rosewood, and I have a lot of new information on werewolves.” He smiled, and knew it wasn’t a pleasant smile.

All his research on werewolves so far indicated that the curse was a web—a violent, self-aware, Dark web that lived to torture its hosts, and had probably been invented by a cruel Dark wizard. It was one thing if a werewolf did manage to accept that and live with it, Harry supposed, though before Loki he had known only Fenrir Greyback as an example of a werewolf who had. But spreading that web to unwilling people was not on, and the moment Loki had chosen to do it, he had set himself up as Harry’s enemy, just as a wizard who was trying to weave a new web to confine the centaurs or goblins would have. Harry was not vates if he stood aside and let Loki get away with something like that.

“I’ll save him and condemn him both at once, he reflected, as he drank his pumpkin juice. Help his people get rights, because that’s the right thing to do. But then make sure he loses the ability to spread the web to anyone who doesn’t want it. A stint in Tullianum ought to do nicely.

Harry carefully repotted the honking daffodil, and then stepped away from the pot and looked at the proctor. She gave him a nod, indicating that his Herbology OWL was done, and he could go.

Harry let out an explosive breath as he walked outside. He kept going until he was standing by the lake, and could sit down, lean against a convenient boulder, and close his eyes. So that’s done, then. It really should have been done yesterday, but for some reason, there’d been some emergency in the headquarters of the Wizarding Examinations Authority—a mix-up with Portkeys, Harry thought he remembered, and Portkeys, Harry thought he remembered hearing—and they hadn’t been able to come to Hogwarts until Saturday.

“What are you doing out here?”

“Relaxing after my Herbology OWL,” said Harry, opening his eyes and peering up curiously at Draco as he hurried towards him. “What does it look like?”

“You need to be getting ready to go to Diagon Alley,” Draco snapped, hauling him to his feet. “Or did you forget that the festival to celebrate my confirmation as Malfoy magical heir is tomorrow? We still need to get you proper robes, Harry, and my mother refused to take us shopping until the OWLs were done with.”

Harry swallowed. “All—all right, then.”

Draco caught his nervousness, and smirked. “Honestly, Harry,” he said, steering him rapidly towards the edge of the grounds. “It’s not going to be as hard as revising, I promise.”

That depends on your perspective, Harry reflected, and prepared himself to face the exposure of his own absolute lack of understanding about which dress robes looked good and which didn’t.

Interlude: Prince of Cats

June 1st, 1996

Dear Harry:

I wanted you to know that I am committed to your cause. Fully, deeply, absolutely. I will not act against your principles, because they are mine as well. My uncle tended to think that ends justify the means—or, at least, that the ends of Light wizards justified their means. I will never make that mistake.

You have taught me more than you’ll ever know. When you met me, I was little more than a disaffected rebel from everything my uncle taught me and believed in. Oh, I had reasons for my rebellion—I thought. But if someone had sat me down and forced me to look at those reasons, I would have found little more than childish sulking. You were the one who taught me to bring the grains of truth under that sulking to light.

I slowly came to realize, gazing at my uncle and my brother and pondering the reasons why they would not swear you allegiance as unconditionally as I did, that I despised them, and not just for their treatment of me. All they could do was look backwards. My uncle often spoke as if my mother were still alive. He valued her memory more than he valued his living nephews, unless those nephews complied in every respect with what he expected of Alba’s sons, not themselves. And Pharos adapted himself to what my uncle thought he should be. Every bit of his own independence, his own spark, was crushed out of him long ago. That is the reason the Starrise family is faltering now, and why the power among the northern Light families has passed to Gloryflower. He is Alba’s son still, not Augustus’s heir, and certainly not a leader in his own right.

But I have looked at my own principles, and now I believe in what you say because it makes sense to me, not because it will
annoy my brother. My uncle had doomed himself, according to those principles. The past needs to be seen in balance with
the present and the future. The dead cannot control or compel the living unless the living allow them to do so. Behavior
restricting the free will of others is repugnant because it acts, ultimately, against the free will of all. And the Light is wider
than the narrow, inflexible image my uncle created of it.

I say to you now: Thank you for bringing me home. Thank you for showing me that I was not wrong in Declaring myself
for the Light. And thank you for giving me a real reason to despise those who live like Augustus Starrise.

It is partly out of gratitude that I will bring the linchpin to you, but far, far more because it is a continuation of those
principles we both share.

Yours in the Light,
Tybalt Starrise.

Chapter Eighty-Five: Draco’s Debut

Harry closed his eyes and tried not to feel ridiculous. It was no use, though. He could feel the blush mounting up through his
cheeks and his ears, mantling his face. He must have been more embarrassed at some point in his life, but he couldn’t
remember it.

“Could you make her hurry up?” he hissed out of the corner of his mouth at Draco.

“You can’t hurry an artist, Harry,” said Narcissa. Her voice was gentle, not as amused as Harry would have expected, and
rather abstracted. A moment later, Harry heard the slight flick of her hands as she told the deaf robe-maker exactly what she
wanted.

Harry let his eyes open up a slit. He stood on a raised stool in the middle of a shop he hadn’t known existed, called
Deianira’s, which Harry considered a rather gruesome joke. The old witch who had met them was not Deianira herself—
maybe they had named the shop after the legend and not a witch—but Ariadne Kaliadnos. Narcissa had treated her with
great respect, spoken to her in sign language, and apparently told her what kind and color of robes they wanted. Ariadne had
stared at Harry from cold blue eyes, then put him on the stool and started the robe-fitting.

With plenty of long, sharp needles and pins to help her, which poked Harry when he shifted too much. If she used magic to
aid her, Harry couldn’t sense it. That was probably what Narcissa meant by “artistry.”

Harry turned his head slowly from side to side, easing his cramped neck, and looked around the shop; he hadn’t got much of
a look when they came in. The walls were covered with such thick draperies of cloth that Harry couldn’t see what material
they were made from. Robes of red and green and blue and a truly disgusting yellow hung in half-finished states on statues.
The windows were small and dim. Harry supposed the view on Knockturn Alley wasn’t anything to brag about, but he
would have preferred some light.

He shifted his weight from one leg to the other, because he couldn’t help himself, and Ariadne poked him with a pin. Harry
yelped and glared down at her. She glared back at him, and returned to stitching on the hem of the robe. The robes were
dark green. Draco insisted they made him look smashing. Harry didn’t know about that. He didn’t really care anymore. He
had envisioned a boring journey through several shops in search of formal robes, too, but he had at least thought there
would be movement. Based on his treatment so far in Deianira’s, it didn’t seem so.

Ariadne somehow flashed a message at Narcissa out of the mass of pins and needles and measuring appliances and Merlin
knew what else that she held. Narcissa responded, and Ariadne let out a little grunt of satisfaction before going back to her
stitching. Harry turned his glare on Narcissa.

“What did you tell her?” he demanded. “And why do you know that sign language anyway?”

“Oh, it’s not really a sign language,” said Narcissa absently, watching Ariadne stitch the new symbols with a small smile of
satisfaction. “Not the kind the necromancers use, at least, and with nowhere near the complexity. It’s merely a set of signals
for agreed-upon words that come up in Madam Kaliadnos’s work. As for how I know it, all the regular patrons of Deianira’s
have to learn it. Madam Kaliadnos insists on it. Those who won’t learn it are obviously unfit for her services in any case.”

Harry lapsed back into a grumpy silence. “You didn’t answer my first question,” he ventured a bit later.

Narcissa gave him a sharp-edged smile. “No, I didn’t, did I?” she said. “All is well, Harry. I merely told her that she could
put on symbols identifying you as the Black heir. After all, you are now, and one might even consider you the Black, since
Regulus has—left.” Narcissa did take care to delicately shade her conversation since they’d arrived in Knockturn Alley,
Harry noticed. “They’ll make the robes look impressive to the quality of Dark purebloods we’re getting at Draco’s festival.”
“Not very intelligent ones, then?” Harry muttered.

“Harry,” said Narcissa, and her face was so serious that he blinked. “I will not have you ruining Draco’s festival,” she whispered, leaning nearer to him now. “I do not think there is a very great chance of that, but it may come about by accident. Understand that the people who will attend this festival value symbols and designs and gestures very highly, whether or not you do. And the festival to welcome a magical heir is a formal occasion. You will impress them to the degree that you remember that.”

Harry sighed and cast his eyes down. The bad things about getting joined to a pureblood Dark heir, he thought in resignation. “Yes, Mrs. Malfoy.”

Narcissa touched his hair for a moment. “In most things, I think you’ll do just fine,” she murmured. “But you really have been ignoring important gestures, Harry, or you have allowed your allies to make them for you. The appearance of the centaurs and the dragon at the alliance meeting, for example. Remember the value of symbols. They can contrive to make people accept things that otherwise they would reject out of hand.”

Harry cast a glance at Draco, who was leaning against a far shelf filled with bolts of cloth and watching him with an intent expression. He didn’t like as though he worried about what kind of impression Harry would make at the festival, or how much of a prat he looked standing there trying to avoid the jabs of Madam Kaliadnos’s pins. He just looked—happy, and as though he appreciated the dark green robes.

I can do this for him, Harry thought. After all, he pretends most of the time that he’s a perfectly forward-thinking embracer of Muggleborns, and that he isn’t afraid of centaurs or venomous snakes any more.

He straightened his back, flinched as another pin poked him, and decided to put on the best show he could—for Draco’s sake.

Draco would have thought he would always know Malfoy Manor. After all, he hadn’t only lived there most of his life; his father had taught him history in its rooms, had told him stories of where various ancestors had slept or bedded their partners or fought heroic battles against Mudblood invaders, had shown him artifacts that were connected intimately to the places that housed them, and had taught him early on the purposes of certain rooms—to remove glamours, for example.

But now he didn’t recognize it. He stood in the doorway and stared at the great hall where his parents had arranged to hold the confirmation of his ascending to Malfoy magical heir, and his mind traced no familiar walls, saw no familiar doors, didn’t remember the places where his father had walked with Draco just beside him, or his mother had walked with Draco in her arms.

The walls had vanished behind elaborate glamours that linked to the skies outside, but were themselves more perfect shades of dark blue than the sky would ever show, speckled with small imagined planets. The constellation Draco had taken the place of the ceiling, with silver lines of light connecting the stars for their slower guests who might not understand its purpose. Now and then, loud cries sounded from the walls of air, as though real dragons roamed just out of sight.

The tables themselves were creations of light and silver and stone; Draco didn’t know what on them was real and what wasn’t. His father had had the time to specially commission them, that was sure. The blue-gray cloths that covered them provided a subtle transition from the dark blue walls. Draco was sure that that was deliberate.

House elves would fill the room, bringing food and wine to anyone who required it, but glamours kept them out of sight, Narcissa had told him, so that the food would simply appear, as it did at Hogwarts. Subtle spells would insure that the guests avoided saying certain words that might disrupt the atmosphere, urging them towards the expression of others. But spells under that would encourage everyone’s rational thinking, no matter how much wine they swallowed. Discussion of politics and business, certain to happen, would require it.

Draco had grown up knowing what it meant to be pureblood, but he had never experienced the equivalent of the rarified, distilled environment that surrounded him now. It made him a little heady.

And he would be bringing a halfblood joined partner into the middle of all of this.

Draco shook his head, and felt a faint smile curve his mouth. This wasn’t the first time something like this had been done. After all, halfbloods were more acceptable than Mudbloods, if only just, and Harry’s magical power was unquestioned. Most of their guests would consider that Draco had done well for himself when they felt Harry’s strength. And the ring, and Harry’s presence at the festival at all, would proclaim that his partner didn’t find gatherings like this uncomfortable. Powerful halfbloods with some sense of polish were best of all.
The things that might go wrong were still endless, but Draco thrust the thought of them away. Harry had one of the finest
senses of personal empathy he’d ever seen, and an overwhelming presence, when Draco could persuade him to exercise it.
He would do well enough at this gathering.

And anyone who might try to insult him would either find his mouth blocked by one of the Malfoy spells watching for
insults to the family, or mark himself in an instant as unfit for a gathering of this caliber.

Draco turned abruptly and made his way to the doors, where the first guests would be arriving. Part of his duties as Malfoy
magical heir at this festival included acting as a competent host. You’re an adult, his parents’ every gesture towards him
today had said. Let us see you act like it.

You will, Draco promised, and opened the front doors of the Manor.

Harry yanked fretfully at the collar of his formal robes.

“You’ll wrinkle them,” said Draco calmly from his right side. “Stop. They look fine.”

“They don’t,” Harry hissed. He was convinced that the formal robes were too long, since they swished around his ankles
with more thickness and more insistence than his normal school robes. Besides, the collar was too high, and the dark green
color made him look as if he were walking around in a pine tree, and the silver symbols stitched along the hem and cuffs…
Merlin knew what they said, but Harry was rather afraid they reflected more disturbing things about him than his merely
being the Black heir.

“They do.” Draco reached out and captured his chin, forcing Harry to look at him. His own face had that serene expression
Harry remembered from Walpurgis Night. “Really, Harry. You’re going to stun them, even the ones who know you. And
no, I’m not saying that only because I love you.” He gave Harry a little smile and held out his arm. “Ready? It’s almost
sunset.”

Harry sighed and settled his hand on Draco’s arm in the position they’d practiced, to send all the right signals to the room.
They had to enter the hall, and thus officially begin the festival, at the moment of sunset, since Draco had been born then.
Even though it wasn’t the fifth of June, but the second, Narcissa had been insistent that they observe the protocols.

“Happy birthday, by the way,” Harry muttered to him from the corner of his mouth.

Draco’s face lost its calmness. “What did you make me?” he asked Harry eagerly.

Harry laughed at him. “It’s not actually your birthday yet, remember? You can’t have your gift until the fifth.”

“You should make me one anyway,” said Draco.

“I’m giving you one right now,” said Harry. “Appearing at this festival with you is my gift for the day.”

Draco opened his mouth to argue, but just then, the doors of the hall swung open, the cue for their entrance. Draco’s head
lifted in a moment, and he adopted yet another serene expression. Harry wondered if he had a closetful of them, and
entertained himself for a moment with the image of Draco taking calm masks off hooks and deciding which one he liked
best.

“Here we come,” Draco murmured, and Harry tugged himself back from his thoughts in enough time to walk exactly beside
Draco as they entered the room, and not trip over the hem of the stupid dress robes.

Harry hadn’t seen the hall before. He hadn’t realized how much the Malfoys had sculpted it to look like sunset inside. He
controlled his urge to gape, putting in place the mask Lily had taught him for formal occasions like this—mildly
appreciative, but deeply unimpressed—and turned to follow Draco across the front of the room to the table that stood at the
far right wall.

Light spells glittered and flashed off his ring. Harry heard more than one murmur. He didn’t try to make them out. Anyone
who didn’t realize he was doing a joining ritual with Draco by now was a nutter. More likely, they were trying to figure out
the significance of the ring as a joining gift, or telling each other about the symbolism of the jacinth.

Draco reached the table, and the part Harry really hated started. Luckily, it was short. Draco turned to face his guests across
the tabletop, his back nearly against the sunset-glамoured wall, and Harry had to stand beside him. He had to look out
across faces staring at him with various politely-bred expressions of curiosity, interest, and disdain, especially from those
who hadn’t met him before.

And he had to listen to Draco praise him like he was some bloody Lord.
“Welcome to the festival confirming me as the Malfoy magical heir,” said Draco, in a smooth, deep voice, which Harry suspected he’d adopted from his father. Harry preferred the way he normally sounded. “My name is Draco Malfoy, and in all matters tonight I mean to fully deserve the name. My father is Lucius Malfoy. My mother is Narcissa Black Malfoy. My blood runs with starlight and with power, and I embrace all that means. Welcome.” He dipped his head, and waited until everyone had finished bowing back.

Then he started in on Harry. “By my side stands my to-be-joined partner, Harry, once called Potter, once son of James Potter and Lily Evans Potter.” The response was a susurrus rather than ordinary whispering, but Harry could hear it. He’d expected it, after the announcement of his Muggleborn mother’s name. He restrained the childish temptation to yell the name back in their faces, and also to point out, helpfully, that two of the most powerful wizards he knew, Voldemort and Snape, were halfbloods. “Now called vates, a Lord-level wizard, the Boy-Who-Lived, friend of centaurs and defector of Dumbledore.”

Harry bowed his head. Most people bowed back. A few stared arrogantly at him, with a stiffness to their necks that said they didn’t see the point of acknowledging him. Harry narrowed his eyes.

It’s childish, perhaps, but Draco did say that a lack of respect conceived in a place like this can follow me for the rest of the joining ritual.

He lowered one of the barriers on his power, and pure magic flooded the room, especially noticeable because so many of the spells on the walls and floor and house elves were subtle. Some of the wizards still staring at him as if he were something the Kneazle had dragged in widened their eyes most satisfactorily. Harry restored the shield a moment later, and sat down in his place, as he was supposed to do.

He picked up his wineglass, and in the next second it was full of shining dark liquid, courtesy of the disguised and incredibly coordinated house elves. Harry restrained the impulse to roll his eyes, and waited for Draco’s toast.

Draco spoke the words perfectly, of course, holding his glass high, and in that moment, he looked as Malfoy as Harry had ever seen him—and as flawless.

“To the future,” Draco said clearly. “To the power of magic spreading and flourishing in bloodline after bloodline, in magical heir after magical heir. To the preservation of our world.” Harry tensed in interest at what was coming next. Each magical heir got to choose the last line of the toast, Draco had told him, and it was often the first way he or she made a mark on the adult world.

Draco darted a quick glance at Harry, and then he smiled.

“To freedom,” he said, “and to will.” Then he lifted the wineglass to his lips, and all around the room, people followed suit.

Draco sat back down, well-aware of the half-astonished, half-wary look Harry had worn from the moment of the toast. He didn’t care. What mattered was that he’d made it, and declared himself in a way that even making his Declaration to the Dark right now wouldn’t have allowed him to do. He smiled at Harry and looked down at his plate, which was covered with the first course, a delicately seasoned pie of venison. Draco’s mouth watered for a moment

Then he cut off a precise piece and held it out to Harry on the end of his fork. Harry’s astonished look deepened, and then his eyes hardened. He and Draco had discussed the idea of feeding each other, and decided they wouldn’t do it.

What are you doing? he was asking now.

Draco cocked his head. He was better at reading the mood in the room than Harry was. He’d sensed more hostility than he wanted the moment they stepped inside the hall. Yes, it was idiocy, but there were some wizards here who would still see Harry’s blood status as the most important thing about him; even that pulse of magic would only convince them that the Malfoys had somehow found a way to harness a dragon, not that the dragon could think for himself. Draco needed to send an undeniable signal that he held his future joined partner in high regard.

That the way to do that was to follow convention to the letter, instead of rebelling, was something he knew Harry would have a hard time understanding, and he had no time to explain. He held out the piece of pie and waited.

Harry glared one more time and opened his mouth. Draco placed the bit of pie on his tongue and watched as he chewed and swallowed. Harry’s eyes widened once, and he seemed about to choke; obviously, the taste of venison didn’t agree with him. But he was far too well-mannered to spit it out. He inclined his head in a small nod to Draco, and then turned to cut his own pie and return the favor.

Draco smiled and waited for the serving. Harry had cut a much larger piece, probably as vengeance. He certainly watched in
disbelief as Draco ate it with relish. Draco didn’t really know what Harry disliked so much about it. Yes, the flesh was a bit gamy, but that was part of its charm; it was one of the more flavorful pureblood dishes.

He fed Harry more of the pie, keeping one eye on their guests all the while. The hall was filled with tables facing the one where he and Harry sat, to display the magical heir—and his or her partner, of course—to the whole room. Draco caught many glances in their direction, especially from those wizards who hadn’t met Harry before. They would also be evaluating him, though, so he kept his face cool and his posture perfectly straight.

He nodded to those who caught his eye, or at least would admit to catching his eye. A surprising number were of those families who hovered distant from the Malfoys, and were often their rivals for influence in the Ministry. Draco knew they were wondering if he was a worthy successor to Lucius. He answered them with a smile like blue light on winter snow. They would know that he was, or they would fall before him. He wasn’t sure which outcome would please him more.

The house elves whisked away the pie long before Draco had tired of reading faces and, through them, minds, and brought the second course, diced and salted manticore tails. Draco picked up the first bit and offered it to Harry with his fingers before he could touch anything.

Harry didn’t object this time, or even insert the slight pause that he had before accepting the venison pie. He leaned forward and took the offering with a lightness that had Draco struggling to hide a grin. Harry understood, then, that flirting was out of the question. They had to present a perfectly stoic façade for this part of the evening.

Later, when they danced, they could get rid of that, and Draco was going to enjoy doing so.

He caught Charles Rosier-Henlin’s eye as he took a bit of the manticore tail from Harry in turn. The man was obviously fighting to repress a grin, but his twin sons, with him, looked unaccountably earnest. Draco narrowed his eyes the tiniest fraction. *If they think they have a chance with either Harry or me, they can forget it.* The Rosier-Henlin boys were handsome enough, pureblooded enough, and wealthy enough to qualify as acceptable partners for him if Harry hadn’t existed, but Harry did, and there was no question of any other person, for either of them.

On the meal flowed, with the introduction of sweet bread and fish from the Mediterranean and wine-soup and delicately flavored fruit, and Harry played the game well, accepting food from Draco’s fork or spoon or fingers as the moment dictated, offering his own food in return, and ignoring most of the stares he got. Actually, to think about it, Draco wasn’t sure if that last was Harry playing the game or just not caring what anyone else thought of him.

The end of the meal would be a challenge, Draco knew, and he heard Harry hiss under his breath as it appeared on their plates. It was a small scoop of ice cream in a silver dish, or at least it had started out that way. Magic had wound dozens of flavors into it, and spun it with trails of pure sugary icing in so many colors that they blazed under the deep blue lights of the hall. Draco could feel his mouth water. The sweetness was exquisite, but it was so much trouble for even house elves to make that Draco had tasted it only a few times in his life.

Harry would need to use his spoon to feed it to Draco, and he would need to do it first—another consequence of his being a halfblood in a pureblood gathering, yielding the sweetest of the food to his host and the partner most purebloods would see as undeniably superior. They’d discussed this, but then put aside the idea when they’d decided they wouldn’t be serving each other their food. Draco hoped desperately that Harry would remember it now.

He did, though his face was distant as he scooped up a part of his own ice cream on his spoon and held it out.

Draco smiled at him and took his wrist, an undeniable mark of favor, as he leaned in to swallow the dessert. It felt like twenty ice-cold fruits, none of them mingling with each other, exploding in his throat at once. He swallowed around melon and apple and orange and others he could barely recognize, and reached for his own spoon with a hand that didn’t shake, no matter how much it wanted to. “Your turn,” he said.

Harry’s eyebrows twitched as if he wanted to roll his eyes, but he opened his mouth and waited obediently. Draco gently tipped the ice cream in, and waited, holding his breath, for the next and most challenging part of this—the one that would have been a challenge even if they hadn’t started feeding each other. He knew Harry had never encountered something of this sweetness before, and he wasn’t completely sure if the left-over remains of his childhood training wouldn’t lead to an unfortunate accident.

Harry swallowed, and his eyes widened. There was one horrible moment when Draco thought he would surely spit the ice cream back out. But then his eyes closed and his head tilted to the side, and he uttered a soft sigh that made Draco think unfortunate thoughts about private rooms and lengths of time that guests could reasonably expect their hosts to be gone.

He looked at Draco in the next moment, and gave him a smile of pure sensual enjoyment.

“Thank you,” he murmured.
Draco knew that more than one person would have heard that—the preparation his parents had done would permit certain listening spells on their table—and felt a surge of power. Adherence to formal gestures would help, but nothing could compare with the true and avid bliss on Harry’s face, or the way his eyes shone as he looked at Draco.

*If this doesn’t convince them that he’s in love with me, nothing will,* Draco thought, and leaned forward to take his next swallow of ice cream.

Harry could still taste sweetness tingling in his mouth when the meal was done. He almost wanted to ask for more of the ice cream, even though he knew it was a special sweet that the Malfoy house elves had worked hard to prepare. He even felt vaguely guilty at the thought that he’d enjoyed it so much when house elves had been the ones to labor to make it.

But he hadn’t known *any* food could taste that good. For the first time, Harry was willing to believe Vera when she said that other people found sweet tastes a temptation, and thought it might be a good thing to overcome the training that had taught him to ignore chocolate.

Draco rose to his feet when the ice cream vanished, and inclined his head. “After the welcome and the food,” he said quietly, “the presentation of gifts is in order, for those who wish to make them.”

Harry sat on his own anxiety. As Draco had told him, this was the most vulnerable place in the festival. If no one had bothered to bring a gift, then the magical heir would look foolish standing in front of the room and awaiting something that never came.

Draco didn’t look foolish, though. He looked utterly composed, as though never doubting that *someone* would have decided to bring him offerings.

And, of course, someone had. Harry turned his head at a glimpse of movement, and saw Hawthorn Parkinson advancing calmly up the aisles between the tables, clad in dark formal robes that emphasized her pallor and her blonde hair. Her neck flashed with an ornament Harry hadn’t seen before, a medallion depicting a rose wound with thorns. It was probably a hereditary Parkinson piece.

Harry was occupied enough in studying it that he didn’t realize the more significant fact about it for a long moment. It was made of silver, and Hawthorn wore it next to her bare skin with nary a flinch.

He looked, startled, into her eyes as she laid the small wooden box she carried down before Draco and bowed her head. Hawthorn looked back at him. Her gaze was as simple and direct as a shout.

Harry had written her about Remus, and about Loki’s politics, not sure how she would respond. The medallion was her answer. She was a pureblood witch, first and foremost. She would not let even a werewolf’s vulnerability to silver—and the pain the silver ornament had to be causing her—define her otherwise.

Harry blinked away any unfortunate emotions that might have crossed his face, and turned back to see Draco opening the box. His gasp was loud and heartfelt, but as he held up the gift, Harry couldn’t see why. It looked like a ring, made of gold, set with a tiny sapphire—valuable, of course, but nothing more.

Then Draco looked at Hawthorn and said, “Thank you. The generosity of Parkinson in sharing its magic with us shall not be forgotten.”

The murmur picked up in the hall again, running from person to person, and Hawthorn inclined her head, a tiny smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. “The generosity of Malfoys to their friends is well-known,” she said. “I thought it worthwhile to answer a virtue with a virtue.”

She turned and swept back to her seat, where Pansy waited in silence beside her chair. Harry found his eyes turning back to the ring, in disbelief.

Hawthorn had pulled out a piece of her own magic, solidified it, and given it to Draco. Or, rather, she had gone to a specialist in Knockturn Alley who could do it for her. That magic was permanently gone from her, weakening her, and would come to Draco’s aid whenever he decided to dissolve the jewel and summon it.

Harry remembered what Adalrico Bulstrode had told him when he yielded up his own magic to keep Elfrida a witch. Dark purebloods valued magical strength more than anything, in the end (despite the resistance some people in the hall seemed to be having to the idea of his own power). To yield it, to sacrifice it, was something that most Dark wizards would do only for magical heirs, and even then not until their deaths. Hawthorn’s gift was royal, and almost certainly no one here tonight was going to match it.
Draco slid the ring onto one finger, admiring it, and then waited again in the tense silence that followed. Harry wondered idly if anyone else would dare advance. Weren’t they afraid of being embarrassed in contrast with Parkinson?

Adalrico Bulstrode did advance at last, though, with Millicent close at his side, as his magical heir. He limped, but he didn’t let the limp slow him; rather, his whole body had adjusted to a dignity Harry didn’t remember from the last time he’d seen him, so that he looked as if the limp were an old war wound, or badge of honor. He gave Draco a stately bow as he extended a dagger with a black stone in the hilt.

“For the Malfoy magical heir, on the eve of his confirmation,” he said. Harry thought he sounded a bit like a card. “The blade was forged by my ancestors for use in the goblin rebellions, and the stone comes from the walls of our estate. We call him Sigurd, in memory of a hero who struck true more often than that. This blade shall always strike true, for you.”

“My thanks,” said Draco softly, taking the dagger up in one hand and turning it around. “It is a beautiful and marvelous weapon. The nobility of Bulstrode shall no more be forgotten than the generosity of Parkinson.”

It was a wording that would insult nobody, Harry thought; Draco was being careful. Everyone in the room would still know that Hawthorn’s gift, as the greater treasure, was the more valuable, but the wording permitted Adalrico to retire with his dignity and a smile.

Draco slipped the dagger into his robe pockets and resumed the motionless statue posture. Harry looked around for the next flicker of movement and was startled to see Arabella Zabini standing and moving among the tables. Granted, she had been invited and had the right to present a gift if she so desired, but Harry couldn’t see her so desiring. She’d never seemed particularly friendly with Lucius or Narcissa, and Blaise’s distance from Draco in school was another argument for that stance.

She carried a set of bells in her hands, and she laid them down on the table in front of Draco. Harry leaned forward to see them better. They appeared to be carved of crystal, from the way they shone and tinkled—but it was blue crystal, and their ringing trembled in Harry’s ears as if it were a sound far away, like the sea roaring in a seashell.

“So that explains her giving him a gift, Harry thought, more comfortable now that he knew the bells’ purpose. A challenge, a test. I wouldn’t want to see what happens, necessarily, when he rings those bells.

Draco picked them up without hesitating, however, untwined the delicate silver chain on which they hung, and gave them a shake. Harry gasped at the sound of their music. Fawkes’s singing barely rivaled it.

The room quivered around them and went giddy, and Harry caught a glimpse of distant mountains. It retreated in moments, however, and left Draco smiling and dipping his head to Arabella.

“Thank you,” he said. “When the test comes, I shall remember that Zabini gave a gift of dreams and mystery.”

That was nicely ambiguous enough that Arabella didn’t look entirely satisfied as she went back to her seat. Harry restrained the impulse to shake his head in amusement. Did she think Draco would be an easier target than his parents, or was she counting on him not shaking the bells at all?

Charles Rosier-Henlin and his twin sons, Owen and Michael, were next. Harry studied their faces in unabashed curiosity as they walked up to the table. He thought he could see shadows in their eyes from their ordeal in Durmstrang, but they didn’t seem incapable of smiling, only constrained from it by the solemnity of what they were doing. He relaxed a bit.

Charles nodded to Draco, but said, “The old tradition of festivals for a magical heir allowed guests to present gifts to his future joined partner or spouse as well as directly to him. Do you accept this tradition, Mr. Malfoy?”

Draco didn’t act caught at all off-guard, though Harry stared. “I could hardly deny the validity of it,” said Draco, “when I have been accepting gifts from my future partner all night—most simply, the gift of his presence. By all means. I would like to see what you have for Harry.” He stepped slightly out of the way, to represent that this gift was not coming to him.

Harry stood, because Draco had. He could see no object in Charles’s hands, though, and wondered what the gift was to be. Charles stepped back, so Harry turned his attention to Owen and Michael. Owen—Harry thought it was Owen, from remembering the face of the boy Bellatrix had tortured in the Great Hall of Durmstrang—stood in front of his brother as he pulled out a dagger. Harry tensed in spite of himself.

“Harry, called vates, called the Boy-Who-Lived,” said Owen in an exquisitely formal voice, “my brother and I owe you a life debt. At great peril, you came into Durmstrang and rescued us from the domination and torture of Bellatrix Lestrange.
Innocence once lost can never be recovered, but lives preserved are worth future preservation, and all honor to the savior. I ask you now whether you have any wish to collect on this life debt, or whether you will turn it over to my brother and I, for payment as we wish.” He lifted his dark eyes to Harry’s face and waited. 

Harry stifled a shiver. He knew Owen was at least a year older than he was, and possibly closer to two. It was slightly creepy to see him so submissive. But then, he was a pureblood in this moment more than he was an adolescent.

And he had asked Harry a question.

Harry let out a sharp breath and said, “You may fulfill the life debt as you will. I will not call on it or constrain you in any way.”

Owen nodded, and drew back the sleeve on his left forearm. Michael was mimicking him. He turned to place his forearm over his brother’s, so that when Owen slashed with the knife, he cut both of them at once.

“Then we pledge our loyalty to you,” said Owen, voice proud and unflinching despite the blood that flowed from his arm, “as the Broken Guard did, as the Order of the Serpent did, as the Ladies of Walpurgis did. As guards, as courtiers, as couriers, as running hounds, as whatever you need us to be, then we are yours, for the saving of our lives and our sanity.”

He had cut a pattern that Harry couldn’t entirely make out under the blood, but which looked like a lightning bolt.

Harry caught his panic and threw it back in a cage. He reminded himself that Voldemort had marked his Death Eaters on the left forearm because of a long tradition of Lords marking their companions that way, and the custom hadn’t been unique to him.

And those ancient Lords and Ladies worth anything had treated their companions as companions—not the mindless minions Voldemort expected his Death Eaters to be, nor the mindless fanatics the Order of the Phoenix had turned into.

Owen and Michael chose to do this. Draco’s long-ago words about not turning away or denying the free will of those who chose to follow him—and serve him, disgusting as the word was—echoed in Harry’s mind.

He lifted his eyes and fastened them on Owen’s face, which was silent and waiting and a bit apprehensive, despite everything. He would know that Harry might at least consider flinging the gift back in their faces.

Harry said quietly, “The pledge is accepted, and to you I return guarantees of protection, loyalty, and constancy. While I live, you shall never lack for a guardian, a champion, or a friend.”

They weren’t any old and ancient oath, because most of those promised more than Harry was willing to deliver; most of those were only used by Lords. They were words that Harry had decided on, and they eased the tightness in both Owen’s and Michael’s faces. Both swept bows as one.

“An honor to be beside you, Harry,” said Owen, and looked down with a faint smile. “And the oath is true.” Harry followed his gaze and saw that the wounds had already healed. The scars did look like lightning bolts. To his immense relief, they were only white, not any ridiculous combination of colors.

Owen and Michael, along with Charles, returned to their seats, and Draco stood. “I think the dancing can begin, now that the ritual of gifts has ended so satisfactorily,” he murmured. “Amoveo mensas!”

And the tables vanished easily, the magic worked into the room responding to Draco as Malfoy magical heir, and it was time for the dancing, and now Harry had the chance to be incredibly terrified.
wearing robes like these,” he whispered. “I’ll trip over the hem.”

“No, you won’t,” Draco said, encouragingly, and began the first steps of the dance. They’d practiced this, but only in school robes. Harry began to grudgingly move in the constraints of the formal robes he was so worried about. He’d smoothed his scowl into composure by the time other people could start to take notice, to Draco’s relief.

“I’m not comfortable here,” Harry murmured, hardly moving his lips. “I’m not used to this, and I don’t think I should have let Owen and Michael swear loyalty to me, and half the room still thinks my blood status is good enough reason to despise me.”

“Half the room?” Draco released Harry’s hand long enough to do a turn on his own, then caught it again. They’d had to choose the dance carefully, so as not to require Harry to make moves that were impossible with his lack of a left hand. “Not nearly that many of them, Harry. It’s true that some of them might think you’re a dragon on a leash right now, but they felt the purity of your power. They’ll change their minds soon enough. Like you said, anyone who underestimates you deserves what it will cost him.”

Harry just stared back at him, eyes, if not face, expressing his discomfort. Draco frowned. I honestly didn’t think this would bother him so much. Why would it? He usually handles gift-giving ceremonies with ease. He handled all the talking at the alliance meeting even more easily. And he went to the Yule Ball and danced with Luna just because she asked, not to prove a point. Why are those same things hard on him now?

As he relaxed into the rhythm of the dance, Draco could let his eyes and mind rove, and study the way people watched Harry. He saw a great many tight-lipped glances and slight headshakes. There were also plenty of spectators who were taking advantage of the music to speak their true feelings, as Draco and Harry had, and it seemed as if there was violent disagreement in many couples. And Draco also noted how many eyes went to Harry, instead of him, though traditionally this was a festival to show off the magical heir of the family, and not his joined partner.

He looked back at Harry, and saw that he moved with his shoulders hunched and his head only half-lifted, as if he expected someone to call out every moment that he had performed a step wrong. He was obviously not returning the gazes by a great effort, rather than being naturally and effortlessly focused on his partner. He didn’t make mistakes in the dancing, but it was mechanical.

Draco blinked as the truth hit him. He really does feel out of place here. It’s as simple as that, and as complex. There’s nothing anyone can do to dislodge me from pureblood society. I’ll always have my heritage, and the Malfoy name has gone through crises before, but it’s always commanded respect.

Harry doesn’t have that guarantee. The Potters command no respect here. And the taint of his mother is everywhere on him. The people watching him take any defensiveness as a sign that he knows he’s not supposed to be here, and any ease as a sign that he’s boorish and doesn’t appreciate the finer subtleties of pureblood culture. He can’t win no matter what he does. His halfblood status always will matter to them, even if his magical power comes to matter more.

Draco was glad that the music allowed he and Harry to dance far apart from each other then, even with their backs to each other for a brief moment, because he wanted to hide his face as the realization struck him.

That’s why Harry hates those pureblood prejudices. They affect him, too. He knows everyone here thinks of him as the child of a Mudblood, though he knows dozens of pureblood rituals most of them wouldn’t even recognize, though he could be their Lord tomorrow if he wanted to Declare, though he’s dedicated to the survival and protection of the wizarding world in a way that most of them will never find the courage for.

I can’t hate them for the sake of some Mudbloods I’ll never know, for the sake of some grand ideal in the abstract. I’m not that compassionate. But I can hate them because they make Harry uncomfortable.

The dance finished, and the guests politely applauded. Draco caught Harry’s hand and turned, bowing to the multitude. Harry bowed along with him, face perfectly blank. Draco had thought before how well he controlled his emotions, always something Dark purebloods had valued. Now all he could do was compare that mask to the one Harry had worn in his first and second years at Hogwarts, when he had locked his emotions in a box.

He hated it now.

He turned and faced the room again, and he knew his stance had shifted; if nothing else, now he had one hand on Harry’s shoulder, where he hadn’t touched him before except for some requirement of the dance. Harry looked at him in mild confusion. Draco looked back at him, and tried to convey his defiance through his facial expression. Harry only blinked, so Draco leaned close enough to whisper into his ear.

“How dare they make you uncomfortable,” he hissed.
Harry frowned. “You don’t think it’s my fault for being uncomfortable with the customs here?” he asked, once again barely moving his lips.

“They’re being idiots,” Draco said. “They claim to value magic more than anything, and they’ve just seen two children of a pureblood family become your companions, and they know that my parents approve of you. That should be enough for them, given all their supposedly accepted standards. And it’s not. They’re being hypocritical, and I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to struggle uphill through vast wastes of idiocy just to propitiate people who claim to value what we already have.”

“What do you want to do, then?” Harry asked, looking befuddled, his eyes moving to several other faces in the room. Draco smiled slightly. He knew he’d been whispering into Harry’s ear for several moments, and that definitely went against the constraints of propriety at an event like this, which called for less intimacy between a couple still courting.

“Something that will show them Malfoys are, and always have been, above propitiating idiocy, even when it’s traditional,” Draco replied, and grasped Harry’s chin to turn his face towards him.

Harry raised an eyebrow and tried to lean in, but Draco held him still. To mean what he wanted it to mean, this gesture had to come from him, or the skeptical guests would see it as just another uncivilized rudeness from That Halfblood.

He kissed Harry gently, thoroughly, with attention to detail, even more deeply than Harry had kissed him at the alliance meeting, and until he could hear several distinctly uncivilized gasps. Then he raised his head and turned to smile lazily at their guests.

“I am the Malfoy magical heir,” he said. “Starlight and power run in my blood, and so does protective instinct. You might want to know that I do love Harry, that I intend to join with him, and that staring at him as if Voldemort had just appeared in your midst does nothing but make me angry.”

Most of them turned away in confusion, or outright grinned—that was from the ones who knew him and Harry, including Hawthorn Parkinson and the Bulstrodes. Draco grinned back. The nice thing about suddenly breaking with custom, he thought happily, is that no one knows what to do with you when you do.

His father could certainly seize the moment, though, and he did, appearing from between the dancers to place his hand on Draco’s shoulder. Draco tilted his head back to look at his father, and saw a faint, cold smile on Lucius’s face.

“Truly,” Lucius murmured, “an occasion such as this should be a joyous one, and a polite one. I am sorry that it could be neither for those who chose to stare. Our own—lack of discrimination in sending out invitations must be to blame.”

Draco felt a sharp joy rising in his heart. His father wasn’t furious with him for breaking from tradition; he was furious at the guests who refused to recognize what was right in front of them. And he was making sure and certain everyone understood that his family was allied with Harry, and planned to stay that way.

“The ceremony is officially over with the dancing, and Draco’s second invocation,” Lucius said then. “House elves will assist you to the Floo and outside the Manor’s wards once you leave the hall, if you plan to Apparate.”

Draco choked back laughter as he watched the undignified scramble that ensued. Not everyone left that way, of course; the people who had given gifts to him and Harry, and several others who could recognize reality when it was staring them in the face, bowed their heads, their eyes bright with amusement, and stayed to offer their thanks to Lucius and their congratulations to Draco and Harry. Owen and Michael Rosier-Henlin approached for a rather different reason.

“Where would you like us to stay?” Michael—Draco thought it was Michael, the one who hadn’t spoken so far—asked Harry.

Harry looked at them and sighed. Then he said, “I’ll be leaving Hogwarts near the end of June, most likely. Do you want to accompany me there, or not? I’m afraid it will be rather boring.”

“It would be relaxing,” said the other, Owen, dropping his voice. “We’re quite recovered from Durmstrang, thanks, but our parents aren’t ready to believe it yet.”

Harry wore a brief wistful expression before he nodded. “Then come with us. I’m sure they’ll be able to find room for you. Most of Hogwarts goes unused right now.”

Owen smiled briefly, and he and Michael melted away to wait. Harry turned to greet some of the others who had lingered. In passing, his eyes met and held Draco’s for a moment.

Draco held in a gasp it would not have been dignified to utter. In Harry’s gaze was utter gratitude, and relief, and a love so profound that Draco felt a bit humbled by it.
For a moment.
Then he lifted his head. *Well, I am a Malfoy, and this is my confirmation festival. And that was a rather nicer gift than any other I got.*
Pleased with the way the evening had turned out after all, he turned to talk with Adalrico Bulstrode, and exchange politely barbed insults with Arabella Zabini.

Chapter Eighty-Six: Strategizing

Harry frowned at the letter in his hand. It was short, and really should not have caused as much shock and confusion as it did. It was a simple request, and he could say no, and the person who had made the request would be bound to obey.

*It’s my own sense of obligation to her that’s making it hard to say no,* he thought, and read the letter again.

June 4th, 1996

Dear Harry:

Since you told me about the battle you intend to hold on Midsummer Day, I have thought I would like to join you in it. Tell me if I can. I have conducted intensive studies of Transfiguration in the past few months, and you have reason to remember my skill with rune circles.

Sincerely,

Henrietta Bulstrode.

The problem, Harry thought as he lay back against his pillow, was that Edith Bulstrode was intending to stay at the school for the summer—she had no wish to stay with her father—and Harry had promised that Edith would not have to see Henrietta again. Henrietta would undoubtedly make a valuable addition to the battle, but Harry couldn’t justify asking Edith to leave the school for that, even if it would only be for a few days. She had nowhere else to go, nowhere else she would feel safe. She barely trusted the strength of Hogwarts’s wards to keep her hidden from her mother.

In the end, he wrote a refusal. He would post it with Hedwig tonight, and hope that Henrietta accepted it for what it was: an appreciation of her battle prowess, but a determination to abide by his promises, even when those promises had consequences he didn’t especially like.

“Have you finished making my gift yet?”

Harry looked up, startled. Draco stood in the doorway of their bedroom, grinning at him with brilliant eyes.

“Not yet,” said Harry, and stood. “I have this letter to post, and anyway, it’s not your birthday until tomorrow, or don’t you remember?”

“I remember, of course,” said Draco with a sniff, fiddling with the ring on his finger that contained Hawthorn’s solidified magic. He had developed the habit to insure that everyone noticed it in the past few days, and once he explained what it was, he had received more than one envious and awed glance. Harry wondered if Draco realized that Harry himself wasn’t going to express awe past the initial acceptance of the gift. “But I thought you might want to give me a hint. Or a choice, the way that you did last year.” He slightly dipped his head, and regarded Harry from under his lowered eyelashes.

Harry choked as he remembered the bond Draco had asked for last year, connecting them mind to mind and making it impossible for him to hide any secrets or emotions. “You want that again?”

“I didn’t say that I wanted that,” said Draco. “Just that I might like to choose. Unless, of course, you want to tell me what gift you intend to get me now, and I can decide if I’d rather have that one.”

“All of this is just a ploy to get me to tell you what your gift is early,” said Harry with some determination, and picked up his letter. “I have to go to the Owlery. You are welcome to come with me and continue trying to worm the surprise out of me if you really want to.”

“It’s not just a ploy,” Draco complained as he trotted beside him. “Why should it be? Of course I’d want to know what the better gift was, one I imagined or one that you made. Why are you irritated with me, Harry?”

“I’m not irritated,” Harry corrected him, as they went through the entrance hall and made their way up the first staircase. “I’m exasperated. There’s a difference.”

Draco tried a few other “subtle” ways of asking for his gift early, causing Harry to shoot him continual disgusted glances.
They met Michael and Owen when they were on the fifth floor and near the quarters McGonagall had assigned them, though, so that distracted Draco thoroughly. He’d already told Harry that he didn’t like the way Owen watched him, trying to absorb indications of his intent from his face and actions.

Harry concealed his chuckle, and wondered if Draco had noticed the way Michael watched him yet. Harry couldn’t imagine it turning serious; Michael, as the son of a Dark pureblood family, would know what this courting ritual meant, and that he stood no chance of breaking apart a couple joined by it. But he was perfectly welcome to admire Draco from a distance.

*I think the world would be improved if more people did that,* Harry thought, while he answered Owen’s questions about where he would be during the battle.

“I’ll need to be fighting Voldemort,” said Harry. “Apart from the fact that only my magic can counter his, there’s a prophecy that concerns the both of us, and he’ll be aiming for me.”

Michael nodded. “Do you want us to protect your friends and partner, then?” he asked, gaze sliding to Draco. Harry hid a smirk, both at the question and at Draco’s indignation that anyone would consider him in need of protection.

“I would appreciate your help in doing so,” Harry admitted. “Distant guardianship, at their shoulders, because Draco, Snape, and my brother all need to be free to move around during the battle. There may be a slight chance that they’re in less danger than normal; the prophecy speaks of my taking a ‘division of the heart’ that will enable me to defeat Voldemort, and I think that he may interpret that as the death of someone close. So he may avoid trying to hurt them, in case he gives me that division. But I can’t be entirely sure he’ll interpret the prophecy that way, and every bit of protection helps.”

“Harry!” Draco all but squawked. “Shouldn’t you be asking *your* guards to stand at *your* back?”

Harry gave him a bright smile. “But, Draco, you’re *important* to me,” he chirped. “And I can protect myself better with my magic than you can with your own powers.”

Draco gave him a glare. Michael took the opportunity to study his profile. Harry swallowed another chuckle, and looked back at Owen.

“There’s one thing we’ll have to settle after the battle, though,” he said. “If Midsummer does defang Voldemort, the way I hope it will, and make him less of a problem for months or even years, then we have to give you a more regular role in my life than just bodyguards. Where I intend to spend the rest of my summer—well, I think I may take Draco and Professor Snape with me, but probably no one else. So think about that, please.”

“We will,” said Owen, snapping his fingers under his twin’s nose to get his attention. “Thank you for giving us a place in the battle, Harry.”

Harry nodded, trying to convince himself that Owen’s tone held only the usual gratitude, and nothing worshipful or slavish, which would have been unbearable. “You’re welcome.”

Owen and Michael turned back to their own room then, and Harry and Draco made their way to the Owlery. Draco at least went on complaining about the bodyguards instead of getting his birthday gift, which Harry found a relieving change of subject.

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Indigena spat dust out of her mouth, and then paused to shake dirt out of her hair. A moment later, she wondered why she’d bothered. More dirt fell into it from the roof of the tunnel.

*I hate being this far underground,* she thought, even as she stroked the vine that had dug the tunnel through the dirt and let her get this far. A second vine had extended beside it and widened the passage enough for Indigena to crawl through, but had retreated so she could fit in. And now they were about to head into unknown territory, the concrete and heavy stone there was no choice but to bore straight through.

This was heavy business, and dirtier than she had imagined, breaking into Tullianum from beneath to rescue the Death Eaters imprisoned there. It meant she didn’t have to attend the Death Eater meeting tonight, though, as the others tugged in their new recruits and initiated them. Indigena had had enough of killing and torture from hearing her Lord talk of it.

She took a deep breath and touched the vine again. It rustled obediently. Indigena felt a smile of pleasure and love light her face, and didn’t conceal it. Why should she? They were alone here, and ahead of them was a task that only they could do.

She leaned against the vine and closed her eyes. “Ready, my love?” she murmured. “For the final push?”

The tendrils, dark green veined with black, that she’d dreamed of and bred and created curled around her in answer. Indigena wrapped herself close, the plants beneath her skin flexing towards the outside. They would give her the ability to
ride with her vine upwards and not be smashed. Indigena’s body hadn’t been fully human for years. She’d never regretted implanting the vines, leaves, and flowers that she had; they bounced most spells, disguised her when she needed to be disguised, and shielded her in moments like this. It only saddened her that most other people looked askance at her for it.

“Now,” she whispered.

The vine struck upwards. Indigena felt the grinding shock when it hit stone. She closed her eyes and hung on, riding every wave as it again and again. Tendrils writhed over her head, seeking out tiny cracks in the solid material, probing always towards the presence of greater warmth and light overhead. Tullianum was their sun, and they were the long-buried seeds rising to meet it.

*How great a force this is,* Indigena thought, as the stones above her ground and shifted apart. *The force of green and growing things,* which drives a flower through inches of soil when the spring comes, which sends sap pumping up through trees like a heartbeat, which makes the first seeds return in months to an area blasted by fire or magic. *And everyone else underestimates it.*

The vine was tiring. It reached out to her, and Indigena bled her magic into it, pumping it full of the power that meant more to a creation like this than sap or blood. It surged again, and she held it, warmth and sleek life shifting beneath her, primal as muscle.

*Ram. Ram. Ram.*

She didn’t know how long it took. She didn’t know how much blood she shed as broken chunks of stone and concrete rasped against her skin. All she knew was the single, driven purpose, the will, that she was giving both herself and the plant. She was a strong witch. She chose to do something, and it got done. On and on they rose.

Indigena wasn’t surprised to feel blasts from wands striking at the creeping tendrils that had already made it through Tullianum’s floor. The Aurors would be trying to destroy her beauty before it could get far. But they were utterly inexperienced with magic like this. They didn’t understand the insane determination that powered it, either the vine’s or her own.

Indigena reached deeper into her own magic, and it answered her, reaching and grasping and whipping. Indigena knew Aurors were flying as the tendrils grabbed them, though she could not hear the sounds of their bodies smashing from down here, and only faintly feel the trickle of blood across leaves. Down here, it was peaceful.

The tendrils crawled on, racing and sniffing over the stone, seeking out those cells where people with the Dark Mark resided. Indigena felt herself smiling as the flowers she’d made for just this purpose turned back and forth, flagging out the smell of her Lord. The Mark on her own arm pulsed in recognition, and the vine lashed forward, driving through the doors, or grasping them and wrenching them off their hinges.

They flooded free, Death Eaters captured last year and Death Eaters captured this year, and Indigena sent up the massive arms of the plant, calling up three times her old strength so that they could tear open holes in the floor, and then withdrawing them. Most of the Dark Lord’s servants didn’t hesitate, dropping into the holes and sliding rapidly downwards. All the holes would lead to the massive tunnel Indigena and the vine had come through, in the end, and that would lead them to a spot on the outskirts of London where they would be able to Apparate to the Dark Lord’s side. Since he would be calling, most of them should be able to reach him even without their wands.

And as for their wands…well, the Dark Lord had sent Karkaroff to kidnap a certain wand maker, who would create new weapons for his loyal servants.

Indigena waited until she was sure that no one with a Dark Mark was left in Tullianum prison. The Aurors had retreated and gone for help, or were dead. She pulled back the arms of the vine, reluctantly, and slid down the tunnel and into the dirt one where the Death Eaters waited.

A heavyset man, who fit her Lord’s description of Walden Macnair, looked at her with a faint smile. “And you’re a Yaxley of Thornhall,” he said.

It was hard to remember human speech for a moment, but Indigena nodded. “Come to rescue you,” she said, pulling up her left robe sleeve to reveal the Dark Mark. “We join our Lord for an assault on Hogwarts at Midsummer.”

Macnair laughed, and his eyes shone. “*That* is what I like to hear,” he said, and helped her lead the others back down the tunnel.

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Harry winced at the sight of the *Daily Prophet* headline the next day.
DEATH EATERS BREAK OUT OF TULLIANUM: TEN AURORS KILLED

He read the story, but the headline had encapsulated it, really. Immense vines of a kind that no one had seen before had dug up into the prison and dragged open the cells of those who carried Dark Marks. They had also killed every Auror that fired curses at them, until the remaining ones had run. Scrimgeour was quoted saying that he considered this a terrible tragedy and would reinforce the prison with new spells against any attack from beneath.

Harry suffered a momentary pang of guilt. Should I have anticipated that Indigena Yaxley would do that?

Maybe he should have, though he hadn’t known she could create vines that would dig through stone. The ground around Hogwarts was dirt, and it was no real surprise that she’d been able to bore through that. But this…

Lucius told me she was dangerous, Harry thought, eating his eggs without putting down the newspaper, which hovered in front of him thanks to a Levitation Charm. I had no idea how right he was.

“Harry? Can I have my gift now? You haven’t even wished me Happy Birthday yet!”

Harry looked up with a faint groan. Draco was sitting down on the other side of him, and he obviously hadn’t seen the Daily Prophet headline. He looked under his plates as if searching for his gift there, then fixed Harry with an expectant gaze.

Harry grimaced and shook out the paper so that he could see it. Draco lost his smile.

“Voldemort did that?” he breathed.

Harry nodded. “With the help of Indigena Yaxley. They certainly didn’t plan their escape themselves.” If they had, he thought, as he turned to his breakfast while Draco read, then I would be contacting Scrimgeour in hysteria over my parents potentially breaking free.

“I—I can’t believe this happened,” Draco whispered. “You’d think the Ministry would have had wards under Tullianum.”

“Under Tullianum?” Harry snorted. “Why should they have? It’s underground—far underground, with solid stone beneath it. A prisoner could only do something about it if they had their wand or could do wandless magic, and the wards should have taken care of both those problems. They weren’t going to waste magic on what seemed secure. There would have been an outcry against them for that, just as there will be for this.” He lapsed into brooding, wondering what Scrimgeour was doing at the moment, and convinced that he needed to send letters to his allies now, with the exception of Henrietta, asking them to come to the school and aid him in the Midsummer battle.

“Well, they’ll have wards there now,” Draco muttered, as he finished reading the article. He folded it neatly and tucked it away, then turned back to Harry. “And none of that excuses you from wishing me a happy birthday, or giving me a gift as soon as possible.”

Harry smiled faintly, and tried to pull his mind back to matters that he thought of as minor in comparison with how Voldemort might use the escaped Death Eaters. “It’s in our bedroom, Draco,” he said. “Do you want to go back and get it now, or wait until lunch?”

Draco bit his lip. “Why couldn’t you have brought it to breakfast with you?” He was spooning food onto his plate, though, obviously unwilling to go without breakfast so that he could see his gift. “Or why can’t you Summon it now?”

“Because it was too big for me to carry in my arms.”

Draco flushed with excitement, and all but bounced in place on his seat. “That should be brilliant, then,” he said. “I’ll come back with you to the bedroom at lunch.” He gave Harry a stern look. “And it should be worth waiting for.”

Harry gave a weak smile. He did hope Draco would like his gift, but he wasn’t entirely sure he would. Well, that worry had just faded and shriveled in the wake of his worry about Tullianum.

“You realize what this could mean, Rufus.” Amelia’s voice was quiet, but inflexible. She probably kept it that low just so he wouldn’t hear the gloating in it, Rufus thought sourly. She had lost to him on the issue of giving werewolves Portkeys to Tullianum, but she was going to win this struggle.

She sat in front of the desk in his office, and so did several other Elders of the Wizengamot, hastily summoned just after Rufus received a firecall informing him of the prisoners’ escape. The rest of them looked as victorious as Amelia. They were starting to feel his strength for the first time, Rufus thought, and few Wizengamot Elders liked being bridled by the Minister. Cornelius’s weakness had spoiled them further, and made them think it the natural state of affairs, that the Wizengamot should direct the future course of the Ministry.
“I do, Amelia,” said Rufus, leaning back and letting his eyes survey all of them at once. He could hear Percy Weasley’s nervous shuffling behind him, and spared a thought to wish the boy would calm down. “It means that we can no longer count on Tullianum as secure. And the Death Eaters are going to swell You-Know-Who’s forces when they go back to him.”

Amelia laughed quietly. “It’s more than that, Rufus,” she said.

*There’s a danger here that I didn’t foresee, then.* Rufus believed he had kept a reasonable handle on the formation of coalitions in the Wizengamot to oppose him, and had just as subtly undermined them. This one, though, he hadn’t noticed. None of the Elders in the room was as close to Amelia as Emily Gillyflower had been. That bothered Rufus. *What’s their common bond? What cause do they share?*

“In what way?” he asked, playing dumb. “Have you received more news on You-Know-Who’s activities that I’m unaware of?”

One of the other Elders, a pompous idiot named Nasturtian whom Rufus had never liked, snorted. “You’re perfectly aware of these activities, aren’t you, Rufus?” he asked. “Seeing as how that young halfblood’s published an article recently supporting werewolves’ rights, and you did the same thing?”

“It was hardly an article,” said Rufus. “It was an interview in the *Prophet*, and I believe I alleged that werewolves were dangerous creatures, as well.” Inwardly, he cursed. He’d made it look as if Harry controlled him, or at least as if someone could make a good case that he did.

“You alleged,” said Amelia. “But I don’t think that you really mean it, Rufus. And now this escape from Tullianum. One might think that you could be a bit more prepared.”

Rufus ground his teeth as he watched her eyes. He and Amelia had been friends and colleagues for years, and then Emily had been bitten. Now Amelia was acting out of fear and guilt and rage at the way she felt compelled to abandon her friend. Rufus understood why she was pressing him so hard, using any excuse to worm her way back to the werewolf issue, but he hated it nonetheless.

“More prepared?” he asked, with a faint frown that concealed the speed of his thoughts.

“Yes, prepared.” Amelia leaned forward. “And so, of course, Rufus, we have to ask each other if we really want an unprepared Minister in a time of war. Of course we can’t have one who can’t meet the challenges. Poor Cornelius wouldn’t have stood the test. We had to vote him out. And, well, of course it’s too early yet to say if you really don’t have what it takes, but we would hate to find out that you don’t. Some more preparation would not go awry.” Her face was all anxious helpfulness.

Rufus heard the threat behind her words. *We enacted a vote of no confidence on Fudge. We can do the same to you, if you get too troublesome.*

And he had been, he realized now, with a blast of self-blame. He had not realized how deep and entrenched the hatred of werewolves was, how panicked the Wizengamot was in the wake of that bite, and how little it would take to tip the balance against him. With this escape, the rest of the Elders might accept the spin that Amelia was hinting she could put on it—that the escape was the fault of an incompetent Minister who let a fifteen-year-old boy tell him what to do. Being seen as in the pocket of Harry would help him no more than it had helped Fudge to be seen as in the pocket of Augustus Starrise. They would vote him down in a panic, and accept the next and strongest candidate who appeared—almost certainly Amelia herself.

If he stepped wrong now, he stood the chance of losing everything.

Rufus had played the game of politics for most of the last sixteen years. This was his own fault for forgetting some of its fundamental lessons. Harry was able to forget them, but, well, Harry had Lord-level power, a diverse gathering of allies, and a responsibility to fewer people than Rufus did, ultimately. Rufus had his mind, and that was close to it, particularly with the deaths last night. Ten fine Aurors had fallen, and that included comrades who would have done their best to support him against unfair pressure from various portions of the Ministry.

*Time to retreat and regroup.*

“I am no one’s pawn,” he said now, his voice mild. “I had not realized that the perception had occurred. Of course a Minister must be strong in a time of war, Amelia, and Cornelius would never have done.” He met her eyes and held them. “I intend to do.”

She got the message. They’d danced with each other too long for her to ignore it. She smiled and nodded. “Good, Rufus.
Really, that’s all we wanted to know.” She stood and extended her hand across the desk to him. “I need to go back to the Department and see to my people. We’ve lost so many…” And she let him catch a glimpse of her genuine grief, as a kind of reward.

Rufus shook back, accepting the grief with a slight nod. He would withdraw some of his vocal support for werewolves, modify his stance, in return for Amelia and her coalition not spinning this escape from Tullianum the way they could have. He disliked the practice, but there was much to dislike in politics, and if he had had the rarified sensibilities of a Gryffindor, he would have got out of the game a long time ago.

He waited until Amelia and the other Elders were out the door, and then turned to Percy. “I want you to write to Harry,” he said. “They’ll be watching my post for the next few days, so it can’t come directly from me.”

“What should it say?” Percy whispered. His face was pinched, outraged, and very nearly white. Rufus knew he had followed the contortions of the confrontation well enough to understand what they were up against.

“The details of what happened here,” said Rufus. “The motivations.” He smiled thinly. Harry would probably still be angry with him for backing off his public support for the werewolves, but, well, Rufus had moved too quickly on that. Time to back off, circle, and attack from another direction.

And he would do it by speaking to someone few if any of his opponents would expect to be helpful.

He rose to his feet. “If anyone needs me,” he told Percy, “I’ll be in Tullianum for the next little while, inspecting the damage. And after that will have to come a press conference with the Daily Prophet, I suppose, which can translate into an article illustrated with brave photographs of me inspecting the damage.”

He swept off, wondering if anyone would realize the other reason he wanted to visit the prison. Former Death Eaters and deranged Light Lords were hardly the only prisoners held there. There was also a certain werewolf, who had given out gnomic utterances so far. Rufus would see what he would say when faced with the Minister himself.

Harry had a sheaf of letters clutched in his hand when he met Draco at the door to the Slytherin common room after their morning consultations on future classes with their Head of House. His face was pale, taut, and determined, and Draco wished irritably that Voldemort hadn’t chosen last night to break his Death Eaters free. Then Harry would be able to concentrate solely on his birthday, and not on politics.

“What is it?” he demanded, when they arrived in the bedroom, he looked around, and he still saw nothing large, valuable, and obviously for him.

Harry blinked for a moment, as though he’d forgotten what they came for, and then smiled thinly. “Oh, yes,” he muttered, and laid the letters on his bed while he reached under it. Draco heard him mutter, “Finite Incantatem!” and then he was pulling at folds of cloth, which rolled under his hand as he dragged them out.

Draco gaped. He had no idea how Harry had managed to get something so large under his bed without Draco noticing. Then he thought, He’s a Lord-level wizard, you fool, and shook his head, paying attention to the gift as Harry unrolled it before him.

“Happy birthday, Draco,” he murmured.

Draco blinked. It was a tapestry, a dark blue one. It was also a very good likeness of himself, standing with a cloak in the Malfoy colors hanging from his shoulders and his hands resting easily on his left hip and his wand, in the middle of a circle of moon signs, quartered at his hands, feet, and head with symbols. The one at his right hand was a stalking lion, the one at his feet a skull, the one at his left hand a barren tree, and the last, above his head, three stars surrounding a dark space in the center. Draco saw the stars were brighter than the rest, glowing as if on fire.

“What does it represent?” he asked, almost ashamed to admit he didn’t know. His eyes went back to the eyes of his woven image. They were mesmerizing, and as if he had modeled for the weaving himself.

“Our courting ritual,” said Harry. He nodded at the lion. “That’s for my birthday, or the first of August—the constellation Leo. The skull’s for Halloween, obviously. The barren tree represents Imbolc, which comes in February. And the stars are __“

“Walpurgis,” Draco finished, reaching down to trace the symbol above his head. The threads shimmered with living heat against his skin. He shook his head in wonder. “And each of the symbols will brighten as we complete the courting ritual for that particular date?”
“Exactly,” said Harry. He gave a small smile at Draco’s stare. “I did pay attention to what you told me about the ritual, Draco, even if I didn’t read as much on it as you did. And I contacted a weaver in London that same week, giving her a detailed description of you. This has been a long time in the weaving, but I wanted to show you that I take this seriously.”

Draco slowly shook his head. “I had no idea, Harry—“

“Well, it wouldn’t have been much of a surprise if you had an idea, now would it?” Harry softened his words by letting the tapestry slip out of his arms to the floor, and stepping over it to kiss Draco solidly. “Happy birthday. I am sorry that I’ve been distracted, but this makes the Midsummer battle all the more worrying. It means we’ll probably get all the Death Eaters in one place, which I’m pleased about, but—” Harry shrugged.

Draco put his arms around Harry and leaned his head on his shoulder for a moment, still watching his woven image. He decided that he might as well give Harry his own gift. “Do you know,” he muttered to Harry, “I managed to possess Snape last night.”

Harry jerked back in startlement and stared at him. “You did? I—that’s wonderful, Draco. But are you sure that he wasn’t just letting you do it to tease you about it later?”

Draco snickered. “No. I made him give a horribly-written Hufflepuff exam a good mark. Then I lingered in the back of his mind to see if he remembered and corrected it. He never did. And this morning, I heard a Hufflepuff squealing about her high mark in Potions.”

Harry looked torn between laughter and worry. “That comes close to a violation of his free will, Draco,” he murmured. Draco conceded a sigh. It’s a good thing he has people around him who worry less about ethics than he does.

“I think it’s a pretty small violation in the scheme of things, Harry,” he said. “And it proves that I can possess a Legilimens. That part of the Midsummer battle will work.”

“I hope so,” said Harry, and his face grew pale again as he looked at the letters on the bed. “I should send these.”

Draco stepped back, and let Harry go to the Owlery. Then he sat back and looked at the tapestry of himself for a time. He noticed that the second full moon sign past Walpurgis, the one that probably stood for June, glimmered just a little brighter than the rest of them. The tapestry marked the passage of ordinary time, too.

One thing about his depiction stayed with him as he gazed.

_Harry made me more beautiful than I actually am._

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_Snape stepped back, and then prowled slowly around his cauldron. The potion within glimmered silver. It smelled like fresh, raw meat and blood. It would attract many werewolves, especially those running mad in their beast forms without a sane idea in their heads._

_and it would poison them the next time their bodies changed from human to wolf. The lengthening of the bones would call out a venom like acid, deeply painful, feasting on their marrow. The alteration of their flesh and muscle would inspire the composition of their blood to change as well, until it burned them. And the last stages of the transformation would trigger the emotional poison, drowning their minds in despair and inspiring them to bite themselves until they died. Because a werewolf was made to withstand enormous amounts of magical damage, the poison would take a long time to work._

_If he ever used it._

_He had promised Harry that he would not._

_Snape stopped and stared down into the potion, well-aware that it cast a faint silver light that glimmered on his face and perhaps made him look slightly mad._

_He had created this poison solely to work out his hatred and his fear. He would feel safer to have this on hand, even though he would never use it._

_No. Never._

_Of course, there was one problem: the hatred and fear hadn’t gone away. In fact, they coiled in the back of his mind, poisoning him, making him wake from sudden dreams of gleaming teeth and loping bodies and hot breath, and causing him to start at a casual mention of the full moon._
But he would never use it, because he had promised Harry.

He filled vials with the potion before it could cool into uselessness, set Warming Charms on them, and took them over to a cabinet on the far wall. He pushed them to the back of the highest shelf, then closed the cabinet and put the strongest locking spells on it that he knew.

He wasn’t going to touch them. He wasn’t going to use them.

They were just going to be there.

**Interlude: The Serpent Bites**

*June 6th, 1996*

**Dear Lord Voldemort:**

I write this in haste, and yet out of a desire to be as complete as possible. I also shed some of the conventions that have guarded our speech before this. I ask that you forgive me. Since I will use the incantation to send this directly to you, I think there is little chance of any of our enemies seeing it.

Potter has just sent me a letter in which he asks for my help at Midsummer. It is addressed *Dear my ally* rather than with my name. I fear that means he has sent his other allies letters, asking for their help, and has merely scribed the same words several dozen times. He may have excluded those he does not trust completely, but the fact that he is writing me suggests his scope of trust has widened. It is possible that many powerful wizards and witches could face you at Hogwarts on Midsummer.

I am unsure how much you know about this already, my Lord, so forgive me if I repeat information you already hold. Potter’s letter stresses that he expects the battle on Midsummer to be difficult and long, and he expressly calls it a battle, rather than merely a skirmish, or a confrontation or duel between the two of you. He assures us that he has plans in place, which he will explain when we meet him in person. We will be meeting inside Hogwarts, and he has confidence in the strength of its wards. He ends his letter with the words, “With your help, I plan to defang Voldemort.” I will send a copy of the letter along with this message, in case you wish to see it yourself.

Burke was a fool, a convenient prop to take my fall. When I found copies of his ‘Serpent’ letter, I adopted his pseudonym and wrote to you as him, though I knew you would notice the difference in handwriting when you broke the concealment charms. I was not, then, ready to declare my allegiance. Now I am. What Potter plans is mad. He cannot face the most powerful Dark wizard in the world in open battle and survive, however many allies stand with him. And especially since the escape of your loyal servants from Tullianum, my Lord, I know that you protect those who serve you, and draw them back to you.

I ask you now only what you think I should do. Should I come to you and take the Mark? Or should I answer Potter’s letter and remain in his counsels as a spy to give you what information I can? It will be too dangerous to send letters from the castle, if you prefer the latter course, but I may use the spell that bends winds inside out to carry Potter’s plans to you. Only tell me, my Lord, and you will have my obedience and my faith.

*The Serpent.*

---

*June 6th, 1996*

**My Dearest Serpent:**

Ah, I do so prefer it when you write with your left hand! You are right, Burke was a fool. And he did not even realize that the information he passed was of little use, or that he would inevitably be found out while carrying the Mark. You have proven more useful in both your letters.

For now, our Lord—and all honor to his name—wishes you to answer Harry’s letter, and go to Hogwarts. It is best that you go as soon as possible. Harry will not confine his plans to one day or one hour or one meeting. The Dark Lord wishes to begin hearing them immediately.

If you are close enough to cause trouble and inconvenience to Harry and his allies, then do so. No killing—not yet. It would reveal you in such a close environment as Hogwarts is, and our Lord has particular reason for not wanting Harry’s adoptive father, brother, or partner touched. Remain in the background, and stay ready to bite, like the serpent coiled at the breast that you are.

I think we shall be seeing each other very soon.
Chapter Eighty-Seven: End of Innocence

Minerva sat back in her seat and watched her students with a faint smile. Another year ended, and despite the battle with Voldemort lurking ahead—a battle in which she would get to participate, this time—the most important thing to her was that her students had survived to the end, and found some joy along the way.

And they had done it under someone who had not known she would be Headmistress until June of last year. Really, Minerva thought she deserved some congratulations.

She shot a glance along the staff table, taking in the faces of both professors and their guests. Severus, of course, was silent as he stared at his food. He had grown both more brooding, and more hateful when he did speak, since the werewolf attack on Hogwarts’s grounds. Minerva tipped a heap of beans onto his plate. The glare he shot her made her glad that she’d known him for twenty years, so she’d had a chance to get used to it.

“Eat your beans, Severus,” she said, and looked at other people as if it didn’t matter to her whether he did.

Sybill was chattering some nonsense at Acies, of course. The Defense teacher never paid attention to her, and Sybill never noticed that she didn’t, making them perfect dinner companions. Behind them, Rubeus carefully handled his knife and fork, as though afraid he would crush them. Pomona, a year-long veteran of sitting at his side, ducked his elbows occasionally as she munched her way steadily through a plate of shepherd’s pie. Filius was conversing with Peter, who answered his questions about using rats in duels with amused patience.

Others of Harry’s allies who had answered his plea for help yesterday were there as well—Belville, Rhangnara, Pemberley, Apollonis, Rosier-Henlin, Parkinson, Bulstrode. Minerva had been uneasy about letting a woman she knew was a werewolf into the school, until she saw that Hawthorn wore a silver necklace at her throat, and Harry had explained to her that she’d never spent time with Loki or cared about his goals. She was here to protect Harry and her daughter. That, Minerva could easily agree with.

She looked back at Severus’s plate, and saw him Transfiguring his beans into cockroaches, which marched under the table and got into Sybill’s robes.

“Severus,” she said.

He gave her a flat stare, Transfigured the last bean, and then sat back. His gaze was haunted as it roamed the walls. Minerva ate a few beans of her own while she thought about that. He had grown increasingly restive since yesterday evening, when the first of Harry’s allies arrived and she lowered the wards to accommodate them. But she had tightened them again at once, after making sure the wards understood who they were. Severus surely could not be worried about how well-protected he was here.

“Severus,” she said, making sure her voice was gentle, not mocking, and that she held his eyes when he looked at her.

“What is it?”

He shut his eyes and sat still for a long moment. Lines of weariness sagged around his face. Minerva frowned. How did I not notice those? He looks as if he has had many sleepless nights.

“I am afraid, Minerva,” he said, hissing out that word as if it were an embarrassing sexual disease. “Is that what you wished to hear? Do you truly want to know how little I look forward to going into battle here, or having Harry do it for me?”

“The only students who will remain until Midsummer have their parents’ permission to fight in the battle, and they’ve been improving as duelists under Alastor’s tutelage,” said Minerva, looking towards the end of the table where the old Auror sat. He was engaged in an argument with Rhangnara, setting out his cutlery to resemble the position of soldiers. Minerva shook her head in amusement. “And this time, Harry is choosing the ground, and has a great many allies at his back. Don’t worry, Severus. In one way, this is madness, drawing Voldemort to Hogwarts. But he never tried to attack a target so strong and well-defended during the First War. He’ll have a hard time taking us, and would even if we didn’t have Harry with us.”

“It is still risky,” Severus whispered. “I still wish that we were drawing him anywhere but here.”

Minerva patted his hand. “I know, Severus. Most of the time, events happen so quickly around Harry that it’s hard to take stock of them before they’re over. But this time, there are others with you to see your child go into battle, and even other parents to share your worries with.” She looked down at the Hufflepuff table, where Mrs. Smith sat with her son, Zacharias, and conversed with him. Most of the students near her watched with awed eyes.
“My child?”

Severus was actually spluttering. Minerva concealed her smile as she looked at him and said, “Well, Severus, if he isn’t your son, what would you call him?”

“He—I—“

Minerva shook her head and rose to her feet. The students were at once silent, gazing expectantly at her. Minerva saw more than one tight grin of anticipation at the Slytherin table, especially on the faces of the first-years. It was a good thing that some of them were children still, she thought, and worried more about tiny school matters than about war.

“As with the end of every year,” she said, “there comes the presentation of the House Cup. In fourth place, with two hundred seventy-six points, is Ravenclaw House.”

Polite applause echoed through the Great Hall. Filius’s House ducked their heads and muttered something. Ravenclaw never had really recovered from the vicious point-taking it had received after the other professors discovered that the majority of the students hexing Harry had come from that House; Filius himself had reduced their points to zero when he realized just how many people had realized they were learning Dark Arts but hadn’t approached him. There was a limit to how much Dumbledore’s spell could excuse them, he said sternly when Minerva asked him about it. They had done well to earn this many points back.

“In third place, with three hundred seven points, Gryffindor House.”

Again, more polite applause. Minerva allowed herself a moment of pure, indulgent House pride as she gazed at her lions. They had tried, incredibly hard, especially after she had cast Remus out and they no longer had a true Head to give them points. But they had fallen short of Hufflepuff thanks to the antics of the Weasley twins, among others. Minerva had to admit she was looking forward to seeing the twins leave after the Midsummer battle. Now that they had the thousand Galleons they’d received from Harry, they could do something actually productive in the world, as well as plague someone else.

“In second place, with three hundred eighteen points, Hufflepuff House.”

Loud cheering from Pomona’s House, which hadn’t got that many points in some time. Mrs. Smith gave her son a glance, and Zacharias dropped his hands from applauding and shut his mouth. It comforted Minerva to know there was at least one person in the world who could control him.

“And in first place, and the winners of the House Cup with three hundred ninety points, Slytherin House.”

She waved her wand, and the banners along the walls turned green, while Severus’s House indulged in self-congratulatory smirks, bowing their heads as the other Houses clapped for them. A pair of first-years hugged each other in excitement, and were dragged apart in moments by Millicent Bulstrode. The lines of worry in Harry’s face eased a bit. Minerva hoped he was thinking of things he had done to help his House earn those points, because there had been many.

“And now, enjoy dessert!” Minerva waved her wand again, and the food cleared rapidly from everyone’s plates, reappearing as chocolate cake. Most of the students began gulping it down. Minerva sat down and began sampling hers at a more leisurely pace.

A swift glance at Severus revealed that he had a faint smile on his face, a mocking sneer, of course. He glanced at her and said, as sweetly as he was capable of saying anything, “Better luck with the House Cup next year, Minerva.”

“Actually,” said Minerva, pausing to take a swallow of pumpkin juice, “I don’t consider myself Head of Gryffindor any more. Lupin didn’t work out, but the person I’ve hired to take his place will.”

“Hired to take his place?” She knew his eyes would be narrow; she hadn’t mentioned this before. “And who would that be?”

“Peter Pettigrew,” said Minerva comfortably.

Severus choked in a most satisfying manner.

The next day, Harry woke up slowly. He thought about skipping breakfast in the Great Hall. He and the other students staying until Midsummer had no classes, of course, just their dueling lessons and their plans for the battle. No one said that he had to go to the Great Hall on time now.

In the end, though, he decided to venture there. The other students were leaving directly after breakfast, and he wanted to say goodbye to those friends and acquaintances who hadn’t received permission to stay, like Ginny, Hermione, and Ron.
He stood and stretched, and that small movement was enough to cause Draco to stir, poking his head through the bed curtains. Harry didn’t give him credit for being fully awake yet, though, because he mumbled, “Want company in the loo, Harry?”

“Go back to sleep until your head clears,” Harry retorted, and headed for the shower, Argutus draped around his shoulders in dozing coils of silver and white.

He had just turned the shower on when sharp claws raked his right arm. Harry stumbled back in shock, staring down at the cuts. He watched as they froze over in moments, the ice only growing thicker despite the heat of the water that pounded on them.

When he looked up, the bird with the toothed beak and lizard-like tail was crouching on the far wall of the room, wings fluttering in time to its derisive, jerky laughter.

“You haven’t learned the truth yet, have you? It asked, and extended one claw, bright with his blood. You haven’t learned how to dissolve the bond that links us, and at this point, with every mark you bear, the chance of your learning becomes less and less.

“I thought you said there was no way to dissolve it,” said Harry, careful to keep his voice low so that there was less chance of waking Draco and Blaise. “That we were bound no matter what happened. You seemed rather upset about that.”

You understand nothing of what has happened. If you knew what I was, you would still reject me, because you are that way. You set harsh limits on yourself. You know nothing of what lies ahead of you, at the end of the dark road. The bird cawed its laughter again, scarlet eyes fastened on his face. And when someone tries to teach you the necessary lessons, you shrink into yourself and lash out. You are weak. That shall be your downfall.

Harry didn’t see the worth of responding. He looked at the cuts on his arm again. Like the others, they were parallel claw marks, a few inches apart, and the numbing cold from them hurt worse than the pain and had already frozen the blood. They would have icy scabs for a time, but the scabs would heal and fall off. Argutus, shifting on his shoulders, didn’t even seem concerned about them, but then, Harry didn’t think Argutus could see the bird.

Weakness, and limitations, and the end of the dark road, the bird told him, and then raised its wings and flew across the loo at his head. As Harry ducked to avoid it, it vanished, breaking apart as if the water were the sun and it were mist.

Harry shivered and ran his clawed arm under warm water to somewhat take away the sting. He didn’t think it was worth listening to what the bird babbled about. For all he knew, this was some trick of Voldemort’s, come to coax him into relaxing the bindings on his magic, so that Harry himself would be swallowed up by the Dark and violent parts of his power.

“But where do you think she is?”

“I don’t know, Draco,” Harry snapped absently as he crossed the Great Hall to the Gryffindor table with his boyfriend beside him. “Maybe she didn’t feel well, or maybe she decided to enjoy the first day of summer holidays and sleep in. It’s not that unusual for Pansy to miss breakfast, you know.”

Draco didn’t look satisfied, but just then Owen moved up to Harry’s side, and he actually growled and tried to shove him away. Harry caught Draco’s hand and Owen’s amused eye, and shook his head at both of them.

“Was there something you wanted, Owen?”

“Yes,” said Owen. “I wanted to know if you’d like us to show some of the Dark Arts we learned at Durmstrang to the dueling club.”

Harry hesitated. He could well imagine that Moody wouldn’t like it, but they could do it when Moody wasn’t there; he preferred to split the dueling club into halves now, working with the less successful students and leaving the better ones to Harry. Owen and Michael would be able to demonstrate to their heart’s content in front of people like Cho and Zacharias, who wouldn’t breathe a word to Moody.

“All right,” Harry muttered. “But make sure no word of this gets back to Auror Moody.”

Owen and Michael nodded and shivered simultaneously. Harry smiled at them, dropped Draco’s hand, and turned just in time to receive a bone-crushing hug from Hermione.

“Don’t you dare die,” she whispered to him. Harry didn’t think she would have been quite as affectionate if he hadn’t been going to battle, but, after all, he was, and her parents hadn’t let her stay to see it. “It wouldn’t be fair, or right. You have so
much still to do.”

Harry gently patted her back. “I won’t, Hermione,” he said. “I’ll do my best to survive, just for you.”

She sniffled once and hugged him harder, then let him go and turned to Draco. “I suppose that goes for you too, Malfoy,” she said. Her voice was perfectly ungracious, but a faint smile tugged at her lips.

“So glad to have your good opinion, Granger,” said Draco, but he inclined his head to her, though he wore no matching smile.

Harry turned to receive a handshake from Ron and a half-hug from Ginny. “I wish Mum had let us stay,” said Ron, frowning. “But she said that the twins were old enough to risk their lives, and we weren’t.” Resentment curdled his voice for just a moment before he brightened and recovered. “Be sure to tell us all about the battle in letters, mate, all right?”

Ginny nodded fervently, though her eyes, aimed over Harry’s shoulder, were scanning the room for Blaise. “I want to know how all the spells from our club got used,” she told Harry.

“I promise I’ll remember,” said Harry. It was amazing how easy it was to laugh and joke with people who wouldn’t be here to see Midsummer, he thought, while he could hardly speak of anything but deeply serious strategy to the people who would stay.

“Good.” Ginny gave him a second nod, and then went in search of her boyfriend. Harry turned to say goodbye to Neville. His grandmother had considered giving him permission to stay, but in the end had decided that she would rather have her grandson beside her.

Neville flushed with pleasure when Harry reminded him about his promise to find a counter for Indigena Yaxley’s plants. “I’ll send you the seedlings as soon as I have a viable plant, Harry,” he said, his eyes glinting with excitement. “I’m not far from breeding one to counter the vines that stop wandless magic, I think.”

“Good for you, Neville!” Harry said, and his ears flushed even more.

Harry turned away to bid farewell to the others, telling himself he could relax and ignore other pressing duties until noon. When he was done here, he intended to go up to the Astronomy Tower and watch the carriages that would bear them to the Hogsmeade Station safely out of sight.

“I think I can see Neville,” Harry said, leaning forward and putting his hand over his eyes. Draco tugged him back from the edge of the Tower—not gently. Owen and Michael, who’d accompanied them there, had stirred uneasily, but they settled back when Draco pulled on Harry’s robe. Harry supposed he was making them nervous, but he didn’t really see why. It wasn’t as though a wind were blowing, and the eastern sky behind them gleamed with the colors of the Light’s blessing on their coming battle.

“You can’t see Longbottom,” snorted Draco. “With those weak eyes of yours, Harry? It’s a miracle you see the Snitch.”

Harry ignored him, watching the carriages as they trundled onwards. He could see the thestrals that pulled them, and so, he guessed, could everyone else on the Tower with them. He wondered idly what the students inside the carriages who’d never witnessed a death thought. Didn’t they ever get curious about what made the vehicles move? Of course, they probably just assumed it was magic.

It was a glorious June morning, with the sun sparkling off the lake’s water and the dew on the grass and several thousand other things that Harry wouldn’t have imagined it could find an excuse to sparkle off. Harry experienced a moment of pure longing that he wasn’t in one of those carriages, going home to an ordinary family who loved him, laughing and joking with his brother, and perhaps trying to play a swift game of Exploding Snap before they arrived at the station.

Then he told himself firmly not to be an idiot. What he had wasn’t the destiny he would have chosen, but there were much worse ones.

“Come on, Harry,” Draco said. “I’m bored.”

Harry lingered a moment longer, though, determined to watch the carriages out of sight. The lead one hadn’t gone far yet, just passing the edge of the lake.

He felt the moment when the wards vanished, the magic sucked out of them. He jerked up straight, his heart so loud in his ears that the sound of it hurt. *That cannot mean what I think it means. It cannot—*  

And then the Death Eaters came out of the Forbidden Forest.
Harry thought he screamed. Draco grabbed his arm, and Owen and Michael grabbed his cloak, as if to hold him back from diving off the Tower. Harry knew he was fighting them, filled with conflicting impulses—to summon his Firebolt and get down there, to warn McGonagall, to shout until all the professors realized what was going on and spilled forth from the castle—

And then it was already too late. The first Death Eaters had aimed their wands and cried out the Killing Curse, and blasts of green light struck the first carriage. Harry heard a terrified scream that cut off in mid-note. Someone was dead.

The Death Eaters were running with their cloaks billowing behind them. They wrenched open the doors of the carriage and dragged bodies, two of them, small enough to be second-years, out of it. Then they manhandled the two struggling, shrieking survivors to the ground. More Death Eaters were coming out of the Forest, aiming their wands in curses that worked to stop the coaches and send the thestrals rearing and tossing their heads. Screams shattered the morning.

Harry’s magic flared out of control. He used it to tear free of the grip of all three people holding him, and ran for the stairs down from the Astronomy Tower. The same thing was happening that had happened in the Forbidden Forest, that had happened in the woods where the magic had taken them for Walpurgis Night and let them hunt a white stag; the stones yielded in front of him, walls turned to misty remembrances of themselves, and he ran more quickly than anything mortal possibly could have.

He was calling even as he ran, intoning the Summoning Charm in his head again and again, and halfway down the stairs, his Firebolt met him. Harry swung his leg over it, and in a moment he was zipping down the stairs faster than his feet could ever have taken him, hunched small on the broom so as not to bump into anyone who might be pounding up or down the stairs in search of him.

Harry reached the doors of the entrance hall at last, and blasted outward. The wards that McGonagall had put around the castle itself sparkled ahead of him, tightening as they tried to insure that no enemies could reach Hogwarts. Harry, not without regret, threw his magic forward, tearing a hole that he closed behind him when he was on the other side, and curled out over the grounds, moving towards the line of carriages and the Death Eaters wrestling students out of them.

Even as he moved, he saw a flare of magic from beside one of the carriages, the first sign of someone fighting back. It was Neville, his rage and fear lending him incredible strength. Harry saw one Death Eater go flying backwards, struck by something that appeared to be a forked lightning bolt. Then Neville turned and tugged the little girl that Death Eater had been holding towards him, shielding her with his body as he began running madly towards the castle.

Other spells struck across the battlefield. Death Eaters were burning with Ardesco, and staggering from the gusts of wind that came with Ventus. Harry saw Ron leading a troop of younger Gryffindor students back towards Hogwarts, and Ginny, her red hair streaming, staying behind to stand guard for three Ravenclaw first-years, who ran screaming and crying for safety.

“Harry!”

He swung his head. That was Hermione, motioning him frantically towards a carriage that had stopped at the edge of the lake. Harry dived, and caught a glimpse of a startled Death Eater, long blonde hair appearing from under her hood, holding a wand to Luna’s temple.

Harry didn’t ask himself about right or wrong; he simply lashed out, forming his magic into a snake, and swallowed the Death Eater’s magic. She was crying as she staggered and dropped to one knee. Luna stepped away from her, looking vaguely puzzled. Hermione seized her hand and ran for Hogwarts.

Harry kicked back into the sky, half-dizzy with his newly-acquired power, looking around frantically for Voldemort. Dark power roared like a black flame behind him as he swung over the lake, and Harry turned that way.

Merlin knew how he’d assembled them that quickly, but Voldemort was there with a dozen children ranged in front of him, all of them either first-years or extremely small second-years. Harry hovered to a stop as he saw the magic blazing around them. A Dark Arts curse, he knew that, but not one he recognized.

Voldemort laughed softly. He wore no more intimidating garment than a dark cloak, but his magic draped hissing over him like a hundred serpents, and filled the day with an oppression that reminded Harry of Midwinter. His face remained bowed, but, coiled at his feet, a serpent made of stitched-together flesh reared. Its eyes were scarlet, and it stared directly at Harry. Harry knew what Voldemort was using to see, now.
“Such a simple test, Harry,” Voldemort crooned. “I know that I cannot kill you until Midsummer, but you could make matters much simpler if you came to me and yielded yourself now. Your life for these children’s, shall we say?” He waved a lazy hand, and the curse around them flared with obscene black life, letting Harry recognize it.

*Life-Web.* Harry felt his pulse pick up, hammering in his throat. *Shit.*

The Life-Web would tie up to twenty people together, and put the rein of their combined life-force in the caster’s hand. He could will them to die at any moment, and they would. He could will them pain. He could will them suffering. He could will them to go mad. Harry had encountered mention of it when he was looking up ways to break Ariadne’s Web; he thought Voldemort hadn’t used it at Durmstrang only because the school was too big.

And it was another spell, like the Fisher King Curse Augustus had used on Adalrico, that could only be broken by the original caster.

“It tempts you, doesn’t it, Harry?” Voldemort whispered, and tugged the tendril of black light that ran to his fingers. One girl, a Slytherin first-year whom Harry vaguely recognized, fell, face running with tears, too terrified even to scream. Harry thought her leg was broken. “Your life for theirs. Come closer, come lower, come to me, and I’ll dismiss the Life-Web. I’ll let them run home to their parents and have a normal life again.”

“You’re lying,” said Harry, but his voice shook, and he could feel his body tingle with his own helplessness. Draco’s words rang in his ears, asking what would happen if Voldemort ever tempted him to sacrifice his life for a dozen children he held captive. Would he be able to resist the temptation?

“You can’t take that chance, can you?” Voldemort asked, and a boy in Gryffindor robes began to scream and scream, his limbs extending around him as if stretched on an invisible rack. Harry cast a healing spell in his general direction; other magic could still affect victims in a Life-Web, until the caster noticed it and refused to permit it. But Voldemort was obviously watching for anything that would spare the children, and after only a moment of relief, the boy went back to crying out.

Harry reached out sharply, trying to drain the magic that composed the Life-Web. It flared back at him, and flung his *absorbere* abilities away. Voldemort chuckled. “The laws of magic are absolute, Harry,” he said. “When they say that this curse cannot be broken except by the one who cast it, that holds true for anything that you might do to try and break it.”

Harry became aware of other screams behind him. He had to turn and help the others. He had to protect the people fleeing to the castle. Even if the professors and his allies had come out to help—and he was unsure if McGonagall would be willing to lower the wards for that, what she would decide was the greater danger—there were still too many Death Eaters, over a hundred on the grounds already, and more flooding out of the Forbidden Forest. He had to do things other than hover over Voldemort and make impossible choices about a dozen children in a Life-Web.

But he could not leave them, either.

His vision narrowed to a tiny point, and the broomstick spun dangerously. Harry grabbed and steadied it, and heard Voldemort laugh.

“Well, Harry? What is it to be? What is your choice?”

Harry could attack Voldemort, but that glittering dark power draped over him, augmented by the magic he’d swallowed from Hogwarts students, said he wouldn’t win. And even if he managed, by some miracle, to kill Voldemort, that wouldn’t break the Life-Web. The children would most likely follow him into death, if what Harry remembered from reading about Life-Webs where the caster died was true.

Shouts sounded from behind him. Intermingled among the cries of pain and desperation were equally desperate, equally pained shouts of his name.

The world roared around him, and for every moment that passed while he dithered, someone else got hurt.

He had to choose.

Harry forced his eyes open, and chose.

Other magic could still affect victims in a Life-Web, until the caster noticed it and refused to permit it. Harry struck quickly, therefore, intoning the words in his head as his eyes moved from child to child.

*Adsulto cordis. Adsulto cordis. Adsulto cordis.*

The Gryffindor boy was the first to stop screaming, as the Heart Attack Spell killed him. Then went the Slytherin girl, whose face smoothed into an expression of blank surprise out of screaming about her broken leg. Then the Hufflepuff girl...
next to them, falling over without a gasp.

Voldemort, the snake’s eyes fixed on Harry, didn’t notice what was happening at first, and then he cried out in a mixture of rage and shock. Harry felt his magic shifting, trying to figure out what spell was doing this and block it. He was obviously hindered by his own belief that Harry would never kill anyone when he could rescue them, however, and for long moments the spell was still able to get through.

Harry, his eyes wide, dry, aching, feeling each heartbeat burst in his ears, flare and then die like a firework, hoped he had made the right choice, quick death over endless suffering that would not have ended, he thought, even if he gave himself up, because if he had not made the right choice it was too much to bear, and he killed the last first-year in the Life-Web just as Voldemort caught on to what was happening and moved to will their hearts back to normal. Then he snarled, and his magic rose after Harry like a spitting dragon.

Harry wheeled, sending the Firebolt towards the battlefield, and curving his absorbere gift around him like another Argutus, draping it from his shoulders and letting it swallow the magic of all the Death Eaters it could grab. The ones chasing the children who were running for Hogwarts noticed the difference first, and began to scream themselves, in primal pain and shock. Then Harry was among those who thought something was wrong and swung to look at him, and rapidly ripping away their strength, making it dwindle to nothing, in some cases, and making some wizards almost Squibs in others before they could Apparate away. And all the while, Voldemort’s power ravened at his back.

Swollen with new magic, Harry swung around and met Voldemort with a tremendous slap that he thought echoed in the ears of everyone all across Hogwarts’s grounds. Harry felt Voldemort reel back, and followed that with another slap, one that he knew came close to reaching into his enemy’s magical core. The sky shook around him, blazing with strange light, and he heard thunder and screaming in his ears.

Voldemort leaned back from him, leery—either of his power or of the prophecy, Harry didn’t know—and Harry turned once more, this time using the stolen power to drape over and secure the last run of the last students to Hogwarts. McGonagall had lowered the wards on the castle, after all, and opened the doors of the entrance hall, and Harry could see the professors running out, grabbing students’ arms and pulling them inside, casting spells to hinder the few Death Eaters still after them, and repairing the wards again once the students managed to cross to safety. Harry scanned the grounds, saw a witch in a white mask chasing a group of Ravenclaws, and poured his boiling rage down a channel at her. She ceased to exist in the next moment, and the Ravenclaws made it, huddling behind Professor Sprout as she swept them all inside.

Harry did not know how many would have died if he had not turned when he did. He knew exactly how many had died because he had hesitated so long, though. When he faced the carnage, he could count the smaller bodies littered on the ground. Students dead and drained of their magic, and, by the lake, dead because he had chosen to kill them.

The world was spinning gently within his head, and his vision widened and then narrowed again, and his breath came in gasps. He did not know whether he had made the right decision, but he knew one thing.

*If I had not chosen to lure him to Hogwarts on Midsummer Day, he would never have come here at all, and they would still be alive.*

Guilt piled on top of him until Harry felt the need to bow his shoulders, but he remained hovering instead, staring towards Voldemort. If he intended to launch an attack now, then Harry would have to be ready to meet it.

Instead, Voldemort cast *Sonorus*, so that everyone in Hogwarts could hear his voice.

“*I want Harry Potter,*” his voice said, from every corner and every direction. “*He is the price for your lives. Each and every one of you will live if you stay in the castle until Midsummer, and then each and every one of you will die if you attempt to shield Harry Potter from me. No one hurts the Lord Voldemort as he has and lives, but Lord Voldemort keeps his promises. You have thirteen days to think on this. Come Midsummer morning, I will attack without mercy.*” Then his voice vanished.

Harry waited, but Voldemort was striding back across the battlefield, the flesh-snake slithering beside him from the look of it, and the surviving Death Eaters had retreated into the Forbidden Forest. Harry, his chest heaving, looked at the students’ bodies and wondered if it was safe to recover them.

A moment later, every body in sight began to bubble with black liquid and turn putrid. Harry swallowed back bile as he watched them dissolve, liquefy into floating purple and green globs. He had to turn his back to keep from losing his breakfast, at the smell and the sight and the knowledge that Voldemort had done this specifically so that no bodies could be brought back to the parents.

Harry remained hovering for some moments, both to keep guard and to count. Fifty-one, plus the dozen at the lake…

*Sixty-three. Sixty-three people I’ve killed.*
He flew back towards Hogwarts, through the last hole in the wards, which closed the moment he was inside. He landed near the entrance hall, and, as if in a dream, felt someone hugging him. He didn’t turn, didn’t look up to find out who it was, probably Draco or Snape, or maybe Connor. It didn’t matter. Remembering the choice and the number was what mattered.

_I made the choice. I don’t know if it was the right one. And there will certainly be people in Hogwarts who want to turn me over to Voldemort, in hopes that he’ll keep his promise and let them live. He won’t, of course, but that’s what they could think will happen. And they’ll see his not attacking Hogwarts as a powerful man’s choice, rather than, as it is really is, fear and the belief that he can’t kill me until Midsummer anyway._

_Thirteen days of siege._

_This will be hard._

_And I do not know if I made the right choice._

**Chapter Eighty-Eight: Path of Broken Glass**

Minerva stood on the Astronomy Tower and watched with black hatred as Voldemort invested Hogwarts’ grounds.

He had returned, scarcely five minutes after he had gone into the Forbidden Forest, with more Death Eaters. In fact, there were several hundred, a fact which dazzled and dazed her. The Dark Lord had never managed to summon that many except in the very last days of his power, just before he fell at Godric’s Hollow. His recruiters must have been busy, especially among those students of Durmstrang whom Karkaroff would have had a chance to try and corrupt, but Minerva couldn’t understand why. Why would they listen to him? What could he promise them? What made them so certain that he would not merely fall again?

And these Death Eaters had obviously practiced what they were going to do when they arrived in the grounds, or at least been told. They set up neat and immediate camps, lines of tents carefully protected with wards that Minerva recognized as those that would resist both weather and fire. The second kind made her want to laugh. _Do they think we’re going to be launching fireballs at them from the castle?_

Well, they might, she supposed. She continued watching, and in a moment saw the reason why Voldemort and his minions had been able to pass through the Forbidden Forest so freely.

The ground shook as the giants arrived, at least twenty of them, all twelve feet tall and grunting as they set their immense weapons—clubs and spears—down on the Quidditch Pitch. The moment they were settled, one of the Death Eaters strode over to them from the middle of the camp. Minerva couldn’t make out who it was from this distance, where he was just a moving dark robe, but thought it was probably Karkaroff, the wizard who had contacted the giants in the first place. Now he appeared to be making some kind of speech to them.

Minerva gave a rapid shiver, and hoped that Voldemort would keep his word, as much as that was possible, and not attack Hogwarts before Midsummer. They badly needed to come up with some kind of plan that would incorporate this many giants. Harry had made a few contingency plans for them, but not even he had suspected that Voldemort would bring more than ten.

_Harry..._

Minerva swallowed around the pain in her throat. Everyone in Hogwarts had heard Voldemort’s final promise, because that was his intention. The adults would know better than to trust him. But the students, even the older students, might not. They might think they could earn passage out of the siege by turning Harry over. Minerva wondered, with resignation nearly as cold as her hatred, how long it would be before one of them would try.

She abruptly swung around, her eyes wide. She had wards up to prevent Apparition anywhere in Hogwarts; she was certain that if that weren’t the case, then some of the Death Eaters would already have entered that way. But now the wards were telling her that strangers had entered anyway.

Godric appeared at her side a moment later, gasping as if he’d run. His robes looked rumpled, and his eyes were wide with fear. He was so upset that when his feet passed through one side of the Tower, he didn’t seem to care.

“Minerva!” he cried. “There are Death Eaters using Portkeys to appear inside Hogwarts! A supply closet on the fifth floor, an old snogging room near the Prefects’ Bathroom, one of the abandoned classrooms on the second floor—”

“I feel them,” Minerva snapped, and began to run. “Just three pairs, so far?”
“Yes!” Godric kept pace with her. “But there may be more any moment. After all, many of them are going to know what Hogwarts looks like inside, since they were students here.” The bitter undercurrent in his voice was strong.

Minerva nodded, and reached out a hand to him. Godric clasped it, though she felt only the faintest brush of warm flesh; he was most solid near the anchor-stone, and they were far from it.

Concentrating, they brought another ward whipping up, one they’d prepared but hadn’t used because they had known Portkeys might be necessary to employ at some point. This one rendered all Portkeys useless within the school itself. The wards on the grounds were so shredded from Voldemort absorbing their magic that Minerva wouldn’t have wanted to try and extend this protection there, if it were even possible. Now, though, the Death Eaters who had ventured into the school were trapped.

“Where are Rowena and Helga?” Minerva demanded, when that was done. They were coming down from the Tower now, and she was cursing her old bones. Well, when needs must, dignity is no answer, she thought, and dropped into her Animagus form. A tabby cat could bound down the stairs and around corners much faster than an old witch could.

“Rowena is going after the ones near the Prefects’ Bathroom,” said Godric, sounding a bit calmer. “And Helga is facing them on the second floor. They left the fifth floor for us, since we were closest.”

Minerva mewed to show she understood, and then hurried forward. One of the moving staircases tried to turn on her, but she jumped from one revolving step to another, toe-walked across a banister, and sprang easily to the floor on the other side. She picked up speed after that, as if she had seen a mouse desperate to get away.

She saw the supply closet that Godric was talking about the moment they reached the fifth floor, because it was standing open, and no students would have been on this floor; Minerva had ordered their Heads of House to take them back to their common rooms the moment they were all inside. Two heavyset, unfamiliar men were walking hastily up the corridor, their hands on their wands. They obviously hadn’t noticed her yet.

Minerva fought the urge to arch her back and spit, which would only alert them to her presence. She changed back instead, and drew her wand. A nonverbal Body-Bind caught one of them, and the other spun around, his face red, as his companion toppled to the floor.

He called out a curse Minerva knew better than to stand in the way of, and she spun aside as it slammed into the stone where she’d been standing. Godric flew at the man, but he dodged, his attention focused on Minerva. She leveled her wand, meanwhile, and murmured, “Transformo columbae!”

In a moment, the dangerous Death Eater was a helplessly fluttering dove, his wand clattering to the floor. Minerva conjured a cage and stuck him in that. The dove pecked at the bars and glared at her, as much as a bird could. Minerva meanwhile Stunned the other man, then released him from the Body-Bind and Transfigured him into a goldfish, conjuring a bowl of water immediately. She liked Transfiguring her enemies. It didn’t kill them, but it kept them from causing trouble.

Carrying cage and bowl, she looked up at Godric. “Do Rowena and Helga need any help?”

“No,” he said, drifting down to let his feet rest on the floor again. “Rowena knows so many spells I don’t—she handled hers just fine. And you haven’t ever seen what Helga’s like when a student’s threatened, Minerva.” He shivered a bit. “She had the stones of the castle eat them.”

Minerva nodded fiercely, satisfied. “And there are no other Death Eaters in Hogwarts?”

“No,” said Godric firmly. “We felt only three pulls on the wards.” He closed his eyes and sighed. “But this means that the students won’t be able to use Portkeys to escape, doesn’t it?”

“I’m afraid so,” said Minerva. The pounding excitement of the battle had faded, allowing her to remember their predicament. “The moment I lower the wards, more Death Eaters would come in.”

“Most likely,” Godric agreed. “Then the Floo Networks are our best bet, I would think—“

“No.”

Minerva turned around. Peter was standing behind her, his face pale. Minerva frowned at him. “You aren’t at the Tower?” she asked.

“I asked Acies to watch the Gryffindors so I could come and speak with you,” said Peter. “And I looked in your office first. The Floo connection’s gone, Minerva. Destroyed. A spell I’ve never seen before, cast on it. The only thing I could tell was that it was a time-delayed one.”

“How could you be sure the Floo connection was destroyed?” Minerva asked, not wanting to believe it. She had thought
they would manage to evacuate the students somehow, not listening to Voldemort’s insane dictum, and that, come Midsummer, only those who had chosen to face battle would remain.

“Because,” said Peter softly, “the fireplace collapsed. I lifted some of the stones back to their original places and cast the Floo powder in it, but there’s not a spark. No fire will burn in it. I tried every incantation I knew. And then I sent rats to the other Floo connections—the hospital wing, and Severus’s rooms, and all the others in the school. They all came back with the same message. Destroyed.”

“I—there has to be some mistake.” Minerva pressed the goldfish bowl to her face, feeling faint. “I refuse to think that a saboteur could have entered Severus’s rooms. A rat might be able to get in, Peter, but he has wards against everything else. Even Animagi.”

“If someone managed to cast a spell on your Floo connection, Minerva, that wouldn’t matter,” Godric said, his face distressed again. “They’re all linked to the one in the Headmistress’s office, so that she can prevent just anyone from coming into Hogwarts. Remove that keystone, and the others are going to break.”

Minerva restrained the impulse to utter some truly vile curses. “We have a traitor inside Hogwarts, then,” she said flatly. Peter nodded. Godric murmured, “It seems so.”

Minerva closed her eyes and tried to control the reeling sickness in her belly. She had welcomed all of Harry’s allies in her office on Friday afternoon, making sure they understood what was expected of them as long as they stayed in Hogwarts. The professors had been there as well. Anyone would have had a chance to cast a spell on her fireplace, particularly one that she didn’t recognize, and one that was time-delayed to have no immediate effect. It could have been any of them.

She took a deep breath, and shook her head, and forced her eyes to open. “Then Voldemort has managed to shut most of the ways out of Hogwarts,” she murmured. “I can’t lower the wards against Apparition and Portkeys in case his Death Eaters enter. The Floo connections are damaged. Anyone flying over the grounds on a broom will be risking his or her life, and certainly the lives of any students.”

“There are still some ways out,” said Peter softly. “I was a Marauder, Minerva. I’ll send the rats through the secret passages, to spy them out and see which ones are safe. That was actually what I was coming to your office to see you about.”

Minerva felt her heart begin to beat again. “Thank you, Peter,” she said, and smiled at him. “I appreciate it.”

Indigena was beginning to wonder if she would spend most of her days spitting dirt.

She crouched in a large tunnel that led from Hogwarts into Hogsmeade—the inhabitants of the village had already fled, of course, leaving their homes and shops open to Death Eater foraging—and wound it with her vines. Other plants snaked through the soil in all directions, finding and digging into the passages that led across the grounds. The Dark Lord didn’t think that many of them would see use, since most of them came up somewhere in the middle of the Death Eater encampment, but he wanted to guard the ones his hostages might use to escape.

*It’s easier if I think of them as hostages and not victims,* Indigena thought, head cocked to the side as she wreathed the tunnel with another hanging drape of green tendrils and white flowers. The white flowers would look harmless enough, even pretty, to anyone who met them. But they contained an incense that would incapacitate any human, dropping them dreaming to the floor of the passage, where the tendrils could grab them and hand them to Indigena.

Indigena had just finished the third curtain of white flowers when she paused. The tendril that coiled around the tunnel further towards Hogwarts—not much beyond her, really, since the Dark Lord’s strict instructions were to leave Hogwarts alone until Midsummer—were telling her about intruders. But not human intruders, or the flowers would already have breathed. Indigena listened to the reports of vibrations for a moment, then smiled.

“I think I hear the pitter-patter of little feet,” she remarked to the loops that draped over her shoulders. “Shall we do something about that?”

The vines agreed, and lashed out from her shoulders, traveling fast down the tunnel. Indigena waited, and soon they hauled several squeaking, thrashing rats within reach of her wand.

Indigena examined them minutely, and then cast several spells to be sure. They were all ordinary rats, not an Animagus among them. The traitor in the castle who went by the name of Peter Pettigrew and was a rat Animagus had probably summoned them, though.

She had the tendrils fling them back down the tunnel, and commanded the other plants in the secret passages where the rats
had tried to sense a way out for the students to do the same. It would do no harm, and probably much good, to send Pettigrew’s little spies back to him and report that there was no way out where Yaxley’s vines coiled.

Indigena encouraged her plants to grow even more thickly after that. *Naughty traitors, to imagine that there is a way out for them while I am on my Lord’s side.*

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_Nineteen. And sixty-three._

“I don’t know what the Ministry can do to help us, if anything,” said Harry, keeping his voice low. He was pacing in the corridor just outside the hospital wing, where he’d been to visit those who had escaped from the battle with wounds. He’d invoked the communication spell to Priscilla Burke as soon as he left, as she was the only person in the Ministry he’d counted as enough of an ally to have taught the spell to. “We’re trapped here with no way out. Someone’s destroyed the Floo connections. The Headmistress has to keep up wards against Apparitions and Portkeys, in case the Death Eaters leap inside the moment they’re lowered. Brooms are too dangerous, for obvious reasons, and Indigena Yaxley’s plants are blocking the tunnels that lead out through the grounds.”

He heard Priscilla make a noise of frustration that seemed to emanate from just above his wrist, but she didn’t say anything for a long moment. That gave Harry leisure to lean against the wall and make the count in his head again.

_Nineteen. And sixty-three. That makes eighty-two. Harry cradled the number in his mind like the key Arithmancy equation that would have allowed him to pass his OWL. Nineteen alive, but drained of magic. Sixty-three dead. Eighty-two people I’ve hurt. And how many hundreds have I failed?_

“You have to understand, Harry,” said Priscilla then, “we already have parents going mad and insisting the Ministry do something. They’re not going to take it kindly when we tell them there’s no way into or out of Hogwarts.”

Harry heard a bark of laughter escape before he could stop himself. He bit his lips after that, though, because if he started laughing, he knew he wouldn’t stop. He began pacing again, and listened to the way his steps on the floor seemed to bespeak numbers. _Sixty-three. Nineteen. Sixty-three. Nineteen._ “And why do you think Voldemort is doing this?” he asked her bluntly. “He wants to panic people. I’m sure he’d just love it if parents came onto Hogwarts grounds searching for a way to rescue their children. More hostages, and he could torture them in front of the walls and know that at least one child would see his mother or father dying in front of him. Lovely plan, to let them come. It’s all working out for him.”

“Harry,” said Priscilla, voice growing harder. “We can’t stop them from going, if they choose to. The Ministry doesn’t have enough Aurors to encircle Hogwarts and keep people from getting into the midst of the Death Eaters. Not to mention that he would attack if he saw us show up, anyway,” she added.

“If you value their lives, you’ll issue a warning about how stupid they’d be if they try to come here,” said Harry, and rubbed his eyes with his hand. He felt exhausted, and it wasn’t much after noon. Of course, the onrush of bad news and what he’d done that morning and the numbers repeating in his head would be enough to tire anyone out, but he needed to remain awake. “Make it blunt, no language spared. People have to know they’re risking their lives if they come here, and their children’s sanity. I don’t care how much they miss their children, against that. They should stay away.”

“They won’t like it,” Priscilla repeated.

“That, frankly, is not my problem,” said Harry, and matched the snap in his voice to hers. “You may have missed this, but it’s a little hard for me to influence parents when I’m in Hogwarts and trying to make sure that Voldemort doesn’t take any of the hundreds of potential hostages around me.”


“I’m sorry,” Priscilla said quietly. “The Ministry’s been besieged with owls and visitors since people started Apparating into London from Hogsmeade and reporting that there were Death Eaters at Hogwarts, and it’s had me—upset. How’s Thomas?”

Harry shrugged, then remembered she couldn’t see him. “Well, from what I know,” he said.

“That’s good, then,” Priscilla said, her voice a bit lighter. “We’ll do what we can, Harry, to keep people from panicking and people from coming to Hogwarts. I can’t promise we’ll be completely successful.”

“Do what you can,” Harry said, and then cut off the communication spell and leaned against the wall for a moment. _Sixty-three. Nineteen. Sixty-three. Nineteen. And eighty-two altogether._

Before he could close his eyes and start thinking about what was going to happen next, Draco came through the doors of the
hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey had wanted him in the hospital wing to help comfort the wounded Slytherin students, as he was one of the few who hadn’t been out on the battlefield himself. Snape was in his offices brewing the healing potions that Pomfrey was already running out of. That, Harry thought, was the only reason he’d been left alone so long after Snape’s initial catch and embrace of him.

From the look on Draco’s face, though, his solitude was about to end. Harry pushed himself up and tried to brace for the question.

“What happened when you were hovering over the lake?” Draco asked quietly.

Harry winced. Trust Draco to go straight to the heart of the most painful matter. But hiding this wasn’t something he could do. He had to let Snape, Draco, and eventually everyone else dear to him—and, of course, the children’s parents, when he was able to contact them—know exactly what he’d done, what he’d turned into out there.

“Voldemort had a dozen first-years and second-years in a Life-Web,” he said. “He offered to let them go if I would come down to him.”

“But you didn’t,” said Draco, and stared at him.

Harry shook his head. “Only the caster can break a Life-Web. He might have promised to let them go, but then I’d have to depend on him to keep his word. He could will them to die, hurt, go mad, anything, as long as he held that damn web. And he could have broken any spell I put on them, once he knew what it was, spells to heal them or levitate them away or do anything else. And while I hung there trying to decide what to do, people were dying around me.” He closed his eyes for a moment.

“What did you do?” Draco’s voice was as soft as a prayer.

“I used a spell that he didn’t think I would ever use, and so didn’t counter in time,” Harry answered, opening his eyes. “I killed them by giving them heart attacks.”

Draco was staring at him, and Draco’s stare filled all the world. Harry stared back. He deserved anything that might appear there, Merlin knew. Disgust, hatred, anger, shock, rejection… The list of possible emotions was so long that he hadn’t finished it before Draco moved.

Draco’s arms curled around Harry and tugged him hard against him. Harry leaned his head on Draco’s shoulder, and wondered what emotion this was. He knew what he wanted it to be, what emotion the warm embrace seemed to proclaim it, but he also knew that he’d changed, and no one would ever look at him the same way again. That meant Draco couldn’t have been hugging him in simple love.


Harry patted his back then, his own body relaxing. He could deal with this. Grief and horror were feelings he knew well, knew how to comfort and soothe. And if they were directed at him, well, he knew how to deal with that, too. He’d seen them in his parents’ eyes during the last day of their trial.

“I’m so sorry,” Draco whispered. “I’m so sorry this happened to you. Harry—that can’t—I don’t know what else you could have done, but I can’t—that can’t have been easy,” he finished, his words choking around the sobs and limping to a halt.

Harry leaned back against the wall with his arms still around Draco, his hand still stroking soothing, comforting circles. He had the feeling he’d be doing this a lot in the next few days. Best to get used to this now.

“Harry, Harry, Harry,” were Draco’s next words, like a mantra. “Why aren’t you crying, too?”

“Because if I begin,” said Harry, staring over Draco’s head at the far wall, “if I start now, I’m not going to stop.”

Draco gave a convulsive shudder, and then abruptly stiffened in Harry’s arms. Harry could feel himself frown. Why? Has he just now realized the full implications of what I’ve done?

“You think that, don’t you?” Draco asked, voice low and tense as an accusation.

“Think what?”

“You think it’s your fault. You think you should have made another decision, even though there was no other decision you could make.” Draco pulled himself away and grabbed Harry’s shoulders, shaking him. “Damn it, Harry, don’t do this! That’s how he’ll get inside your head. He doesn’t need to send dreams, not when he can make your own guilt eat you alive!”
“If I don’t feel this guilt,” Harry said quietly, not resisting the shaking. “then I’d already be gone, another Dumbledore or another Voldemort. This way, I know I’m still human.”

Draco said several things a properly-bred Malfoy, in Harry’s opinion, shouldn’t know. “And what solution would have been better?” he demanded then. “You, giving yourself up? You said it, Harry. You could have done that, and he still wouldn’t have released the Life-Web. All you would have achieved was your own martyrdom and a kind of squalling pride that at least you did the right thing. Fine if you want to die a Gryffindor, but damn you, you have to stay alive.”

“Oh, I know that,” said Harry, mildly puzzled that Draco would think he didn’t know that. “Boy-Who-Lived and all that, right?”

“Stop it, stop it, stop it,” Draco said, leaning in towards him now, voice low and intense. “Damn you, Harry, please. Don’t do this. You’re blaming yourself, and that’s going to tear you apart, and then how are we going to survive this siege?”

“We’re going to survive it because I’ll make myself into a symbol,” said Harry, and stepped back, tearing away from Draco’s grip. “A symbol of hope or a symbol of hatred, whatever they need. You know there will be people who want to turn me over to Voldemort, in hopes that he’ll keep his promise. I can’t even blame them. I hoped, for one insane moment, that he would have kept his promise if I’d gone down to him.”

Draco tried to grab him again. Harry dodged. He’d felt the trembling and cracking of the edges of his control as he stood there. He couldn’t stay. Draco would hold him again and try to make him—Harry didn’t even know what it would be, but it would involve admission of guilt and perhaps crying, and it would shatter him. He couldn’t shatter, not now.

Draco called after him. Harry walked down the corridor and didn’t look back. He had to get to McGonagall and offer her his strength to help bolster the wards on the castle itself.

Owen had ears. And he didn’t like what he heard.

He and Michael had shadowed Harry for most of the morning and early afternoon, but as Harry spent a large part of the early evening cooped up with the Headmistress, they’d gone exploring. They wanted to know what the school thought of Harry, how many were hopeful and how many hostile and how many too terrified to think.

And so they went to the Great Hall, concealed with Dark Arts spells that Professor Fleur-de-lis had taught them at Durmstrang, and watched as the children brought there for dinner conversed and argued with each other. Many conversations were low-voiced, and choked with tears. Unnoticed, though, Owen and Michael could get close to the various House tables and listen in.

“I can’t believe she’s gone,” was a common theme, with a variation of “He’s gone,” and Owen learned to ignore them. They were grieving, and grieving was a natural process after what had happened on the battlefield this morning. He himself had endured enough of it at Durmstrang. Merlin knew, after yet another day in which he saw yet another fellow student brutally tortured.

The other conversations were the ones that interested him more. The first he heard was between two older Gryffindor students, talking to each other in voices that the crack of cutlery and buzzed whispers of others would normally have concealed.

“Do you think he’s right?” one of them, a pale and rather pretty brown-haired girl, asked the other, a tall boy with dark eyes. “Do you think that if we really gave him Harry, then he’d leave us alone?”

“I don’t know,” said the boy, but not firmly enough to make Owen think he was Harry’s supporter. “We can’t trust him, I suppose. I mean—I know we can’t. But maybe…” His voice trailed off, and he said no more.

“Maybe,” the brown-haired girl whispered, and Owen nearly snorted at what he heard in her voice. Desperate hope, the kind of hope that got in under one’s heart and tore it. There had been some students at Durmstrang who thought that doing just what Bellatrix wanted, even torturing others when she ordered them to, would spare them. It hadn’t worked. And yet people had kept doing it and kept doing it. Stripped down to a question of their own survival or someone else’s, a surprising number of people would choose their own survival.

Owen supposed he couldn’t blame them. They were children, true children, even though the girl looked older than he was. They hadn’t learned, as he had, that you put aside those niggling little hopes and lived through a situation like this by pushing forward and enduring.

He passed the Ravenclaw table, and noticed the largest knot of students he’d seen yet, focused around one furiously whispering girl. Owen moved carefully nearer. One girl looked around suspiciously at the breeze on the back of her neck,
but didn’t, of course, see him, so she returned to dancing attendance on the other.

Owen listened, too, and what he heard raised the hairs on the back of his neck.

“—for a reason,” the single, intense girl was saying, gesturing with one hand. “It all happened for a reason. The compulsion spell from Dumbledore, the Dark Arts we learned from Rovenan, everything. It was to prepare us for this. For a situation when we might have to do the right thing because no one else would.” She sat back and stared challengingly at the others.

“Yes, Margaret,” said another, her face troubled, “but the compulsion spell was to make us hate Harry just because Dumbledore hated him. What if this is the same kind of thing? You-Know-Who wants to make us turn on Harry because he hates Harry?”

Margaret shook her head. “Not the same thing,” she said, “not at all. Dumbledore was doing it because he’d been arrested for child abuse, and he hated that. He wanted to resume his power. But You-Know-Who just wants to kill Harry. The point isn’t getting us to hate him. The point is getting him. And you heard what he said. The moment he gets him, he’ll leave us alone. Or he’ll attack without mercy on Midsummer morning.”

Most of the students huddled around her flinched at that. A boy spoke this time. “Can we really trust him to keep his promises, though?”

“I’ve read some histories of the First War,” said Margaret, insistent. “You-Know-Who would sometimes send warnings to those villages he wanted to attack, promising the Death Eaters would strike at such and such a time. And they always did. He keeps his promises. I think he’ll keep this one.”

Owen concealed another snort. He had read those histories, too. What the survivors tended to forget was that Voldemort had only made such “promises” when he was fully come to power, and could use terror of his name just as effectively as actual raids. Before the last year of the War, he had never warned, simply attacked. There hadn’t been a single survivor of the Battle of Valerian.

“It’s something to think about,” said Margaret, with a firm nod.

*And you’re someone to watch,* Owen thought, and shifted away.

The Hufflepuff table actually exploded in a row as he watched, one that their Head had to come and break up. As she forcibly separated the two boys in the middle, one of them yelled, “I don’t care what you say, Zacharias! He’s going to kill us all if he doesn’t get him!”

“You’re being an idiot, Ernie,” the other boy, who looked as cool and calm and unruffled as it was possible to be, murmured. “Of course he won’t let us go. Why would he? A castle full of hostages to terrify, to torture, and to use on our parents to make sure they don’t fight him? Oh, yes, let us go, wonderful idea. He isn’t worthy of the name of evil, murdering bastard if he does.”

“Some of us might be able to leave,” Ernie insisted. It was patently obvious to Owen that he hoped he’d be among them. “You never know—”

“That is enough, both of you,” said their Head sharply. “You are coming with me to my office right now.”

Owen drifted over to the Slytherin table while that was settled. He didn’t hear much there, though. Apart from anything else, some of them were using spells that muffled their conversations, and he had to be careful lest one of them managed to dispel the concealment charm he was using.

He met his brother back in the middle of the Hall, and looked an inquiry at him. Michael shook his head, eyes even darker than usual.

“It’s—going to be hard for Harry,” he said.

Owen smiled grimly at his twin. “Good thing that he’s got us to protect him, then, and that we have a few less scruples than he does,” he said, and Michael nodded back, his hand closing on his wand.

Harry stood on top of the North Tower, barely a few inches from the shimmer of Hogwarts’s strengthened wards, and looked down at the campfires of Voldemort’s army.

And it was an army, a true one. Harry knew that the Death Eaters Indigena had rescued from Tullianum had swelled his ranks, but only by a small amount. The majority of these men and women were new recruits, culled from other countries; Harry thought that he would have had some advance notice if so many Dark wizards had disappeared from Britain.
His hand tightened on the stone for a moment as he watched an owl, dodging towards the school, spiral to the ground in the wake of an *Avada Kedavra* curse. He wondered grimly whose owl it had been. A parent, trying to send a letter or a Portkey to a child? One of the *Daily Prophet*’s owls attempting valiantly to bring the paper in? One of the regular pieces of correspondence that McGonagall dealt with in her position as Headmistress? They would never know. The Death Eaters had been killing all the owls that either tried to leave the school or reach it since they arrived that morning. Well, of course they would, Harry thought. The owls might bring a means of escape, and Voldemort wouldn’t want that.

He supposed he should be in bed. But there was no one to make him go. Harry had Vanished away from Owen and Michael, and Draco when he had come looking for him, and Snape was still in his offices, this time brewing the Veritaserum that McGonagall needed to interrogate the captured Death Eaters.

There was a traitor inside the school. And Harry had brought him there.

He leaned his head on the stone and breathed in the cool air. This high, he couldn’t smell the scent of the campfires, and the stars themselves seemed to make the night frosty and distant. He could pretend, for a moment, that he was reading about this situation in a history book or hearing about it as a story long after it was over, and his head could clear.

And then the numbers came back.

*Sixty-three. Nineteen. One.*

The “one” was that of a girl who’d slipped into a coma when Madam Pomfrey tried to cure the pain curse she’d suffered. The matron was unsure if she’d done it because of the pain curse, or because she was allergic to the potion used. Either way, she was hovering beside her now, trying frantically to bring her back to life and to light.

Sixty-three and nineteen and one made eighty-three. Harry was sure the number would climb before it was over.

He turned when he heard a light footstep behind him on the stone. It took him a moment longer to recognize who stood there, because her black robes blended so well with the night around her. Then he saw one of her sleeves flutter for no good reason, and knew it was Pansy.

Pansy, who had missed breakfast, because she must have known that those students would die on the battlefield this morning, and she was sworn by her oaths as a necromancer not to reveal that.

Harry drew in a deep breath, and then let it out again. He wasn’t sure what he could say. Even if he gave her words of comfort, she couldn’t respond to them, except in the sign language that he didn’t know. And he couldn’t blame her for not warning him. She was forbidden to.

She edged up beside him, though, and Harry could read the silent appeal in her body language well enough. He reached out and put a hand on her shoulder. The tension flowed out of Pansy, and she bowed her head. The intangible wind playing with the edge of her sleeve seemed to slow. Harry was almost sure he had soothed her.

He smiled at her, and then turned to make his way down the stairs. He’d patrol the school, and see if he encountered anyone roaming out of bed. The professors were so busy comforting all the students that they were bound to miss one or two.

And if that person needed to talk to him, then Harry could listen. If that person needed to punch him, he could allow that, too. If that person needed to scream and shriek in hatred because of what he had done, then Harry could take that, because he was ultimately strong enough to resist it, and he was ultimately in the wrong.


Snape was unsurprised to find that the Death Eaters had already been Transfigured back from a dove and a goldfish when he carried the Veritaserum into McGonagall’s office the next morning. They were seated in chairs, not only tied with ropes but stuck in Body-Binds that left their jaws alone hanging loose. The Headmistress looked up from contemplating their faces, and nodded to him.

Snape felt a grim surge of satisfaction as he uncapped the first vial. Dumbledore would have objected to this. In the end, of course, he would have allowed it anyway, after admitting that his methods of trying to persuade the Death Eaters wouldn’t work, but he would have dithered long enough to cause harm and get him, morally, off the hook. McGonagall charged ahead and did what she had to do to protect her students, and moral consequences could be faced later.

*Somewhat like Harry, in fact.*

Draco had come to him last night, when he couldn’t find Harry, and told him the tale of the dozen dead children. Snape
understood as no one else could have. He’d committed murders even after he became a spy, because that was the only way he could have maintained his cover as one of the most vicious and violent of the Death Eaters. Sometimes he’d tried to find a way out, but with Voldemort’s eyes always on him, there was usually no other decision to be made. One did what one had to do, secure in both the boiling bile of one’s own conscience and hatred and misunderstanding from those who would never have to make such choices.

Snape wished that Harry had come to him. But Harry had not, and though a few of the other professors had reported seeing him in the halls, they had not approached him. Too busy with their own students, Pomona and Filius had told him when he asked.

Or too afraid, Snape thought, as he tipped the Veritaserum down the first man’s throat. They think him marked for death already. No one walks too close to a man like that.

The prisoners became slack-jawed and loose-tongued enough when they had swallowed the potion, and willing to answer McGonagall’s questions. For the most part, their answers were as expected. They knew nothing of why Voldemort had wanted to attack Hogwarts early, or who might have destroyed the Floo connections, and he had sent them with Portkeys to force McGonagall to bring down wards that would prevent their use. There were others waiting with Portkeys, and with the word Apparate poised on their lips, for the moment when she might lower those wards to try and send the students home.

Then McGonagall asked, “Does Voldemort mean to keep his promise to attack on Midsummer Day, and Midsummer Day alone?”

“Yes,” said the one on the left, a man with dreaming, stupid eyes that Snape was not surprised had joined the Death Eaters. Idiots, the lot of them who would join with him now, he thought, curling his lip. “He will destroy everything on Midsummer. Unless Harry Potter is handed over to him first.”

The second said the same thing, in almost the same words, when the Headmistress asked him. McGonagall glanced at Snape, to ask if he had any questions. Snape leaned forward. Both men wore identical robes, and had worn identical masks. Nothing to indicate which one of them was higher-ranking, and if they were both newcomers, as demonstrated by the state of their knowledge so far, then neither would know that much about their Lord’s plans anyway.

But he did ask, “How will Voldemort use the giants in battle?”

“I don’t know,” said one, and then the other. Snape frowned. He’d noticed that the one on the left had a very slight trace of a French accent, so he focused on him. “How has Voldemort been recruiting in France?”

“Through a contact in Beauxbatons,” the Death Eater said dreamily. “I don’t know who it is. He passes messages on to former students who are sympathetic to the pureblood cause, and they pass messages on to others.”

Snape looked at McGonagall, but she was already standing, moving to her desk and scribbling something down. “When we can send owls again,” she said, without looking up, “then I will inform Madame Maxime of the problem on her staff.”

Snape felt a surge of gratitude that she had said when and not if. Then he told himself not to be ridiculous. The Headmistress might be the best leader for the school in this time of crisis, but that did not mean he had to feel gratitude towards her. Someone had to keep a clear head in what was rapidly turning into an exploding nest of loathing and fear.

As if the revelation had given her fresh strength, McGonagall returned to the interrogation. She still didn’t elicit much that had to do with the present battle, but she was learning essential things about the methods Voldemort had used to find his Death Eaters in France, Spain, Belgium, and Germany. When this siege ended, Snape thought—when, not if—they would be armed with information that might enable other nations to join in and prevent more Dark wizards from flowing into Britain.

And when this is done, I am going to find Harry.

Harry moved carefully along a dungeon corridor. He’d nearly run into Connor in the entrance hall, as his brother passed him on his way to the hospital wing to visit Ginny, who’d sustained a nasty cut to the shoulder protecting the Ravenclaw students yesterday. Harry was glad that he’d concealed himself at the last moment, so Connor couldn’t see what he looked like. As it turned out, one of the Hufflepuff boys who’d seen two of his friends riding in the same carriage with him had wanted to punch him, and while Harry had taken the blow on his cheek without much damage, Connor was sure to fuss over it and pretend it was worse than it was.

He’d almost reached the common room door. He intended to be even more careful in opening it. He’d seen the way some of
his Housemates watched him last night. It was one thing to unite against Ravenclaw Death Eaters attacking him in the school. He wondered, now that open war had come at last, how many would be thinking of saving their own skins, and how many had relatives outside the school in masks. He would stay only long enough to retrieve some of the ingredients for a common healing potion from his trunk, and then go to brew it. He could give what was left over to Madam Pomfrey.

A hand closed on his shoulder, and Harry nearly panicked before a too-familiar voice said, “There you are.”

Harry turned around in resignation. Snape stood behind him, and his eyes narrowed when he caught sight of Harry’s swelling cheek. Harry looked away for a moment.

“You know,” said Snape, voice soft with fury, “that making yourself into a martyr will not serve to keep the siege at bay. Why are you doing it?”

Well, at least he’s not playing sympathetic. That’s a relief. “Because Edgar White needed to work out some of his frustrations, sir,” said Harry, his voice neutral. “And by hitting me, he avoided hitting someone else. And it’s true that I didn’t anticipate that Voldemort would attack early, when I really should have.”

Snape gave a jerked-off noise that might have been a laugh in another universe. “We should have anticipated that, Harry,” he said. “The professors, and the rest of the school. We thought the students safe enough behind the wards as they went down to the Station; it was only a short carriage ride. We were the ones who did not anticipate that the Dark Lord would swallow those wards. Do not rub the stain of blood so deep into your skin that it will never come out.” He tugged hard on Harry’s shoulder, turning him around. “And come with me, so that I can give you a healing potion for your cheek.”

Harry followed obediently, but did feel compelled to say, “You must know what I’ve done, sir. Draco would have told you.”

“I’ve heard.” Snape did not look at him as he strode rapidly along the corridors. That relieved Harry, but at the same time, he couldn’t reconcile it with the fact that Snape was telling him not to make himself a martyr. The lack of sympathy made sense. But why was there still some sympathy left?

“Then you must know what I’ve become,” Harry said.

“Become?” Snape stared at him now.

“The same as Dumbledore,” said Harry, staring into his eyes, willing him to understand. He didn’t open his Occlumency pools, because he didn’t want to let Snape into the echoing cavern of grief and pain and numbers that was his head, but he let as much emotion as he could shine on the surface. “Someone who sacrifices a small number of people for what he calls the greater good. Someone who makes horrible decisions because he let himself be backed into a corner, and then justifies it by saying that he couldn’t have done anything else. I’ve tried to prevent the rot setting in too deep by not justifying my decision, sir, but there’s no getting around the fact that I did this. The person I was two days ago would not have.” He winced as he neared the end of that speech. The swelling at the edge of his jaw was starting to interfere with his talking.

Snape gazed at him in silence. Then he said, “Harry, I committed numerous crimes when I knew what the Light was, when my conscience had been restored to me, because it was the only way I could continue to serve the side I thought was right. I —grieve for it. And I did not let it change my whole perception of myself, because I knew how and why I did it. In time, I came to understand that there are different kinds of courage in the world. This is the courage that a Gryffindor will never understand, the courage to make a decision that the world will hate you for and not hate yourself for it.”

“But that’s exactly what Dumbledore did, sir, and why my mother said I should believe in him,” said Harry. He felt a strand of wondering agitation twine through his brain. Why was Snape doing this? He had changed, he knew he had changed, and Snape, if he had gone through a similar situation, should only know it along with him. “He made the hard decisions that everyone would hate him for—”

“And he tricked himself into believing they were the right ones.” Snape sneered. “Always, he justified himself to himself. In time, he minimized the costs, and then he could always choose the road of sacrifice, because the costs meant nothing to him. You have already resisted that by not justifying your decision. You know what those lives cost. You know you will never make a decision like that as a routine matter of course. You are not Dumbledore, Harry.”

“Perhaps not yet,” said Harry. “But does it really matter that my action was small and his were larger?”

“Yes,” said Snape, voice like a hammer. “Yes, it does. If you will not understand me on that scale, Harry, then understand me on this one. Can you see yourself dwindling into what Dumbledore became at the last?”

“Not right now,” said Harry. “But I could become that. I could progress along the road of sacrifice until—”

“Then you are not there yet,” said Snape. “And you are aware of it. Unless you insist on believing in destiny like a Hufflepuff and thinking that every action we take advances us in a certain direction regardless of whether we want to go
there, then you will resist this temptation. It is only a temptation like the others, Harry, a trap set to destroy you. Think yourself evil, or doomed to become evil, and you are doing to yourself what your mother and Dumbledore wanted to do.”

“But what I did was evil!” Harry yelled. “Merlin, why can’t you understand that? Every mistake of arrogance, recklessness, stupidity I made yesterday, and before—”

“Then let us examine a situation in which you tortured Voldemort until he released the Life-Web,” said Snape, voice emotionless now, the way it was when he lectured on a potion he did not particularly enjoy. “You willingly cause your greatest enemy unimaginable pain until he does your will. A use of compulsion, and a use of agony. And meanwhile, behind you, other children are dying while you wait for Voldemort to crack. And what then?”

Harry snarled at him.

“You see what I am driving at,” said Snape. “On some level, you even believe it. There were no right choices, Harry. Those who will cry and scream and blame you for this are those who were not in that situation, and had they been, they could well have done something worse. Let them cry and scream and blame you, if that is what you want, but do not encourage things like this.” He gestured at Harry’s swollen cheek. “That only increases their conviction that they are right and you are wrong, and it will do you more damage than anything else. It weakens you physically, when we need you strong.” He sniffed, and then sneered. “And you have not eaten, slept, or bathed since yesterday morning, have you?”

“No,” said Harry, knowing he sounded, and looked, very small.

“That is more stupid than anything you did on the battlefield,” said Snape, and turned away with a snap of his robes. “Come with me. When you have had the healing potion, you will bathe, eat, and rest. And I do not care if a hundred Hufflepuffs are seeking to punch you for what you did or failed to do yesterday.”

Harry trailed after him, mind a kaleidoscope of shattered pieces. Snape should know corruption if anyone should, since he had served both Dumbledore and Voldemort. He should have recognized the corruption settling in Harry. And yet he had refused to acknowledge it. He had even insisted that Harry’s plan to let other people take their frustrations out on him was the real stupidity here.

Harry hadn’t decided how that made him feel yet.

“I like the idea, but I can’t think of anything that would make them swallow it,” Harry said, leaning on one elbow as he frowned down at Fred and George’s latest creations, a pair of sweets that would cause the people who ate them to go blind until they ate the antidote.

George—well, Harry thought it was George—gave him a fierce smile. Both the twins’ smiles had grown more edged since the siege began, Harry had noticed. He held up a vial of what looked like water, or perhaps Veritaserum, at the most dangerous. “We thought of that,” he said. “So we’re going to—”

“Fly above them,” Fred finished. “And scatter the drops onto their heads like rain. Whoever it touches will go blind.”

Harry frowned. “And you’re sure you won’t catch any of our own fighters when they’re in the middle of the Death Eaters?”

“Ah, but our side will be carrying the antidote,” said Fred, and displayed what looked to Harry like an identical vial. “We’ll give it to them before they go into battle, and they’ll just have to—”

“Swallow it, if this potion touches them,” George finished, and shook the vial he held. Harry drew back from it, a bit warily, though the vial was capped. “We’ll tell everyone about that before we go to battle.”

Harry nodded. “And you have enough for everyone who’ll be fighting next Friday?”

George and Fred gave him identical looks of pity. “Hate to disappoint you, mate,” said Fred. “But our army—”

“Just isn’t that big,” George finished. “We’ll have enough for multiple doses of the antidote, come to that.”

Harry sighed. “All right. Anything else you have ready yet?”

The twins shook their heads, and left with comments about designing more. Harry leaned back against the wall of the Room of Requirement and watched them go.

It was the third night of the siege, and Harry was letting himself be as cautiously hopeful as he ever got. He was feeling better now that he’d rested and eaten, and both yesterday and today he’d joined Moody in here for intense sessions with the dueling club members. That now included every student fifth year and up—or those students who had been fifth year and up—in the school, though not everyone would be going out onto the battlefield. Some of them would stay in Hogwarts and
defend the younger students when Midsummer came.

The days had also included strategizing with the people Harry was absolutely certain he could trust, the twins among them. He had to face the fact that the traitor who had disabled the Floo Network was most likely someone among his allies, and that meant he couldn’t talk to them unless they would consent to take Veritaserum and answer a few questions first. Harry hadn’t asked them to do that yet.

He pushed himself wearily to his feet. It had been hours since he’d eaten, and once he did, then Draco had demanded he come back to the Slytherin common room and sleep in his own bed. Otherwise, he’d said, Harry would just show the rest of Slytherin House he was afraid, and some of them would begin to think he was weak, and Harry would have people who might try to open Hogwarts to Voldemort just because the Dark Lord seemed stronger.

Harry made his way quietly to the kitchens. He would ask the house elves for a few pieces of bread and cheese to prepare his own sandwich. They would mostly be asleep at this hour of the night, but a few were always awake, cooking the breakfast in shifts and preparing food that would have to last longer periods of time.

He reached the entrance he knew from the Marauders’ Map, the pear he would have to tickle, but slowed down when he heard muffled voices coming from behind the painting. Most of them were house elves, but they sounded shrill with distress, and there were the deeper tones of at least one wizard there. Harry hesitated, and then waited, leaning his ear against the painting and murmuring an eavesdropping spell. If the wizard had legitimate business here and caught him, Harry could always plead the security of the castle.

The wizard’s voice came into focus first. “…just let me cast the magic that I need to cast, you chattering imbeciles!” His words were so high with nervousness that Harry didn’t recognize him.

“But Headmistress McGonagall says good elves is not letting nobody cast magic in the kitchens!” wailed one of the elves, and Harry heard the soft fleshy sounds that came from them tugging their ears or wringing their hands. “Nobody but good elves is supposed to be here! No sneaking food, no nasty tricks, no no no!”

“It will only take a minute,” said the wizard, his voice softening now. “I promise. Just let me cast it, and I’ll be out of here in a moment.”

“No,” the elves whined in chorus, but Harry suspected they would lose the argument. A wizard could often trick, bully, or persuade servile house elves into doing what he wanted, because they would punish themselves later, and the web kept them too terrified to protest that much unless the threat was blatant.

Harry thought he’d heard enough. If this was innocent, such as casting freshness charms on the food, then the person inside could hardly protest him walking into the situation. But Harry was beginning to suspect that this was the traitor.

*It would make sense for him to go after the food, so that it would be easier for Voldemort to starve us out,* Harry thought, and tickled the pear. It giggled and transformed into a handle. Harry pulled the door open.

Mortimer Belville swung around, wand in hand. The house elves around him glanced up from sniffling and tugging their ears and banging their heads against tables. Harry caught Belville’s eye.

The man panicked. He whipped his wand towards Harry and chanted something in what sounded like Gaelic, a spell Harry had never heard before. A beam of green light not that far from the shade of *Avada Kedavra* formed and flew towards him. Harry ducked under a table, and saw the light sever the wood neatly.

*Yes, Belville is our traitor,* he thought, as he scrambled back to one knee and cast a nonverbal Body-Bind. It recoiled from a shield that Belville had brought up around himself. Harry surprised himself with how calm he was. His anger was a mounting boil on the horizon, though. *Makes sense, I suppose. None of us recognized the spell that had disabled the Floo connections, either.*

Belville got behind the cover of a table, and pointed his wand at the heaps of pancakes and eggs the house elves had set out for breakfast. Harry didn’t know what he had in mind—perhaps a rotting curse, or some kind of poison—and he didn’t intend to wait and find out.

His anger had arrived, and that was more than enough for him to *will* Belville to be still. Belville froze. His eyes gaped, and his hand was stone, despite the awkward position his arm was currently in. Harry watched in puzzlement for a moment as his face turned blue, then realized his spell prevented Belville from breathing, too. He shook his head and released the man’s lungs from the spell. Belville could breathe, but do nothing else, as Harry floated him out from behind the table, prized his wand out of his motionless fingers, and nodded to the house elves.

“He was trying to hurt Hogwarts,” he told them. “I’ll take him to the Headmistress, and she’ll deal with him. Now, this is very important. Did he cast magic on any food in here?”
“No, Master Harry, sit!” said an elf who still had his hands clamped on his ears. From the sound of his voice, he’d been the one who had objected to Belville casting the charms in the first place. “We prevented him!” There came a chorus of vigorous head-nods from all around the kitchen, and Harry relaxed.

“Thank you,” he said, and the elves’ eyes welled with tears. Harry went on hastily before they could begin an outburst. “I’ll take him into custody from here, but the Headmistress and Professor Snape might have questions for you later.”

“Mistress McGonagall and Master Snape shall always be welcome,” the house elf in the lead said firmly, and once again the others nodded so hard it looked as if their heads would fall off.

Harry nodded back, and then levered Belville into the air, deliberately floating him upside-down as he began the trek back to McGonagall’s office. There was nothing that said he couldn’t “enjoy” the experience of blood rushing to his head while Harry maneuvered him along the hallways. At least it was better than dropping him on his skull, which Harry also had the temptation to do.

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“Caught the traitor.”

Draco hadn’t expected Harry to come and sit at the Slytherin table for breakfast that morning, much less make a declaration like that. He stared, his mouth gaping open in a most un-Malfoyish manner, while Harry began to eat his pancakes, simply ignoring the eyes that watched him from around the Great Hall.

“Well, who was it?” Draco demanded at last, when Harry showed no indication of following up that amazing introduction with anything else. He’d intended to scold Harry for not coming back to the common room last night after all. That had prompted more quiet mutters and shiftings of alliance. At least half of Slytherin, Draco thought, considered Harry afraid now, half-helpless in the face of Voldemort’s threat.

Harry swallowed the mouthful of pancake he’d taken, and replied, “Mortimer Belville. McGonagall and I questioned him under Veritaserum last night after I caught him trying to tamper with the food in the kitchens.” He rolled his eyes and snorted when Draco gave a nervous glance at his breakfast. “Don’t worry, I caught him before he could do anything. He said that he’d written two letters to Voldemort using the name Serpent—the name Burke had used. One was before Midwinter, and the other was a few days ago. He informed Voldemort that I considered him one of my allies, and that he should come to Hogwarts before Midsummer to prepare for the battle. It might have been one of the reasons that Voldemort decided to move and come to the school early, since he didn’t want all of my allies to have time to arrive.”

Only when Harry stabbed his fork down viciously did Draco realize how angry he was. Harry had rarely showed any emotion but compassion and quiet determination in the past few days, as if he didn’t want anyone to realize that their supposed savior could also feel rage. Although, Draco thought, as he watched Harry stab again, hard enough to make his fork skid and shriek on the plate, I suppose that could also be because he thinks he has to be some kind of ridiculous symbol to everyone, a saint or a martyr, someone perfect.

“Indigena Yaxley wrote him back,” Harry continued, after another few bites. “He was supposed to report what he could of my activities to Voldemort, and, of course, cause as much pain and trouble in Hogwarts itself as he could. He was the one who disabled the Floo connections.” Harry shook his head. “No wonder we couldn’t recognize the spell. It was one he’d studied in some obscure book—and that’s where he got the fact that all the Floo connections in Hogwarts are linked to the Headmistress’s office, too. Ravenclaws.”

That was loud enough to make half the Ravenclaw table glare at them. Draco nudged Harry with one elbow and nodded at them when he looked up. Harry, to Draco’s intense, secret delight, glared instead of turning away or just bearing the glares as he had for the past few days, and the Ravenclaws were the ones who wound up averting their eyes in confusion.

“What can you repair the Floo connections, now that you know what spell did it?” Draco asked, and then could have kicked himself for phrasing the question that way. Harry didn’t need more troubles piled onto his shoulders, as if he were the only one who could relieve them. Draco should have asked if McGonagall or the professors, the ones who would normally take care of those responsibilities, could do it.

Harry’s face took on a disgusted expression. “No. He never looked up the countercurse. Hermione’s volunteered to research in the Hogwarts library and see if she can find something, but I don’t know if she will. I know we don’t have the book Belville talked about.”

Draco nodded. At least Granger’s handling it, doing something actually useful, instead of expecting Harry to save her like the rest of them. As much as he hated to admit it, Gryffindor had been the House most supportive of Harry since the siege began, and the one to argue most vehemently against the idea of handing him over to Voldemort in hopes that the Dark Lord
would keep his promise and leave the rest of them alone. The Slytherins outside of those already devoted to Harry were too busy thinking of the politics, the Hufflepuffs were mourning the greatest number of students killed from their House, and the Ravenclaws were returning to their old distrust of Harry with a vengeance. But between them, Potter, Granger, and the Weasleys were browbeating the rest of their House and dragging them along where they might have resisted, as well as urging the upper-year Gryffindors who’d never participated in the dueling club to attend.

“What’s going to happen to Belville now?” he asked.

“That’ll wait until after the battle’s over,” said Harry. He swallowed a few more bites, then rose abruptly from the table. “I can’t eat any more right now,” he said, tossing his head like a restless horse. “Come on. I want to talk to Snape again. Maybe he needs help brewing the healing potions. And then I should visit the hospital wing and see if that girl who fell into the coma is awake yet.”

Draco stood, though he wanted to object that Harry should stay and finish his breakfast. He was too relieved to see that Harry had managed to put aside his guilt and self-loathing for the moment, though. Later, when the mood had had some time to settle in Harry, he would nag.

They made it to the middle of the Great Hall, Draco occasionally catching ripples of movement from the corner of his eye as the Rosier-Henlin twins followed under a concealment charm, and then the hex came flying from the Ravenclaw table.

Harry was turning to meet it before Draco recognized it, and the Rosier-Henlin twins were intoning *Protego* together, so that the hex crashed into three Shield Charms at once and dissolved. Harry stood in silence and looked for who had done it. He didn’t say anything. He didn’t have to. The expression on his face did that for him.

The Ravenclaws shuffled and shifted apart, and then a boy Draco thought was a seventh-year got shoved forward from the middle of them. He stumbled once, but regained his balance. Draco saw, from the corner of his eye, that Professor Flitwick was already on his way down from the head table, his wizened face looking even older than usual.

“Gorgon,” said Harry, his voice inflectionless. “Do you know, I *did* think that we’d taken care of our disagreement last year.”

Draco did know the boy. He’d insulted Harry in second year, been terrified of him in third, and dueled with him at the beginning of fourth. He managed to look frightened and sulky both at once now, and his eyes cut back and forth between Harry and his Head of House.

“Gorgon,” said Flitwick, halting a few feet away. “What excuse do you have for your behavior?”

Gorgon exploded, his fists clenching. “What excuse do you *think* I have?” he shouted. “He got my cousin killed, Professor! He did it because he was careless and an idiot and—and maybe he’s not a Dark Lord, but does that matter? He had some idiot plan to face You-Know-Who, and he just couldn’t leave the rest of us out of it! He had to do this, too!” Abruptly he straightened, eyes darkening further, and his next words came out like a whip tipped with malice.

“And actually,” he said, speaking to Flitwick, but with his gaze locked on Harry, “I heard something that makes me reconsider the accusation of Dark Lord, Professor. I heard *someone* saying that she looked over her shoulder when she was running to the castle and saw some of the first-years dying beside the lake. Harry here just hovered on his broom over Voldemort, and did nothing to save them. What good is he as the Boy-Who-Lived, if he can’t even face You-Know-Who the way he’s supposed to?” Murmurs of outrage began circling the room in the wake of his words.

Draco looked at Harry, and saw that his face had turned white. His own stomach was missing its bottom now. *Shit. Someone saw. And if they know that Harry actually killed those children...*

Gorgon looked pleased with the way he’d scored a hit on Harry, but Flitwick interrupted his triumph. “You will come with me to see the Headmistress at once, Gorgon.”

“What? We’re not allowed to speak the truth now, Professor, even on the edge of dying?” Gorgon demanded. “You’ll notice that he didn’t deny it!”

“We are not allowed to cast hexes on each other in a situation as desperate as this one.” The tiny little professor’s voice had grown markedly deeper, and Draco was reminded that he’d been a dueling champion in his day. “The Headmistress has forbidden it outside of actual dueling practice. I do not know which punishment she will choose for you, but I am sure it will be *severe.*”

He led the way out of the Great Hall. Gorgon followed, though he did dare a final scowl over his shoulder at Harry.

Draco looked at him warily. Harry swallowed once or twice, but nodded when Draco caught his eye.

“There are some people who are going to react that way,” he muttered. “Let’s go find Snape. I’m fine.”
No, you’re not, Draco thought in exasperation as he trailed Harry to the door, closely followed by the Rosier-Henlin twins. It’s one thing to know they blame you, and another to know they’re willing to hex you to exercise that blame. What if they do it again? What if someone finds out that you mercy-killed those children, Harry? Will you just stand there and let them curse you?

Connor might not know much. That was one thing Snape had told him whenever they dueled together: that he didn’t know much, even when he got one of the Light-based spells right. And he might not know that much about Potions, or Transfiguration, or Herbology, or in fact most of his school subjects. He might only be good at honesty, and flinging hexes, and compulsion, and flying.

But he knew this much.

“You’re being stupid,” he told his brother.

Harry paused and stared at him between strands of his fringe, which was matted and dripping with sweat. He’d tried to show Connor a fire-based spell that was supposed to seek out every scrap of wood on an enemy’s body and burn it—including a wand. Connor couldn’t yet master it. Harry had shown no sign of impatience, or of discouragement. He just went on showing it to Connor, over and over again, long after everyone else had left the Room of Requirement and gone to dinner.

It was six days into the siege, Thursday evening, and Connor knew how things stood now. Every day, more and more people in the school got angry at Harry, because they were stupid. He’d largely managed to keep such stupidity out of Gryffindor, because he made everyone who wanted to say it back up his argument, and so far it always trailed off into mumbles of “but someone walking down the corridor’s best friend’s cousin’s sister said” and unfounded allegations about Harry practicing dark spells on helpless spiders in random corners. But it was deeply-rooted in Slytherin, and now it was beginning to affect Harry.

“I don’t know what you mean,” said Harry, in that monotonous steel voice that Connor hated. “This curse could save your life someday, and on Midsummer, the Light will be overhead. It’ll help you if you ask. You have to know this curse, Connor. I know you might not get it right tonight, but you will eventually.” He turned away and faced the far wall again, where a stuffed “wizard” made of cloth had lost every bit of wood it owned twice over. “Now. Like this. Ard—”

“You’re being stupid,” Connor cut in, determined to make Harry acknowledge him this time, “because no matter how much time you spend drilling and dueling and strategizing and catching traitors, there will always be someone who blames you, Harry.”

Harry’s shoulders stiffened. “I know that,” he said.

“Then fucking act like it!” Connor burst out, letting his temper have free reign. He knew Draco and Snape had tried to talk to Harry about this, but they were too content to back off and wait when Harry showed signs of pain, or said that he understood. Connor didn’t plan to. Serpents bite on the heel. Lions go for the throat. “Stop treating yourself like a Muggle machine! Stop flinching every time someone mutters about you having caused this! Stop worrying about them so much! We have to have you to win this siege and organize this battle, because you’re the only one who can face Voldemort, and that’s not even counting the people who want you to live because we love you and would prefer that you not die, please. Driving yourself to exhaustion won’t work, and you can’t go out there and offer yourself up!”

“What makes you think I would?”

Connor stepped towards him, seized his brother’s arm, and spun him around. Harry faced him, looking blank, his green eyes carefully closed. But Connor knew this expression of old. It wasn’t blank and it wasn’t cold. It was the look Harry wore when he was being a stubborn dumbarse.

“Because I grew up with you, Harry,” Connor snapped. “And I didn’t know everything, but I noticed this. You acted this exact same way when James or Sirius or Remus said something that you wanted to think deeply about. You disappeared into yourself and let your body function on its own. I noticed because you always played your worst games of Quidditch on those days. And now I think you’re working yourself up to go out there and try to settle this once and for all. Or, at least, you’re not here, and you need to be here.”

Harry blinked, and for a moment, Connor saw a glimpse of something human in his eyes. Then he whispered, “But it’s sixty-four now,” which made no sense at all, so Connor asked about it.

“What do you mean?”

“She died,” Harry whispered. “The girl who went into the coma. Heloise Whitestag. She died this morning. And sixty-three
people died on the battlefield. So that’s sixty-four people dead now.”

Connor cocked his head and waited, eyes narrow, sensing his brother wasn’t done.

“Sixty-four people I’ve killed.”

Connor gripped his shoulders and shook him. Harry’s teeth jarred in his head, and when his head stopped bouncing, he gave his brother a look of abject astonishment.

“You. Are. Being. Stupid,” said Connor, and resisted the impulse to slap Harry across the face when his stare only deepened. “You didn’t kill them, Harry.” Harry tried to interrupt, but he charged on. “No. I’ve heard those rumors about the lake, and I don’t know what happened there. I’ll wait until you’re ready to tell me. But for Merlin’s sake, Harry, stop brooding and come back. You’re not going to give Voldemort what he wants. You know he’d slaughter us all even if you went out to him. You’re not going to do that. Say you won’t.”

“Connor—“

*He’s reluctant to swear. He was thinking about it.* Connor was only thankful that he’d found out about this, and not Draco or Snape. They would have yelled. This didn’t need yelling, not now.

“Harry,” he said, and softened his voice, and gripped his brother’s shoulders so that he could stare into his eyes. “Say you won’t. Swear it to me.”

Harry stared at him.

“Swear it on Merlin and your magic,” Connor insisted.

Harry swallowed, closed his eyes, and said, “All right. I swear it on Merlin and my magic.”

Connor wrapped his arms around Harry and hugged the breath out of him. He felt Harry’s arms curve around him a moment later, and Harry let out one large sob, but not a flood of tears. Maybe that was a good thing. Maybe it wasn’t. But at least Connor had managed to avert what could have been his brother’s most painful stupidity.

“Good,” Connor muttered into his ear. “And in return, that oath and this particular piece of stupidity will remain between us.”

Harry nodded, his head moving lightly against Connor’s neck. Connor sighed, and hugged his brother one more time.

*Anyone else, and he’d be the one reassuring him,* he thought, stepping away so that he could draw his wand and practice the wood-burning curse again. *But because it’s him, he thinks there should have been something more he could do, and some way to save us all before Midsummer.*

*Well, sometimes there’s just not.*

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Hawthorn hugged her daughter one-armed. “You’ll get through this, Pansy,” she whispered. “And, in the meantime, know that I am incredibly proud of you.”

Pansy nodded, and her hands flickered out from her sleeves, speaking in the sign language of the necromancers. Thank you, Mother. I promise that I won’t do anything stupid. I’ll only do what has to be done. I love you.

“That’s my girl,” Hawthorn said, and then she let her go, and watched as Pansy walked calmly out of the room. The black robes concealed her motions, her general shape, and her face, but she was still the daughter Hawthorn had raised. In spite of her reassurance, Hawthorn did not truly think she would turn from her path and break her oaths. She had kept silent when she knew that dozens of children would go forth from the school and die. She would get through the coming battle, too.

Hawthorn had long since settled with herself whether it was moral for a necromancer to keep silent when she knew that someone would die. Seers saw the future in uncertain terms, and made prophecies that could shift, but what a necromancer saw was inevitable. Telling would make no difference. Death was absolute, and people would die the way they would die.

She turned and drew the cover off the basin of warm water the house elves had brought her the moment she asked for it, no fuss and no questions. With a sigh, she bathed her left arm in the water, and frowned at the black skull and snake on her skin that was the reminder of an old, old foolishness.

For the last two nights, as the siege turned on through a week since its beginning—it was now Saturday afternoon—her Mark had been steadily darkening and burning. Hawthorn had known when her former Lord was summoning the Death Eaters before, but the pain had never been this bad before, and she feared some new evil. She had caught Adalrico’s eye in
the past day, and Snape’s, and Peter Pettigrew’s. Their faces were all grim. They all held their left arms as if they were tender. When pressed, Snape had admitted that he feared it might be something similar to what Regulus Black had suffered—an apparently infected Dark Mark. He had given Hawthorn a potion that helped with the pain and advised her to bathe the Mark often.

Hawthorn was not sure what would halt the Mark’s inflammation after the siege. Regulus Black had pursued some arcane method of healing not open to the rest of them. But she was confident that they would find some means of halting it. Snape was a Potions Master, and for the sake of old fellowship, he would share any solution he discovered with them. And Hawthorn herself was no slouch in Herbology, though nowhere near Indigena Yaxley’s level. She could look to the plants of her estate, the Garden, after the siege.

After the siege.

The words could sound as if they described another universe, if she let them.

Hawthorn would not let them. She refused to regret when she felt the burning of the Mark, and think about what would happen if she had chosen to accept Fenrir Greyback’s coercion and join in the effort to resurrect the Dark Lord three years ago; she certainly refused to surrender. She did not bow to intimidation.

She narrowed her eyes, and knew a small growl was bubbling in her throat.

Of any kind.

She had received a letter from Lupin last week, just before she prepared to Apparate to Hogsmeade. He had detailed his choices in the matter of Loki’s pack, laid out the laws against werewolves and the worsening situation, and begged her to come and join him. He hadn’t wanted her to know beforehand because he feared she would betray the plans to Harry, but now that he knew anyway, Lupin wanted Hawthorn to consider that she had a choice to acknowledge herself as a lycanthrope.

I choose to define myself, Hawthorn thought, as she watched the water begin to boil around her Mark. I am not a brand on my arm, and I am not a bite on my neck. I follow no master, and I follow no Lord. I give my loyalty where I choose, and I am a pureblood witch, and a mother, and a widow, and part of Harry’s circle.

She pulled her arm free of the water and called aloud for another bowl, which had a house elf appear, bowing, at once. Hawthorn thought she rather scared it, since she knew her eyes were flashing amber and the hair on her body was standing up, and she looked as frightening as a werewolf could so near the dark of the moon.

That did not matter, though.

I am myself. I will not back down. I will think in terms of ‘after the siege’ if I choose to.

And I will go about tomorrow, find the source of this nonsense saying Harry should surrender himself, and put a stop to it.

“Do you think you can really expand the illusion enough to cover all the horses?” Harry asked Honoria dubiously. He had to admit, he hadn’t considered using her glamours as a major part of the attack before. He knew she was good with tiny illusions, even good enough to use them unconsciously and in great detail, but the horses would blaze in the storm of the Light and would make quite a lot of noise as they charged. Harry thought even a master illusionist would be hard put to cover that.

Honoria only grinned at him. Currently, she wore an illusion that made her hair look short and black, and her robes flashed with distracting letters in various colors. Harry didn’t know why, except that she’d wanted it that way. “I promise, Harry,” she said, “I can cover anything you want me to.”

Harry nodded, slowly. “All right. But I’ll want you to practice before we actually get into the battle.”

“Of course!” Honoria looked around at the Room of Requirement, which at the moment resembled a place for planning strategy, with a round table in the middle and the walls covered with maps of Hogwarts. “What do you want me to make this look like?”

“Surprise me,” said Harry.

Honoria nodded and closed her eyes, a tiny line furrowing her brow. A moment later, the Room around them vanished, and they were tumbling through the air, in freefall, with the fires of the Death Eater camp beneath them and getting closer all the time.
Harry swore and grabbed for some handhold despite himself. It felt incredibly real, and not only visually. He could hear voices beneath him, the rush of passing air, and Honoria’s exultant laughter. He could feel the wind in his hair and the turning of his body, too, so thick that his brain kept insisting he was falling. The smell of cooking drifted up to him.

Then the vision of sky and camps was gone, and they sat in the Room of Requirement once more, with Honoria gazing at him innocently.

Harry found his voice on the third try. “You’re right. It will more than do.” He was even more impressed than he was letting on. Ordinary illusionists could create sensory effects of all kinds. But to coordinate them so that they struck at the same time and formed a seamless picture took incredible skill.

Honoria stood up and clapped her hands, the illusion around her hair melting to reveal her ordinary bright curls again. “Thank you!” she said, and hurried out of the Room, leaving Harry alone.

He leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes. Exhaustion pounded through him once again. It had nothing to do with ordinary weariness of the body; he’d slept in Slytherin last night, from just after nine at night until well after six, and “shown” everyone who would take the hint that he wasn’t afraid of the shifting currents in his own House.

But worry and anxiety were taking their toll. The battle was in four days, five if one counted the Sunday now half past. Voldemort had still not made a move on the castle, but Midsummer’s steady nearing, and the announcement about his granting the other students safe passage if Harry came down to him—repeated every morning, now—meant he didn’t have to. Fear feasted in the castle, more ravenously than a pack of Peter’s rats. Sidelong glances came at Harry from the most unexpected people, including Blaise and some of the others he’d trained with in the dueling club. He could see the promise whispering in their brains.

And the words had taken hold in his own brain, as Connor had somehow managed to see on Thursday. Harry had to wonder if there wasn’t something he could do to insure that Voldemort kept his promise.

_I could trick him into swearing an Unbreakable Vow._ That was the sanest of the many plans, mad as a fever dream, that had assaulted him so far. And Harry knew they were mad, even as he entertained them. He was the only one who could face Voldemort. He knew it. He had to stay within the castle, no matter how much others might want him out.

But their fear, and the idea that if he was such a hero and the Boy-Who-Lived he should do something about this, and the urge to do _anything_ rather than increase the numbers pounding in his head, all dragged at him like puppies with a rag between their teeth. Shouldn’t he do _something_? Was his reluctance only because he knew that people who loved him would be upset to see him die, and because he had, perhaps, corrupted himself more than he knew by killing those dozen children near the lakeside? What if Snape was wrong, and he was right? He had changed himself, crossed a chasm he could never cross back over, by killing those children. He had stepped onto a path that would lead him to become Dumbledore, in the end.

If he went down to Voldemort, if he struck, if he tried to end it now and the prophecy was with him, then at least the world might be spared two Dark Lords, or a Dumbledore with _absorbere_ abilities.

“Harry.”

He sat up quickly. He hadn’t thought someone could enter the Room without his knowing it, but then, he didn’t know everything about the Room of Requirement.

Vera stared at him for long moments, then shook her head. “You have another hole torn in your soul,” she whispered. “Why did you not come to me?”

“So I could fight through this on my own,” said Harry. “I needed to think about it. I have to look at what I did through my eyes, and not just others’. Of course other people are going to tell me that I did the only thing I could, because they want to keep me alive. But I have to decide for myself if this is a crime deserving death.”

He blinked when he finished. He hadn’t realized until he said it that he had thought of going to Voldemort as much like an execution as like a sacrifice.

Vera took a seat on the floor opposite him, folding her legs under her. “You did something horrible,” she said softly. “And it was the only thing you could do.”

Harry shook his head. “You can only see the effects on me,” he said. “You can’t see the thing itself.”

“I read your conflicting motivations better than you read them,” Vera said, with no sign that she’d been insulted. From what he’d seen of her, Harry almost thought the Seer was incapable of feeling anger. “You know, at bottom, that surrendering yourself is not a choice. You know the true prophecy, and you know that someone must stand at your right shoulder when
you face Voldemort.”

Harry shifted, and shrugged one shoulder. “Maybe not. My brother might be the one destined to defeat him instead.”

“You do not really believe that, either,” Vera told him quietly. “You do not know how he could love the whole of the wizarding world. And I have seen him, and he does not—not yet. If the time can come when he can fulfill that part of the prophecy, it is long hence.”

Harry lowered his eyes.

“You do not believe that, but you are falling back into old habits of thought, that you yourself are evil and deserving of punishment in situations where you will excuse others.” Vera reached out and cupped his chin, turning his eyes up to meet hers again. “I do not have enough time to heal you now,” she added, voice a dying fall. “But I hope that you will let me try, when this battle is done with—and that you will not kill yourself in the meantime, because you have deluded yourself into thinking you deserve it.”

Harry hesitated, then swallowed and said, “I—I haven’t told anyone yet, but I had planned to go to the Sanctuary for the summer.”

The smile that crossed Vera’s smile was warmer than the sunrise. “That is a wonderful idea, Harry,” she murmured. “That would be part of the reason that you are so determined to drive Voldemort from the battlefield bleeding?”

Harry nodded. “I couldn’t leave the wizarding world for as long as I need to if he was still active and sending his Death Eaters on raids. But if I wound him as badly as I’m planning, he won’t dare show his head for months. I am going to make him hurt.” His hand was clenched so tightly into a fist on his knee that it hurt, itself. Harry took a deep breath and forced it to relax. “And then I can go to the Sanctuary. I need to get past the lingering traces of these soul-wounds I bear. I’ll bring Snape and Draco with me if they want to come, and if they would be welcome.”

“You Malfoy and the Bitter One are more than welcome,” said Vera. “And I wish you good luck in the battle. Do not kill yourself, for then I would never see you healed, and that would be a tragedy.” She leaned nearer and let her dry lips brush his cheek, then stood. “Do not drive yourself to madness, either. The grief and fear of those around you is understandable, but it is, in the end, grief and fear, not rational thought. Allow them to feel emotions in peace, but not to control your actions.”

Harry watched her until she left, and then bowed his head and rested it on his arms for a long moment.

Maybe I can get through this. Maybe I can. More, maybe I’ll deserve to get through this, if I try very hard.

Those words ran on the surface of his mind. Underneath it ran another mantra.


Millicent stared in silence at the dark specks in her father’s hand. Then she raised her eyes to his face.

“Does Harry know you have those?” Her voice was smooth and calm and normal. She congratulated herself on it. She would have felt even better if she hadn’t felt the need, a moment later, to put her hand out and clutch the wall of the room where her father was staying, once a Defense professor’s quarters.

“Of course not,” said Adalrico, and put the specks—the Black Plague spores, Millicent corrected herself; she could call things by their true name—back into his robe pocket. “He would forbid me from using them, if he knew. Quite right and proper for the ethical side not to use disease magic.”

Millicent watched him carefully. Adalrico sounded—odd. Different. He was rubbing his left arm, and she knew why, so that wasn’t the difference. He prowled back and forth from the bed to the room’s far wall, and all the while his free hand opened and closed, opened and closed again, as if he didn’t know what to do with himself.

“Father?” she ventured at last. “What’s wrong?”

“This is all wrong!” Adalrico exploded, spinning around. Millicent noticed him stumble as his weak foot came down, but he recovered in moments and shook his head impatiently at her, so she stayed where she was. “We need to be fighting poison with poison. I know I could reach a few of the Death Eaters from the walls, if McGonagall would drop the wards for one moment. I would give them fear. But she won’t, because she is too worried about some of the students getting hurt.” He slapped his hands together, snarling. “This is war! They’re already hurt! They’ve seen other students die in front of them. I think it’s time that my old comrades saw some of their own die.”
“You think Harry should be harsher,” Millicent summarized. She should have known this was coming, she thought, reflecting back on little hints her father had been dropping all week. This was Monday, the tenth day of the Dark Lord’s siege. She supposed she should be grateful he’d held back from snapping as long as he had.

“Of course he should be,” said Adalrico. “Make the other side suffer, the other side sacrifice. That is the way to fight a Dark Lord. It is the way we fought Dumbledore, when I was a Death Eater.” His hand slid up and down his left arm in a soothing motion. “Show them that you mean to kill them, and continue killing them until they withdraw from the battlefield. Harry is too hesitant, too gentle. He makes the Dark Lord believe that he can conquer us, and he can. He will destroy us unless we prepare ourselves to carry the battle to him.”

“I think we’re doing that,” said Millicent, feeling as if she watched a stranger. She knew her father was crueler than most people, far crueler than Harry, but watching him actually prepare to betray a formal family alliance was madness. Has he forgotten that that scar on his arm will burst open and bleed him to death if he betrays Harry?

“On Midsummer,” said Adalrico. “And what is the point of waiting until then? Why not break the siege now, and charge?”

“Because a storm of Light is coming on Midsummer,” said Millicent. “And it will help the Light allies Harry’s assembled.”

“We should not wait,” Adalrico insisted. “We should attack now.”

Millicent stood very straight. She felt three loyalties pulling and tugging at her: loyalty to her father, loyalty to Harry, and loyalty to her family. But two of them were pulling in the same direction.

“I am going to Harry now,” she said, “unless you swear by our name that you will not attack the Death Eaters on your own.”

Adalrico spun around and stared at her. “What?” he asked at last, his voice soft with disbelief.

“You heard me,” said Millicent. She felt light-headed, but she had no doubt that this was the right thing to do. “We swore to him, Father. The honor of our family is at stake. And he is my leader, my vates—if you want to put it that way, my Lord. You are doing this because of your own impatience, not because it’s the right thing to do.”

For a long moment, there was only the sound of noisy breathing. Millicent was vaguely surprised to realize that some of it was her own.

Then her father said, “And is that not betraying the honor of our family, Millicent? To turn on your own father?”

“No, when you would be the one to do wrong by the Bulstrode name,” Millicent retorted, and took a step forward. “I’ve watched Draco’s father lose his grip on the Malfoy honor slowly, because his son knows what Harry is better than he does. I don’t intend to let you lead us down that same rocky path, Father. Swear now, or I go now.” She let a shimmer of black run around her fist, just in reminder to her father that she was his magical heir and could use any of the gifts that he possessed to stop her.

Adalrico held her eyes. She held them, and stared back.

Then he stepped close to her, swept her up in an embrace, and murmured into her hair, “I swear by our name that I will not attack the Death Eaters.”

Millicent managed to relax, her head spinning. She put her arms around her father in return and held him. She was already almost as tall as he was.

“MY daughter,” Adalrico whispered. “My heir. I am so proud.”

And that is what being Bulstrode means, Millicent thought. We endure, and we do not falter, no matter what the test.

Hermione paused in her reading of the latest book and wiped her eyes for a moment. They were watering. She’d been reading since dinner the night before, and because not even Madam Pince was going to chase her out of the library under these circumstances, she’d read straight through the night. She thought it was somewhere around dawn now.

Dawn on Tuesday, her helpful calendar-voice piped up to remind her. And the battle begins on Friday.

She bent back over the book with a vengeance. There had to be a way to restore blocked Floo connections somewhere. She was determined that it should exist. This book was a dense history of the way the Floo Network had been first established, and how Floo powder worked. Her eyes ran easily over the long, complex sentences, untangling them.

A pair of hands came to rest on her shoulders, and began to massage. Hermione resisted the pressure for a moment, but then leaned back with a sigh and a groan, and let her head roll to one side, so that her cheek rested on one of the stroking hands.
“You shouldn’t read all through the night like that,” Zacharias whispered into her ear. “You’ll strain your eyes and get dark circles under them, and then where would you be, a pretty girl like you?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Hermione, fighting the urge to close her eyes. “I suppose I’d have to fall back on my intelligence.”

Zacharias went on rubbing her shoulders for a moment, then pulled out the chair next to her and sat down. Assuming he’d come to keep her company, Hermione started to turn back to her book, but he claimed her hand. Startled, she turned to look at him.

She was even more startled when he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers. The expression on his face was utterly serious.

“Hermione,” he whispered. “I never understood before just how stupid blood prejudice was.”

Hermione blinked. What brought this on?

“They want to kill you,” Zacharias went on earnestly, gesturing towards the walls. Hermione reflected that even when he spoke as if life and death mattered, he was still pompous; it didn’t seem to have occurred to him that she knew that. “Not because you hurt them, not because you took a political office away from someone, not because you’re better at magic that they are, but just because you’re—you. And that’s wrong, and it’s stupid, and I’m sorry I never really realized it before. I’m sorry.”

Hermione reached out and hugged him, closing her eyes as she felt him kiss her neck. She kept them closed, so that she wouldn’t let the tears gathering behind her lids roll down her face.

“I love you,” Zacharias whispered.

Hermione nodded, choking on sobs of exhaustion and fury and sadness, unable to respond for right now. She didn’t fight when he gently pushed the book away from her and led her back to Gryffindor Tower.

Snape had been on edge most of the day. That could have something to do with Madam Pomfrey at last having enough potions to ease the pain of those students still in the hospital wing—including Calming Draughts to dose those who had suddenly become Squibs thanks to the Dark Lord—and so not requiring his skills. It could have something to do with this being Wednesday, the nineteenth of June, two days before the solstice and almost the last day of the promised time Voldemort had granted the school to deliver Harry up to him.

It almost certainly had to do with several potions ingredients gone missing from his store, the locking spells undone by a fairly complicated Dark Arts curse.

Snape had, of course, cast several spells that should provide him with images of those who had crept into his offices and “liberated” the ingredients. He had expected to see the Weasley twins. He had not expected there to be no images at all. Another Dark Arts curse had insured that every tracking spell would fail, including the ones Snape had chosen.

The ingredients gone were asphodel, wormwood, valerian roots, and sopophorous beans—the ones that made the Draught of Living Death.

Snape had gone at once to McGonagall, but when he had told her what she suspected, she had, her mouth tightening, agreed that he should not announce the theft to the school. Instead, she would join him in the place most likely to reveal the students who had taken it. So they were now both waiting, quietly, Snape under a Vanishing Potion and McGonagall in her Animagus form, at opposite ends of the corridor that held the Slytherin common room.

Snape knew, unfortunately for his students, what House that particular skill at Dark Arts was most likely to belong in.

He even thought he might know why the thieves had chosen to brew that particular potion. He wanted to be wrong, however, and if he was, then he need only embarrass his Slytherins instead of—

Instead of do something worse.

His thoughts cut off as the door to the common room opened. Blaise Zabini’s head poked out, and he glanced up and down the corridor. Then he nodded and looked back over his shoulder.

“It’s clear,” Snape saw him mouth.

He could see McGonagall half-close her eyes so that the light from the torches wouldn’t reflect in them as two of the seventh-year students, including one of the prefects, who had been in Snape’s NEWT Potions class, stepped out of the common room with a bundled shape over their shoulders. If one wasn’t looking for it, it would appear to be a set of blankets
and a pillow, as if Blaise and his friends were heading to the Great Hall to make a common sleeping pallet among numerous other students. More and more people did so every night, finding their common rooms too claustrophobic and isolated. Snape was sure the three had counted on the deception to save them if anyone saw them on the way. They’d even added glamours to make it look as if the blankets had long, tasseled ends.

As Snape flicked his wand and dismissed the glamours, the hair poking out of one end of the blanket came into view. It was black, extremely messy hair.

White-hot rage consumed him, aided, it seemed, by the throbbing pain in his left arm. He had to fight to keep from simply sending the Killing Curse at Blaise and having done with it. Instead, he sipped the antidote to the Vanishing Potion at the same moment as the Headmistress changed back and said in an extremely cold voice, “Mr. Zabini, Mr. Findarin, Mr. Tipperary, what do you think you are doing?”

Blaise spun around and stared at McGonagall in shock. Findarin and Tipperary were a bit smarter. They raised a Shield Charm against any hexes that McGonagall might cast, then turned and started hurrying up the corridor away from her—

Only to find their Head of House visible again, and waiting for them. They stopped running, and the bundle nearly slipped off their shoulders. Snape waved his wand and caught it with a Levitation Charm, floating it to his feet. He slit the blankets open with his wandless magic. Harry’s face, slack with the Draught of Living Death, appeared as the blankets uncoiled from around him.

Snape had to breathe several times to clear the red haze from his vision. He had thought that someone might be arranging to kidnap a student, but he had imagined the victim would be a Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, or Ravenclaw lured into his House’s territory and made a scapegoat for Slytherin’s increasing frustration with the siege. That there would be people in his own House who would turn on Harry…

It was a good thing McGonagall was here, he thought dimly, as he turned back to hear the explanation. A very good thing. Or he would have killed them. He could feel the words Avada Kedavra waiting at the back of his tongue, and had to concentrate on not saying them.

Blaise had started “explaining” by then. “It was just a prank, Professor,” he said innocently, eyes wide. “We were going to put him in the Great Hall and laugh at him when he woke up in a strange place tomorrow—”

“You are lying, Mr. Zabini.” The Headmistress could make her voice a whip when she wanted to, Snape admitted. “With any other student, I might accept that as an explanation, but not with Harry. You were going to take him to Voldemort.”

Blaise fisted his hands and didn’t respond.

“Mr. Zabini?” McGonagall asked. “Or do we need Veritaserum?”

“Fine!” Blaise shouted. He was shaking. Snape saw the frustration and the rage and the effect of twelve cumulative days of pent-up emotion running through him. “Yes, we bloody well were! I’ve been taking to my mum with the communication spell Malfoy taught me, and she wants me home, and she doesn’t trust Harry to win the battle, and I’m—we’re all so fucking tired of this! If we give him up, then we can leave!”

“And did you truly believe that Voldemort would keep his promise, Mr. Zabini?” McGonagall’s voice was a hiss. Snape strooped and drew out the antidote to the Living Death that he’d prepared, pouring it into Harry’s open mouth and massaging his throat to be sure he swallowed. Harry blinked his eyes open a moment later, looking drowsy and puzzled.

“He might!” Blaise yelled back. “Anything’s better than this hell we’re living through right now!”

Harry heard. Snape saw his eyes close, and his body jolt as though someone had just slapped him everywhere. Then he got slowly to his feet, swaying and wincing. Snape seized his arm.

“How did they get it to you?” he whispered.

“A glass of butterbeer,” Harry replied, his voice tired, his eyes on Blaise. He ignored Findarin and Tipperary, who were cowering in place. “Everyone in the House was drinking one, except Blaise, who wasn’t there. Even they—” he jerked his head at the seventh-years “—took one. I think Blaise must have had the antidote on him. When he came back, he gave it to them. But I remember most people falling asleep in the moments before I felt the potion overcoming me.” He was silent a moment, then said, “He really meant to turn me over to Voldemort?”

“Yes,” said Snape.

“Oh,” said Harry, and then turned and pressed his face into Snape’s robes, and said nothing more. Snape stroked his hair, eyes on his former seventh-years, and on McGonagall, who appeared to have heard all she wanted to of Blaise’s story.
She Stunned all three of them briskly, then nodded to Snape. “I’ll put them in the room off my office,” she said. It had turned into a temporary holding cell for the captured Death Eaters and Belville, as much to keep them from the wrath of the general Hogwarts populace as anything else. “Wake your students up, and then talk to Harry.”

Snape nodded, and stood aside so that she could stride up the corridor with the three bound students floating behind her. Blaise’s face was still frozen into an expression of panic-stricken anger. Snape studied the Headmistress’s expression, thinking she would be weary about having to do this to her students, but it appeared to have only pissed her off.

“What?” Snape touched his—yes, he could admit it in the privacy of his own head, his son’s hair—and made Harry look up at him. “I didn’t brew enough antidote for everyone. I thought I would only be dealing with one or possibly two victims of the Draught. Let’s wake up Draco and a few of the other most skilled Potions students. Will you help me brew more of the antidote after that?”

Harry’s eyes showed naked gratitude for the chance to put off discussing what Blaise had done. “Yes,” he said.

Snape nodded and strode towards the Slytherin common room, his arm and his temper both still burning. At least anger was a distraction from the fear that he could have lost Harry permanently.

One more day.


“What is that?” Snape asked, after he had given the password and the door swung back.

Harry jumped, then stared at him, eyes shuttering. “Nothing,” he said.

Snape raised an eyebrow, but let it go as he gazed at the common room full of his sleeping House.

It is not nothing, and we will discuss it in good time, Harry, as we will young Mr. Zabini’s attitude. Be assured we will.

Chapter Eighty-Nine: Tomorrow We Leave For Battle

Harry opened his eyes slowly, not realizing where he was for a long moment. Then he remembered. Snape had told him to sleep on the couch in his private quarters last night, not trusting the rest of Slytherin House to take care of him.

Harry winced at the memories of Snape’s precise, cold voice as he lectured on House loyalty, and the lowered eyes of the other Slytherins. It really hadn’t been their fault, any of them. Blaise, Findarin, and Tipperary had had to feed them the Draught of Living Death as well, just in case they might have tried to interfere with their kidnapping of Harry. Yes, some of them might have stood aside and let them take Harry to Voldemort, but some of them might have stopped Blaise and his friends. They would never know now.

Since he was fully awake, his mind began reciting the numbers again.

Sixty-four dead. Nineteen without magic. Three I frightened enough to try and take me to Voldemort.

He sat up, stretched, and pulled his glasses from a nearby table before he realized that Snape was sitting on the chair opposite, watching him and sipping a cup of tea. Harry jumped and stared at him. Snape waved his wand, still saying nothing, and a tray bearing tea and a bowl of cornflakes with a cup of milk close at hand floated over to him.

“Eat,” he said. “I’ve fetched this food from the Great Hall for you. It’s morning,” he added, anticipating Harry’s next question, “and Voldemort has already made his announcement about wanting the school to turn you over to him. This time, McGonagall countered with an announcement of her own, explaining what had happened last night. Everyone now knows that the Headmistress thinks such betrayal dishonorable, and how disappointed she is in any House that could consider it. You will be guarded today to make sure that does not happen again.” Snape sipped his tea and watched until Harry poured the milk into the cornflakes and started eating just to get away from his stare.

Sixty-four, said the sound of his own chewing in his ears as he ate.

“Where’s Draco?” he asked, when he’d swallowed a few mouthfuls.

“I sent him back to Slytherin after my speech,” said Snape, and drank some more tea. “I knew he would wish to guard you and speak with you, but a large part of that speaking will be apologies that he did not recognize the taste of Living Death in time. It cannot help you now.”

Harry stiffened for a moment, but Snape followed that with nothing more ominous, so he forced himself to eat some more cornflakes, and even drink a bit of his own tea. Nineteen, said the swish of the liquid in the cup.
“What will help me?” he asked a few minutes later.

“Being talked out of this guilt that you are carrying,” said Snape. “I thought I had managed it. I thought Draco had managed it. I thought your own mind had managed it. Alas, it seems that we have not.” His voice was without inflection, but Harry could hear the steel underneath.

“I don’t know what you mean,” said Harry. “I accept, as you said, that those who didn’t face such a decision can’t understand why I did as I did. And I know that Blaise and the others betrayed me out of fear for their lives, and not because of something I did.” Three, said the shuffle of his shoes on the floor.

Snape made a muffled sound oddly like a chuckle. Harry laid down his spoon and stared at him. Snape stared back, and if there was amusement in his face, it was a cruel, predatory, hawk-like amusement.

“How many times have I told you, Harry,” Snape said softly, “you cannot lie to a Legilimens?”

“I am not lying—”

“I heard you counting last night,” Snape said unapologetically. “I believe I know the numbers. Sixty-four dead, counting Miss Whitestag. Nineteen without magic, turned into Squibs. And three members of your own House who turned on you. People who have accepted responsibility for their own decisions, Harry, do not recite numbers like that to themselves.”

“I have accepted—”

“You have not.” The only sign of Snape’s anger, besides the force in his voice, was the way he suddenly released his teacup and pointed his hand at Harry. Wandless magic kept the teacup hovering in midair. Harry wondered if Snape was even aware of that. “You are making the dead more important than the living, the wounded more important than the whole, those who blame you more important than those who do not. You are living exclusively in their company, and by doing so you betray us.”

Harry felt as if he’d been punched in the gut. He looked away from Snape and tried to explain what he meant, what he felt. “If I forget about them, then I’m betraying their memory—”

“I have no interest in listening to your tired self-justifications,” said Snape, voice as cold as Harry remembered it being from first year. “You are betraying us, Harry, with every breath you take that is focused more on doom than on survival, with every glance you give that looks on the past as if that is somehow a sacred country. Tomorrow we leave for battle. We may fail because Voldemort is the stronger, or because Death Eaters kill us. I will not have us fail because our leader is distracted and dreaming of his own guilt instead of how best to protect us.”

Harry shivered. The words had cut him like shards of ice or glass. “I—I can’t watch anyone else die because of me,” he whispered.

“Then announce that now,” said Snape, his voice pitiless, “and turn the leadership of the war effort over to McGonagall. Tell your allies that you’ve failed them. Tell them that you are afraid, and because of that, you’d rather walk out and give yourself up to the Dark Lord, because you cannot bear to see death. You would rather commit suicide, make yourself a martyr, then endure what is a natural consequence of war. And, before you go, make sure to tell the Sorting Hat that it made a mistake. It should have put you in Gryffindor after all—save that now, not even they are squalling about martyrdom.”

Harry clenched his hand. Emotions were blowing through him like winds, and he wasn’t their container, but a leaf tossed about in them. He couldn’t identify all of them. Fear was the predominant gale, though. “Don’t you understand?” he insisted. “Bringing Voldemort here was a mistake. I should have set up a trap for him elsewhere. I had no right to endanger the life of anyone who didn’t volunteer to be in the war. All those who’ve suffered so far were innocent. And I killed twelve of them myself—”

Snape laughed. Harry flinched again, certain he was hearing the boy who had flung devastating insults at James and the other Marauders in their sixth and seventh years.

“Be sure to tell Voldemort that,” Snape mocked, his eyes on fire with darkness. “Be sure to tell him that every victim who suffers as a result of this war is your fault. Be sure to tell him that war should only be between those who have agreed to suffer in it, so that they can bid their families properly farewell, and wave their hands, and go out to die after their morning tea. This is war, Harry. The Dark Lord does not care, he has never cared, about who is innocent and who is not. He prefers the innocent as victims, in fact, because they are so much less likely to fight back. And I am sure he would rejoice to know that his greatest enemy is tearing himself apart over a dozen dead children, rather than concentrating on saving the hundreds of living children still trapped in Hogwarts.”

Harry was breathing faster now. And he knew that one of the emotions howling through him was anger. But what Snape was saying was still wrong, still had to be wrong.
“I’m like Dumbledore if I use numbers,” he said, “if I say that the lives in Hogwarts are worth more than the lives of those children who died on the battlefield, just because there are more of them.”

“Has it occurred to you,” said Snape, voice descending to a rumbling purr like that of some great hunting cat, “that even Dumbledore was right when he began? He lost himself slowly to the mantra, the idea, of sacrifice. He made decisions in the First War that led to the loss of a small number of lives to save a greater. That is true. And tell me, Harry, would you say it is right to save the lives of twelve children over nine hundred? That is approximately how many students remain in the school right now. Would you trade them for those dozen first-years and second-years, if you had the choice to make again?”

Put like that, it did sound impossible. Harry shook his head, though. “Did Dumbledore ever kill a dozen people himself?” he asked. “Did he kill a dozen children?”

Snape’s mouth parted slightly, and his eyes glittered. He whispered, “What do you think had to be done with the children when the Children’s Massacre was discovered?”

Harry swallowed.

“There were spells cast on them to make them remain alive,” Snape continued. “The official story, of course, is that they died when their rescuers tried to take them from the crucifixes. That is not true. The truth is that Dumbledore, and the others who came with him, had to end those spells and release them to death, because their wounds were mortal. They killed them out of mercy. Ask Minerva about the Massacre, Harry. Ask her what it was like to stare into the eyes of more than a dozen children as she took them down from their crucifixes and ended their lives, that she might end their suffering. The cowards in that situation were those who stayed behind because they refused to be responsible for the death of a child, not those who took those deaths on themselves and sent them where they would hurt no longer.”

Harry closed his eyes for a moment. Then he said, “You told me that that kind of courage wasn’t something a Gryffindor would understand. To—have to make that kind of decision. But McGonagall made that kind of decision after the Children’s Massacre?”

“Not all Gryffindors, I should have said.”

Harry took a deep breath and looked at Snape again.

“Do you see what your guilt will cost us?” Snape asked. “If Minerva let herself be incapacitated by the guilt that some children died under her care, she could not lead the rest of the school and tend to the living. She feels the emotion, but the time to let it wash over her is not now. She will wait until she may indulge it. And in this, Harry, she is wiser than you are, because you are indulging your pained and aching conscience now, at the expense of the pained and aching people around you.”

“But I—but I could hurt them,” Harry whispered. “I have hurt them. Even if I get through the battle, shouldn’t I go to Tullianum on murder charges?”

Snape lunged forward, grabbing his shoulder and shaking him fiercely. Harry squeaked in surprise and mortification. Snape was the third person in two weeks who had shaken him, and Harry was beginning to feel like a naughty child.

“Do not think that way,” Snape said fiercely. “Or every wizard who fights with you tomorrow should go to Tullianum on murder charges, Harry.”

Harry lowered his head. Snape caught his chin and tilted his face upward again, so that he had to face those intent black eyes.

“What is it about this that troubles you so much?” Snape whispered. “That they were children? That this was the first act of war in which you had to make a decision you did not know was right? That others blame you? That last should be no surprise. That second was something you must have known you would have to do someday. And as for the first, there are children here in Hogwarts as well, Harry, some of them younger than your victims, still alive. They are more valuable than the dead. The living are always more valuable than the dead. They matter more. They have the possibility to change, to redeem themselves—and to live after this battle is done. Will you fail them because you are too busy memorializing those who can no longer hear you?”

Harry shivered. He felt chills tearing him apart, chills from so many disparate emotions that he was no longer even prepared to say that fear and anger were among them.

“We go to battle tomorrow,” Snape said again, voice a concentrated force of rage. “Will you abandon us to face Voldemort alone because you must hide your head in mourning? Will you let children die because children have already died? Will you let the Dark Lord kill us?”
“No!”

Harry’s vision became sheened with blue as the phoenix fire exploded from him, and his emotions coalesced as one, righteous anger. Snape pulled back at once, though the flames had not burned him. He eyed the aura that surrounded Harry, and there was a look of grim satisfaction on his face.

Harry was breathing hard. This rage was a precious thing, and he hung onto it. He still could not be entirely sure, whatever Snape had said, that he had done the right thing. He did not understand how anyone could have that certainty about an act of war like this, and he envied McGonagall’s seeming ability to go on living her life as normal after it. Perhaps he would talk to her, when this was done, and get some kind of advice about not letting a war wound define one's life.

For now, though, they did have a battle to fight.

And he could see, if he accepted Snape’s stinging words as truth, the way that others must have seen him—Draco, and Connor, and the Ravenclaws who stared at him with doubt in their eyes, and the Hufflepuffs who had whispered in his wake, and the Slytherins who might have agreed with Blaise about the need to give him up. If he was this deep in mourning, if he cared about no one but the dead, then perhaps he wasn’t going to save them, and then why shouldn’t they take their chances with Voldemort? A weak savior offered them no options.

You were the one who told Voldemort to come to Hogwarts. You were the one who insured that a battle on Midsummer Day, and not just a storm, would happen in the first place.

So fucking act like it.

Harry almost smiled when he realized that that last sentence was in his brother’s voice, and then he set about expanding his Occlumency pools to trap his guilt and sadness and fear. They could not interfere right now. They had no place on the battlefield. As Snape had said, it was anger and a desire to see everyone around him live that would get them through.

How had he so thoroughly forgotten his own lessons? Put your head down and endure. Shove forward, no matter how much it hurts.

The battle was the task for right now. Everything else, including the justified accusations that he would face when his murder of a dozen children became public knowledge, would have to wait. Voldemort was certainly not going to politely stand aside while Harry contacted the parents of his victims and told them to do whatever they liked to him.

When that moment comes that they know, his conscience whispered, it will be a harder test than this.

Harry acknowledged that, and put the realization aside. It would happen, but he could not allow it to dominate his actions for now. And if he had to lock and chain his emotions artificially with the Occlumency Snape had taught him, then he would. He had already planned to go to the Sanctuary this summer, because he had begun to wonder what unhealed mental wounds would cost him in the war. Now there was a more urgent need for healing, but it could wait.

He looked up, and caught Snape’s eye. “Thank you, sir,” he said.

Snape sneered at him. “You should have known better than to fall into a pattern,” he said. “Or, barring that, you should have come to me at once.”

“I know that now, sir.”

Snape shook his head. “When this is finished, Harry, I think you should devote your summer to making sure such emotions will never incapacitate you again.”

“That’s why I’ve arranged with Vera to go to the Sanctuary, sir,” said Harry, and had the supreme satisfaction of seeing Snape choke. He smiled and stood up, still blazing with the phoenix fire. “I’m going to meet with my allies now, just to make sure they all understand their part in the battle. Can I borrow some Veritaserum, so that I can make sure there are no traitors among them?”

Snape rose and fetched the vials of Veritaserum without a word, all the while staring at him as if he had become a different person. Harry smiled at him, pressed his hand—the flames wouldn’t burn anyone he didn’t tell them to—and then left. For the first time in days, a list of tasks was unfolding in his head, a sign that he was back to normal now, and could think of what he was supposed to be doing.

Meet with my allies and make sure they’re true. Set up those older students who are going to stay in the school and protect the younger children. Pass the phoenix fire through the stone again, and purify the last of that foul magic—and make sure that Draco and Snape know what I’m doing this time. Speak with Tybalt, and insure that he does have his linchpin ready. Speak with the Malfoys, and see if they’re coming to the battle tomorrow...
“You’re happy.”

Ignifer turned with a start. Honoria stood behind her, staring at her with such innocent eyes that Ignifer knew immediately she must have been there for a few minutes. Ignifer shook her head and tried to regain control of her face. “Why would you think so?” she asked, turning away again. “We go to battle tomorrow, and our leader has just told us that he does not expect everyone to survive. I would be happy if I were guaranteed to live, but there is no reason for joy in the face of this.”

“Bollocks,” said Honoria cheerfully, and shut the door of Ignifer’s room. Ignifer couldn’t help glancing at it. Honoria shrugged when she caught the glance. “I know counters to most of the simple unlocking spells.”

“I am not surprised.”

Honoria laughed at her. “But you are happy, Ignifer,” she said, going over and stretching out on Ignifer’s four-poster, a bed so ugly that Ignifer was not surprised it had been relegated to the dusty “guest” quarters before she came to Hogwarts. “I can tell. And I even know why you’re happy.”

“Do enlighten me, then,” Ignifer said, turning to face the mirror she’d conjured earlier. She had to stare closely at her hair as she used spells to fix it in place on her neck. She didn’t want it getting in her face during the battle. “Since you know so much more about my own emotions than I do.”

“That’s what a lover should do,” said Honoria. She ignored the startled little jerk that Ignifer made. “And you’re happy because Harry came back. He’s been moping himself into a corner for the past few days, and you were wondering if we would get the chance to fight and die with honor. Now we will, because he woke up and realized that the rest of us were more important than the people who died for him. You aren’t frightened of dying tomorrow. You’re frightened of the way you might have died, if Harry was still grieving so much that he refused to lead or made some strange and incompetent plan. I don’t really understand this focus on honor that you have, but I suppose it has something to do with your Light past.”

That was actually remarkably accurate. Ignifer saw no reason why she should have given up all her honor when she Declared for the Dark. That was in and of itself the honorable thing to do, when the wild Dark had saved her life, though of course her father hadn’t seen it that way. But she wasn’t about to admit that Honoria had guessed right. She went on braiding her hair in silence.

“No, I don’t know why you’re doing this,” she told Honoria when she thought she had her breathing under control, catching her eye in the mirror. “If it’s only to be funny or tease me, you can leave. I will never joke back. I have no sense of humor.”

“Of course not.”

Honoria pouted and rolled back over on her side, accidentally-on-purpose letting her robes ride up to reveal a length of her thigh. “And why not?” she asked.

“There is every reason why not!” Ignifer spun around. Her face was burning. She tried desperately to recall the codes of behavior that her family had drilled into her about this when she was a young girl. There weren’t many of them, actually. When the time came that she should think about bearing children, then she would look for a suitable husband, pureblood and Declared to the Light, and hopefully the magical heir of his family, though the last wasn’t required. It would be enough of an honor for his children to bear the Apollonis name, after all. They would do everything by formalities that Ignifer had known all her life.

One thing those codes were clear about was that no one was supposed to pursue anyone else. That was for halfbloods and others who didn’t have the assurance of a marriage whether or not they loved.

“Well, a halfblood woman is trying awfully hard to court me,” Ignifer thought, slightly hysterical. And she’s also Declared for Dark. I suppose only the magical heirship is lacking.

“I don’t know why you’re doing this,” she told Honoria when she thought she had her breathing under control, catching her eye in the mirror. “If it’s only to be funny or tease me, you can leave. I will never joke back. I have no sense of humor.”

“Yes, you do,” said Honoria. “It’s a lover’s task to know that, too. And as for why I’m doing this, I told you already. You’re beautiful, and intelligent, and stubborn, and proud. I want you.”

Ignifer ducked her head, feeling her cheeks burn. Pureblood prudery, perhaps, but she just wasn’t used to hearing people
“And as for why we should shag now,” Honoria continued, a bit of hope entering her voice, “you know the situation. There are history-songs that talk about it. The night before we leave for battle. Couples bed each other to assert the primacy of life in the face of death.”

“And the history-songs I heard usually placed such—bedding after the battle,” Ignifer pointed out.

“Well, that’s stupid,” said Honoria. “Because how did the couples know they were still going to be alive then? We’re alive right now.” Her hand moved in the mirror, and Ignifer saw her patting the bed. “Come here, Ignifer. Don’t let some shadow of your father stop you.”

Ignifer closed her eyes for a long moment. She would be doing this for a stupid reason if she gave in, she thought. No matter what Honoria might say about asserting the primacy of life, it was mostly going to be a quick fumble, without dignity, without the rules that Ignifer had known all her life.

Well, ask her about that, then. See what she says.

Ignifer opened her eyes and turned to face Honoria. The younger woman was watching her intently, holding her breath. Ignifer frowned. I wish she would not do that. It’s as if she finds me too beautiful to resist, and I know that is nonsense.

“I might break the rules for you,” she told Honoria, “but it would be only a few moments of passion, and that would feel tawdry to me.”

Honoria gave a smile Ignifer hadn’t seen before, and rose to her feet. “A few moments?” she murmured. “That’s what you think. It’s six in the evening now, and we have until at least six tomorrow morning.”

Ignifer swallowed, her heart beating fast, as Honoria came towards her and took one of her hands, standing on tiptoe to whisper into her ear.

“We have hours,” Honoria whispered. “And I intend to use a few of them near dawn for sleeping, if that.” Her other hand slid coaxingly along Ignifer’s arm, and she drew back to smirk at her. “If you agree, of course,” she said, and repeated the sliding gesture, making Ignifer feel an inexplicable urge to squirm closer.

Ignifer shut her eyes for a few moments, and contemplated it. This obviously meant something to Honoria. It would not be quick. If they both survived the battle, it might be repeated.

And if this broke the rules she had known all her life—did that matter? Her father doubtless thought she had lain with every Dark pureblood already, because he believed that was what Dark witches and wizards did. Ignifer did not think Honoria would gossip about it. And if one of them died in the battle tomorrow, no one else would ever know.

“All right,” she whispered.

Honoria immediately seized her mouth in a kiss, as if afraid she would back out if she waited a moment longer. Ignifer bowed her head, and slowly, hesitantly, kissed back. A moment later, Honoria undid the charms on her hair so that it tumbled around them.

“Don’t need these right now,” Honoria whispered, curved an arm around her neck, and drew her back into the kiss.

“And then the witch went home, because she had a diamond necklace and a cup on a chain, and that was all she’d asked of the world,” Thomas finished. He gently set the book aside, stroking the cover. Really, the library at Hogwarts had the finest collection of old fey tales he’d ever seen, ridiculous legends that broke all the laws of magic. But he’d enjoyed reading them aloud via the communication spell to his children for the last few days.

“Father?”

Rose’s voice, emerging from his left arm, pulled him back. Thomas looked towards the sound of her voice and imagined her seated in the library, just finished copying down the words he’d read. She was the one of his children most interested in preserving old knowledge, especially if it was new to her. “What is it, dear?”

“Do you think you’ll die tomorrow?”

Thomas tilted his head back and regarded the ceiling with a frown. “Well, Rosie, I don’t know,” he murmured. “We’re prepared, and we have a good plan. And I think that I know enough spells that the Death Eaters don’t stand a chance of guessing them before I use them, especially when they’re non-verbal. And I know that I trust Harry, and most of the people who’ll go to battle with him trust him, too. The children in the school don’t, or they wouldn’t have tried to give him over to
Voldemort yesterday, but they don’t count as much. And—"

“Father!” Rose’s voice was just slightly exasperated. “Do you think you’ll die? That was the question I asked.” Her words wavered on the end.

“I don’t know,” Thomas said, studying his wrist in interest now. “Have you been reading those books again that claim you can develop Divination ability without being born with it? You can’t. That’s one of the things we learned from the Grand Unified Theory. Divination is a useless subject to teach. There are some students who will just never be able to master it, and that means—”

“Father. No, I haven’t been reading those books again. I know they’re useless. But—you don’t sound afraid. And we’re all afraid that you’ll die. Even Mother, though I know she doesn’t show it.” Rose’s voice lowered on the last words, as if she thought Priscilla, or one of her siblings, might be listening to her.

Thomas smiled gently. He had no doubt that it was true, if Rose said it was so. She was his magical heir, and because of that, he’d treated her a bit more like an adult than the other children. And she’d reacted to the training well, seeing things that an adult would be more likely to notice most of the time.

“I would expect them to be afraid,” he said, tilting his head to the side and rubbing at the back of his neck. “It’s death, after all. And they’re not here with me. And your mother’s been overworked in the past few days, with the Ministry exploding as news of the situation at Hogwarts spreads throughout the wizarding world.”

“But you’re not,” Rose whispered.

“No,” said Thomas. “I’m not.”

“Why not?”

Thomas shrugged and stood, meandering through the shelves of books to put away the one he’d borrowed to read to Rose. “I don’t know. I never have been. Death is there, and it’s going to happen someday, and I would prefer that it not be painful. But—it would be like being afraid of the sky. It’s always there. It won’t go away just because you want it to. And your life’s easier when you don’t ignore it.”

“The sky doesn’t kill you, though.” Rose’s voice sharpened in the way that Thomas knew meant she was getting angry with him. He was sorry for that. He never did know when he crossed the line from ordinary behavior into anger-making behavior.

But he didn’t live in the same world as other people. He knew it when he tried to explain things that were simple to him, and they didn’t understand. But he could get frustrated by that or he could get used to it, and he’d done the latter.

“But in other ways, it resembles death,” he said. “And I think being afraid of either of them would be silly.”

Rose said nothing for a moment, but the tingle of magic on Thomas’s left wrist told him she hadn’t ended the communication spell. He waited patiently, running his fingers along the shelf of books in front of him. He had to go to bed soon, to be ready and rested for the battle in the morning, but he wanted to choose some light reading to take with him.

“I love you, Father,” Rose whispered. “I hope you don’t die.”

Thomas laughed gently as he pulled out a book on centaurs he hadn’t seen before. It would interest him to read what implausibilities filled it. “I love you too, Rosie, and I hope the same thing. Good night.”

“...and take care of your mother.”

“Well, of course take care of our mother,” said Michael, giving him an offended look.

Charles really couldn’t blame his son for doing that; it had been a stupid reminder to give the twins, that he wanted them to take care of Medusa if he died in the battle tomorrow. Some of the promises they had requested from him in return were more outlandish. For example, Owen had wanted Charles to create a guarding spell that would follow Harry around like one of the Muggle dogs that guided the blind. Michael had wanted Charles to adopt a child, one of their older cousins, if they were both gone. He didn’t think his parents should be without children.

_The house will feel so empty if they are both gone_, Charles thought, watching his sons as they lounged back against the bed in his guest quarters. _But that would be true even if only one of them died._

There was a pause in the conversation. None of them could really think of anything else to say, Charles supposed, or any other promises to make. They had pressed hands, and confessed fears, and asserted what would happen if one of them
survived but the others didn’t.

Charles wondered if Owen and Michael were afraid. Owen’s face, in particular, was so calm that he could tell hardly anything from it.

He was not afraid.

He had known this day would come when he committed his family to Harry. In truth, this day had been coming for twenty-six years, since Voldemort had returned to Britain. This was the first time that someone who was not Dumbledore would go forth in battle against the Dark Lord with the whole world able to watch.

Charles felt a fierce, quiet gladness that he was here, and able to participate in the battle. Since his nephew had died in a failed Death Eater raid, he had known Voldemort would not benefit the Rosier-Henlins. But Harry would, and he had survived his own first great moral crisis. When Charles asked what had driven him so deep into grief, Harry had talked to him in private and told him what had happened to the children in the Life-Web.

*The first of many decisions like that,* Charles thought. *And he will not let it callus him.*

Charles mourned for those children’s parents, but he rejoiced that his own family followed a leader so strong and had found a place close to him. He reached out now and clasped first Owen’s hand, then Michael’s.

“To death in the morning—causing it, and not experiencing it,” he said. It was the salute his father had given him the first time he fought.

Owen repeated it, and then Michael, their voices strong and shining. Charles nodded, and watched as they left.

Then he invoked the communication spell to speak to Medusa. It might be the last time he would ever do so.

But he was not afraid.

Pansy sat down on the top of the Astronomy Tower. It was high enough to be cold, even though summer was coming tomorrow, and the sight of the fires beneath her was intimidating enough to scare most people away from the walls. Even the wards seemed thinner up here.

That was, in fact, the point. No one was likely to bother her.

Pansy closed her eyes, and dropped straight into the cold darkness she’d learned to carry within her about three months ago. The world around her sang like a cracked bell, but within the darkness, all the bells stopped. Pansy found herself in the midst of a deeper cold than she had known could exist. This was the darkness left when life had passed, she thought. Someone could stop speaking aloud, and still have the warmth that breathing and moving blood lent. She herself was a living example. And Lucius Malfoy, for all that he prided himself on his chillness, could not have endured a cold like this. Only the dead and the necromancers were meant to.

When she looked up into the darkness, she saw holes in the place of stars. They were always there, patiently waiting, sometimes gently tugging on the dead. Most of the dead who did not become ghosts but remained close enough to the living world to communicate with necromancers went up those holes in the end. Pansy did not know what lay beyond them, because no one ever returned to talk or tell.

“Hullo, Pansy.”

She turned and nodded to the most talkative spirit she knew, who foamed towards her like mist. He created a face for a moment, then let that go and took the form of a great dog instead. He claimed to find it more natural. Pansy wondered if it was because a human body was more complicated, or if it had to do with the fact that his animal form so closely resembled a death-connected Grim.

“Hullo, Sirius.” She could speak aloud here, because this was not the mortal world. She sat down and watched him for a moment as he snapped at drifting bits of his own misty body. “Looking forward to tomorrow?”

Sirius Black turned his head and stared at her for a moment. His eyes held the mad, haunted look that Pansy had grown used to when he “taught” at the school in her second and third years. Most of the time, he looked like what Pansy supposed was his younger self, rather madcap. She knew why he had changed.

“Hush,” she said quietly, and reached out a hand to stroke the cold mist on the top of his head. “Tomorrow will be hard, but I knew that when I first gained the ability to see death. There will be people who perish tomorrow. But there are people who perish everywhere, every day. And since I’ll be on the battlefield, you’ll have the ability to come forth and help Harry.”
The haunted look in Sirius’s eyes eased a bit, and he licked playfully at her fingers. “That’s true,” he said. “But I’m still not looking forward to tomorrow.”

Pansy nodded. “I know.” Sirius would be able to appear only in the form of a ghostly dog. He couldn’t actually rejoin the world of the living, and even if Harry saw him, which was doubtful, Pansy didn’t know if he would be able to speak to him. They were part of such different worlds now. Sometimes she caught Sirius looking up at the black holes in the darkness. It had been nearly two years since he died, and other than his own guilt and remorse at the manner of his death and a wish to help make up for it, Sirius had no tie of love or vengeance to hold him here, the way most spirits did. Pansy was frankly surprised he had resisted for so long. She wondered if she would have come back in a few days, battle or no battle, and found him gone.

“I miss him,” Sirius said then, which was part of their nightly rituals.

“I know,” said Pansy.

“I wish I could do something more to help,” said Sirius, and wagged his tail, and looked frustrated. Pansy knew what she had to do. As she progressed further in her necromancer studies, she had learned that part of her task was to help ease the dead’s powerful emotions. The living had the living to do it for them, but the dead had no one if the only people able to speak to them wouldn’t help.

“You can’t,” she said gently. “You’re dead.”

Sirius no longer snarled at her when she said that, the way he had when she was first able to see him. He lowered his head and put it on his paws instead, and gave a pitiful whine.

“Harry misses you,” Pansy whispered, stroking his fur. “And you miss him. But you can’t be part of the same world anymore. The divide is too deep. And after tomorrow—well, I don’t know, Sirius. Do you think you’ll be able to stay here much longer? I expect to find you gone each time I come looking for you.”

“I don’t know,” said Sirius, and rolled over so his head was against her knee. “I still wish I’d told him. There were so many things I could have done differently, and then I might have been there, and helped him when Lily and James turned on him.”

“It’s over and done,” said Pansy firmly. “It was inevitable. You died there because you were meant to die there. If my father had seen you alive, he would have known.”

“I suppose destiny is true,” Sirius grumbled back, “but it does bugger all for comfort.”

Pansy laughed quietly and ruffled his fur again. “Your brother is getting help now,” she said. “He broke his own silence that might have cost him everything. And Harry will win this battle. We’ll help him win.”

Sirius sighed and closed his eyes. “I know,” he whispered.

“You’ll be at peace in the end.”

“I know.”

Pansy said nothing else. They had discussed the ins and outs of the battle as much as possible, and Sirius knew everything about it as it related to him and Pansy. They could do no more but sit in the cold and darkness, and share silence.

“You realize that someone could see us outlined against the castle and fling a curse at us,” Draco said softly, nuzzling his face into the back of Harry’s neck.

Harry snorted, and said, “That would be why I have a concealing charm up, Draco, so that the Death Eaters don’t take the chance to reduce us to small smears of black goo on the wall.”

“Oh,” said Draco, and then peered over Harry’s shoulder at the campfires again.

They were up in the North Tower, because Harry had wanted to go there before he went to sleep. Draco had agreed, particularly when he found out that they could be alone there. He hadn’t been alone with Harry all day; first had come Snape’s shredding of Harry’s guilt complex in his quarters, and then had come endless strategy meetings, sometimes with all of his allies, sometimes with just one. Draco had kept himself busy enough, speaking with his parents via the communication spell and practicing his possession abilities, slipping through the minds of the Slytherins. He was relieved to find that most of them were shocked at Blaise’s treachery, and even angry. Draco knew the feeling. He was going to find Blaise when the siege was done.

But now they were alone, and standing on the North Tower, and gazing out at the camp of their enemies. Well, Draco
supposed, one couldn’t have everything.

“Thank you,” Harry said.

Draco stiffened slightly in surprise. “For what?” he asked.

“For not pressing me today,” Harry said, turning around and holding his eyes. “For not insisting that I talk to you when I wasn’t ready. And for not wailing and blaming yourself for falling victim to Blaise’s trick. It happened to all of us.”

“I would only wail if he was beyond my reach,” said Draco calmly. “As it is, he’ll pay.”

Harry regarded him sternly.

“He will,” said Draco. “Him, and Findarin, and Tipperary, and Belville, and the two Death Eaters McGonagall captured. They all will, Harry.”

“I think we should let the Ministry try them—“

“The Ministry won’t consider what they did a crime,” Draco interrupted. “Well, the adults maybe, but not three harmless students.” He made his voice into a vicious parody of what Harry had told him the Department of Magical Family and Child Services woman, Madam Shiverwood, sounded like. “So they’ll definitely leave them alone. And that’s not right, Harry. You have to show that you won’t let your enemies get away with something like that. If that means setting your allies on them, fine. But you can’t leave them just dangling around unpunished. They were idiots.”

“They were frightened,” Harry corrected quietly.

“So were the rest of us!” Draco exclaimed. “But you don’t see the rest of us doing something that mad, do you?”

Harry’s body was tense in his arms for a moment. Then he sighed out, and leaned against Draco. “All right,” he murmured. “If you can get McGonagall and Snape to agree, then I won’t interfere.”

Draco waited for some contradiction, some protest, some explanation of morality. But Harry said nothing, just looked at the fires.

“And that’s it?” Draco asked, his voice growing edged in spite of himself. “That’s all the objections you’ll make?”

“I’m tired, Draco.”

Draco resisted the temptation to snap that they all were, and waited. Harry was letting his weight be supported as much by the stones in front of him as he was by the arms around him, he thought.

“I’m tired,” Harry continued. “And I can’t afford to be, not if we’re going to win this war. I always intended to send Voldemort howling so that I could take some time to heal myself and make the future progress of the war a surer thing. Now it’s even more urgent. I frightened myself with how far I fell until Snape rescued me. And I’m not entirely sure, even now, that I made the right choice, and if I confront the parents of those dead children like this, I’d break.”

“But you aren’t going to tell them that you killed their children,” said Draco, slightly incredulous.

Harry turned and looked at him, eyes calm and luminous. “Of course I am. They deserve to know what happened.” He shook his head when Draco opened his mouth to argue. “No. I’ll face them, and deal with what I have to deal with. But I’m going to put it off until I can actually deal with it, and that won’t be until after I visit the Sanctuary.”

“I thought that was a fever dream of yours,” Draco murmured, burying his face against Harry’s neck again.

“No,” said Harry. “I’m tired, Draco, of lots of things. I’m tired of drowning in guilt that other people would overcome easily. I’m tired of extending too much forgiveness and only knowing it when someone else points it out. I’m tired of not being able to relate to you physically, and then dismissing my own attempts to overcome that, because there’s always something more important going on.” His hand found Draco’s own and squeezed it. “This is the point, after the battle, where more important things end for a while. I’m going to the Sanctuary, and working on my own healing, so that eventually I can work towards the healing of the world with a surer heart.”

Draco swallowed, decided he would choke if he tried to say anything, and settled for turning Harry and kissing him. He was not sure what affected him more: the revelation that Harry was finally, finally taking some time for himself, or the revelation that Harry was talking about his own life after the battle as something he would have, and not have to give up to Voldemort in payment for having killed those children.

Harry kissed back, firmly, and then smiled as he pulled away. “Would you like to come to the Sanctuary with me?” he asked.
“I would have followed you if you left me behind,” said Draco, and wrapped an arm firmly around him. “No letting someone else teach you what pleasure is like.”

Harry laughed, high above the battlefield, on the edge of death, and Draco had to close his eyes.

Chapter Ninety: Beneath This Storm of Light

The dawn came, and with it, the storm.

Harry met it standing on the edge of the Astronomy Tower, watching the east as it shone with gentle colors at first, orange and peach and apricot. Then those hues melted into each other, and grew fiercer and fiercer, and surged, and turned the color of gold and diamonds. The image of a gryphon hung in the sky, hovering with wings spread over Hogwarts, blazing with all the colors of fire.

Harry could hear frightened shouts from the Death Eaters behind and below him. He allowed himself a tiny smile. Did Voldemort tell them that they would be fighting beneath the Light itself today? Or did he consider that a tiny, pesky little detail that they didn’t need to know about?

The gryphon’s wings faded into white where they met the clouds, but the center of its body was real, defined, sharp, and full of gold. Its talons, blue, were held tucked close to its chest. Its eyes were rubies made of light, and its neck and head blared orange. Harry wondered if the talons or the wickedly curved beak were causing the Death Eaters more problems. Or perhaps it was the lion-like hind paws, though as yet they were still fighting to form out of the sunrise.

Harry raised his left wrist, both to salute the Light and in a private memorial of his own. A year ago today, he had lost that hand.

The gryphon abruptly began to flap its wings. Harry stared, and heard the wild song of the Light in his ears, played by the turning of the sun and the moon and the stars, very close. The song melted into an echoing cry that streamed out of the gryphon’s beak. Harry felt the sound uplifting him.

From behind and beneath him, the Death Eaters didn’t find it nearly so inspiring. And why would they? Harry wondered, looking over his shoulder and watching their stumbling panic with a faint smirk. This was the Light screaming its defiance at the Dark and its Lord. They would know that its greeting or its blessing or both was not meant for them.

Harry turned back in time to see the gold at the center of the gryphon’s body growing brighter, until he had to put his hand over his eyes. Then the image broke with a crack like thunder, and the air flooded with more music and with light cleaner and purer and richer than ordinary sunshine. Harry was not surprised, when he felt able to look up again, to see that the center of the sky was aswarm with glittering, tumbling golden waves, all of them edged with white like the gryphon’s wings, all of them moving in a lazy circle that centered on Hogwarts.

The storm of Light had arrived.

Harry turned to face the Death Eaters and the battlefield again. Voldemort was moving through their ranks, heading to the front of the crowd for his morning announcement about what would happen to the inhabitants of Hogwarts if they didn’t hand Harry over. Harry kept his gaze fixed on him, and hoped McGonagall was watching for his signal.

“Today is Midsummer,” Voldemort called out, his voice, accented with Sonorus, striving for dignity and failing. “The thirteen days of grace that I gave you have passed. Now that the storm—”

Harry called his phoenix fire, finding no trouble in summoning righteous anger with Voldemort right below him. It flared, blue and white, and Voldemort’s snake swung its head to look at him. Harry was almost sure he saw the Dark Lord’s lipless mouth part in a smile, though of course he was too high up—as Draco would have reminded him—to make out such details.

Harry called the phoenix fire to leap higher and higher, and then sent it up around him in a dazzling display of light. By now, all the Death Eaters were watching him, and so was Voldemort, amused and attracted by the reckless spending of such magic.

Harry had counted on that. While they focused on him, McGonagall quietly dropped the wards in one specific place, and the Weasley twins would be making their way out through the hole under one of Honoria’s illusions. They were carrying the vials of potion that would make those it touched go blind, and they were heading for the Quidditch Pitch, where their brooms were stored. McGonagall closed the wards again the moment they were through. Harry waited until he felt them tighten before he spoke.

“Here I am, Tom,” he said, and saw Voldemort make a checked movement that bespoke his fury. Harry smiled more widely. He does hate being called by his name. “What do you think? Should we settle this with a duel once and for all, like
Lords and gentlemen?”

“I think not, Harry.” Voldemort’s voice had gone back to the disgusting croon it had been when he captured the children in the Life-Web. “You should have known better than to challenge me. When you succumb to my power, and lie broken and bleeding at my feet, looking up at me, you will learn better. I will personally take charge of your reeducation myself.”

And on he went, blathering, while another tiny hole in the wards opened up in front of Harry. He knelt down, scooped up a handful of what would look like tiny golden pellets from the stone in front of him, and dropped them over the edge of the Tower.

The Gloryflower insects fell until they hit stone or soil, and if they hit stone, scurried madly across it until they could reach the soil. Harry hadn’t had a chance to spread them through Hogwarts’s grounds before Indigena arrived. They were going now, though, with the specific imperative to bite every plant that wasn’t grass or a tree. That would doubtless mean the loss of some native flowers and Hagrid’s vegetable garden, but it would get rid of Indigena’s vines and blossoms and thorns. Harry didn’t dare send out the Gloryflower horses, among others, until he knew Indigena wouldn’t be able to just grab them with vines and hold them motionless.

“What are you doing?” Voldemort demanded abruptly. His snake was apparently looking in the right direction to have noticed the insects, though not the hole in the wards.

Harry arched a brow and smiled as he scattered another handful of insects downwards. “What does it look like I’m doing, Tom?”

Another twitch from the Dark Lord. “It looks as if you think that you need help in defeating me,” he sneered.

“I would say that,” Harry agreed, and then lifted his eyes to scan the five hundred or so Death Eaters behind Voldemort. “But you hardly came prepared for single combat either, Tom. Giants. Really. Was that necessary?”

By now, Voldemort was shaking with anger. Harry dropped two more handfuls of insects before he was able to respond. “They shall all die,” Voldemort whispered. “They shall all perish, and I shall make you kill some of them yourself, as you did by the lake.”

Harry kept himself from staggering with an effort. Voldemort’s Sonorus was touching the ears of everyone in the castle, if he kept the form of the spell he had used for his morning announcements. That meant that everyone would now know he had killed those children in the Life-Web.

He pushed it aside. He would deal with it later, and hope that no one would try to stab him in the back from within the school because of it. He looked outward again, scanning the distance, the road that led to Hogsmeade.

“What are you looking for, Harry?” Voldemort called. “Aurors from the Ministry come to save you?”

“No,” said Harry, softly enough that he didn’t think Voldemort could hear him. His eyes locked on a glint of light that wasn’t the storm reflecting off something. “A second sunrise.”

A moment later, horns, or the sound of horns, broke the morning, sounding like the hunting horn that Harry had heard summoning him throughout Walpurgis. He felt his face break into a smile in answer, especially when one of Honoria’s illusions answered with trumpets from within the school. Some of the Death Eaters looked uneasily over their shoulders.

“What was that?” Voldemort demanded.

Harry couldn’t believe he wanted an answer to that question. But he didn’t have to give it, because it answered itself in the next few moments.

Gloryflower had arrived.

The ground shook with vibrations as a herd of artificial unicorns came charging, their bodies glinting silver as running water beneath the golden sky, their diamond horns sharp and lowered and playing that hunting call over and over, their hooves flashing and their manes streaming. They bound straight past the still-staring giants and slammed into the back of the Death Eaters. Harry saw more than one body go flying, stabbed by a horn through the guts or kicked by one of the hooves that Laura had told him were as sharp as knives.

Vines lashed out of the ground, grabbing and slowing some of the unicorns, but these were not the horses Laura had sent. They had no riders to take care of, and plenty of edges. The unicorns whipped up and down, and the vines fell cut and wriggling from their feet and their bodies. Harry saw spikes springing out of their necks and flanks, severing their assailants and then withdrawing beneath the silver again so that the unicorns could pick up speed.

At the same moment, some of the Death Eaters began to scream. Harry concentrated, sharpening his ears with his magic,
and made out some of their words. They were blind. Fred and George had reached their brooms, and were on them above the field, scattering down drops of their potion.

Harry looked down at Voldemort, and saw the fury gathering on his face. His magic was gathering around him, too, a Dark answer to the Light overhead, and Harry could feel it opening like a pit with snakes at the bottom.

He stepped back from the edge of the Astronomy Tower, dropped the phoenix fire, and reached out his hand. The artificial animal curled up beneath the wall, so that Voldemort wouldn’t see it before it was time, raised its head and blinked at him, then bowed its back so that Harry could climb aboard.

This was the creature that Laura had said her ancestor had built a prototype of. She’d sent the prototype and one other copy of the creature to Harry. Harry thought it had started out something like a thestral, but Laura’s ancestor had gone slightly mad in adding spikes and horns and fins, until it looked more like a cross between a thestral and a dragon, and perhaps a unicorn if one took into account the enormous single horn rising from its forehead. It was made of iron, and ugly beyond belief, but its sides had ready-made stirrups. In spite of his lack of experience riding horses, Harry could ride this and know he wouldn’t be thrown off.

He fixed his feet into the stirrups and leaned forward. The iron creature spread its wings. Harry felt the egg-shaped stone bouncing in his robe pocket, along with several other stones pried from the walls of Hogwarts. The egg-shaped stone was full of the purified magic he’d taken from Dumbledore and Voldemort, and finished cleansing last night with Peter and Draco and Snape to watch over him.

The other stones were empty.

Right now, anyway.

The iron creature took several running steps, and then launched itself from the edge of the Tower. Harry clutched the spiny neck; his Quidditch gear, especially the glove, was essential to protecting him while he rode the beast. They circled out over the battlefield, tents and fires and Death Eaters swinging crazily beneath the madly flapping blue-black wings.

Harry used one knee to nudge the iron creature upward, and it took the command, rising. Harry streamed across the grounds towards the Forbidden Forest, looking all the while for some sign that not just the Gloryflower unicorns were there.

He saw it in the form of three separate triangular flashes of light, their agreed-upon signal, and pumped his arm. The Gloryflowers, the Griffinsnests, the elder Malfoys, and the others waiting on the edge of the grounds began to move forward. They’d arrived without being noticed; the Death Eaters hadn’t been worried about a threat from behind.

Harry wheeled the iron beast around again. He could see threats from at least two directions. The first was that the giants had begun to move, swinging their clubs onto their shoulders with stern grunts and heading for Hogwarts. They wouldn’t care about wading into the panicking Death Eaters, Harry knew.

The second was that Voldemort was attacking Hogwarts’s wards.

Harry took a deep breath and opened his absorbere ability as widely as it would go. Then he began to rake the Death Eaters gathered around the Quidditch Pitch and the edges of the Forbidden Forest, swallowing their magic with no care for if it was fouled or not. He needed as much power as he could get his hand on, and it wouldn’t matter if he gulped enough to burst him, because he would pass most of it directly into the stones in his pocket.

Voldemort swung to face him at once. He pointed one hand, and a spell Harry didn’t know traveled up through the air towards him in a deadly dark cone.

Harry spun the iron beast to meet it, and it obeyed him as quickly and neatly as the Firebolt would have. This was his major part in the battle, other than gathering magic. He would face Voldemort and hold him, because no one else could do that.

He broke the dark cone, turning it aside, deflecting it into small scattered particles that fell and burned themselves out harmlessly long before they hit the grass. Harry gave Voldemort a smile he was certain to feel and then began gulping more magic. Voldemort, he thought, would have to come and face him. He wouldn’t want to drain his own followers of power, and to break through the wards and drain those inside Hogwarts would take moments of effort in which Harry would have a chance to become more and more powerful.

Sure enough, Voldemort, maddened by the thought of losing to him, did not leave him alone. He gave a command in Parseltongue that sounded choked in dirt, the same language he had used to control the worm in the graveyard, and several Death Eaters flew aside as something slithered over to him from the direction of his tent.

Harry fought to hold onto his breakfast. The creature was a flesh-dragon, made of stitched-together parts of Muggle bodies, the same one he had seen in some of his visions when he’d still held the Occlumency link to Voldemort open. It breathed
not fire, but a great and vicious stink, if he remembered correctly.

And now Voldemort was mounting its back, accompanied by his snake, and pointing Harry out, still shouting in choked Parseltongue. Harry saw the dragon’s head, slick and pale and sewn together, lift and orient on him. The great wings flashed and flapped, and the dragon began to rise from the ground.

Harry braced himself for the meeting, glad he rode a non-living mount that couldn’t be affected by the stink, and hoped that his attacking allies were in a position to do something about the giants.

Lucius ducked, his hair flying, as one of the giants’ clubs tried to smash him into the ground. Narcissa dropped smoothly to her knees behind him, grabbing his shoulder and shielding him with a *Protego* as one of the giant spears stabbed at him. The giant recoiled. Lucius knew maintaining the Shield Charm had cost his wife, but she didn’t appear to be tired as she held out her hand and helped him rise.

“On three?” she asked.

Lucius nodded, and put his back to hers. They were aiming at giants who appeared to be ignoring them now for the sake of getting to Hogwarts, or had perhaps simply forgotten about the smaller creatures when they looked away. Giants had notoriously short attention spans, which was one of the difficulties with getting them to be allies in wizard wars.

“One,” he said.

“Two,” Narcissa echoed him.

“Three,” they said together, and followed the number with the curse that alone could carry all their rage and hatred when their son was cooped up in a school and threatened by the madman Lucius used to serve.

“*Avada Kedavra!*”

Twin beams of green light shot away from their wands, and each felled a giant. Lucius laughed aloud, cold, fierce pleasure rising up in him. He heard Narcissa laughing with the same emotion behind him. He never felt so close to her as he did in these moments. He turned and claimed a hungry kiss, in the instant before she had to cast a Shield Charm around him to protect him from a giant’s flying club.

In fact, Lucius saw as he looked up, the giants seemed to be going mad, acting as if something invisible were circling their heads and taunting them. Were there giant-gnats?

“Takes a more concentrated—“ Fred shouted as he emptied one of their vials of blinding potion on a giant’s head.

“Dose to bring them down,” George finished, nodding as he emptied two vials on the same giant, flying his broom with his knees, and then reached into his robe pocket for another. “Yes, it does.”

Fred grinned at him, and George grinned back, thinking that this was really the perfect way to test their new products. Protected by their illusion, no one could see them to hit at them, and that meant they only had to dodge randomly fired curses and, now that they were among the giants, wildly swinging clubs. And since they had both been Beaters on the Gryffindor Quidditch team for the majority of their school careers, that was no trouble.

“Bet I can get that one,” Fred said then, nodding to one giant in the center of the tangle, which was staring at its blind, flailing brothers in dumb wonder.

“Not before me!” George shouted, and urged his broom forward. Fred laughed and rose over the giants’ heads. George, meanwhile, took the lower route, around and through the giants’ arms and weapons.

A club passed close enough to cause a whiffle of wind to run up his ribs. George shivered and put on a burst of speed to carry him clear. He nearly hit a second giant in the armpit, but spun the broom twice, in a maneuver that Connor had shown him, and ducked around the obstruction. He had to keep one hand on the vials in his pocket so they didn’t fall or fly out, and he had to watch all the time just in case he missed a shadow that would indicate a weapon was coming at him, and he was blasted again and again with the foul smell of sweating giants in close quarters.

He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been this madly happy.

He came out under his last raised arm, and saw the giant he and Fred had targeted immediately ahead. He also saw that Fred was going to reach him first; his route had been faster after all. George cursed and pulled up, hovering, ready to listen to
whatever taunts Fred gave him in good humor.

Fred turned and glanced back, seeing him. A smile lit his face, and he drew breath to shout something.

Their target had had his head lifted. Now, for the first time, George saw his nose working. Then he grunted, and swung his club around in a steady circle.

Fred never saw it coming.

The club caught his broomstick and smashed it to kindling. Then it broke his legs—George could hear those snaps of bones as if they were his own—and traveled on, straight into his ribs. George shrieked, on fire with his twin’s pain, sharing the sensations as he never had before.

He was diving without conscious thought, falling and falling, his eyes locked on Fred’s motionless, falling form. He felt himself draw his wand and chant the Levitation Charm without realizing he would do it, either. With Fred unconscious—hopefully unconscious, at least—he felt only half-alive.

He saw Fred slow. And then he caught him, he caught him, oh he had him, wrapped close in his arms, held tightly, and he could feel Fred’s ribs twitching and folding inward in a way that no ribs ever should, and Fred choked on blood and met his eyes.

“Don’t you dare die, you son of a bitch,” George breathed, as he spun his broom and rose, flying directly towards the castle.

“No call to go insulting Mum,” said Fred faintly, and shut his eyes.

George dismissed the glamour that would keep anyone from seeing them and realizing they needed help, and flew.

Harry cursed softly as Voldemort forced him to wheel high enough, and bring up enough defenses, that he could no longer easily reach and drain the Death Eaters. Voldemort was laughing at him, and his laughter sounded just as unpleasant aloud as it ever had in Harry’s dreams.

“What good is magic if you do not use it?” he said now, and another spell that Harry didn’t recognize came at him, this one a purple stream of light that forked again and again as he looked at it, like intelligent lightning bolts splitting to attack a target.

Harry swallowed that magic, too, and saw Voldemort’s face twist. They were high enough now that Harry was shivering, and the lazy swirls of golden light turning overhead seemed closer than the people struggling on the ground.

Voldemort said something else, but Harry didn’t really hear it. He was struggling with the flow of power he’d swallowed. He’d pressed most of it into the stones, but he had to retain some of it in case Voldemort hit him with a spell that couldn’t be shielded against and was too vile to gulp down. And already he felt distant and detached from the world, floating above it in a way that had nothing to do with his mount. He could do almost anything with this much magic. Why shouldn’t he do it?

If he feels like this most of the time, Harry thought, eyes lingering on Voldemort as he spun the iron beast away from another bolt of forked lightning, this time green, it’s no wonder that he thinks other people are of no account.

Voldemort touched the neck of his flesh dragon, and it drew its head back. Harry saw the slick jaws part, and he sucked in a quick, deep breath of air.

The dragon breathed, a clinging, choking cloud of inky murk that flowed around Harry’s face. He could feel the oiliness of it against his skin even before he was forced to open his mouth to take in new air and smelled the reek. He began to hack. The smell was burning the lining of his throat and mouth, and the only solution he could think of to keep from vomiting his guts out was to aim the horned thestral for the sky and hope that it would bring him clear of the cloud soon.

It appeared to have worked; Harry could see light and golden sky a moment later, and he breathed clean air frantically to ease the burning. But his mount shook a moment later, and Harry realized that the flesh-dragon hovered not far away. Its tail had just slammed the thestral, and barely missed breaking his own leg. Now its head was coming around again, the jaws parting.

Harry dropped into the instincts that he usually kept for Quidditch, and willed the beast to dive. It obeyed him, dropping like a stone for long enough that Harry knew people would have been yelling his name in fear and fury from the stands if this was a true game. Then he kicked out, and the thestral turned and began to climb again in steady circles.
Harry turned his head, scanning for Voldemort, and saw the dragon bearing down on the battlefield. The Dark Lord had either got bored with him, or realized the best way to infuriate and incapacitate Harry was actually by attacking his allies.

_I’m not going to let him do that._

Harry opened a conduit directly to Voldemort’s magic, as he had done in the Chamber of Secrets, and last Midsummer in the graveyard, and began to drain him. The foul taste _was_ enough to make him vomit this time, but he succeeded in getting Voldemort’s attention. The dragon swung around again, a strange whistling shriek bursting from its throat.

“You _dare_?” Voldemort breathed, staring blindly down at him.

Harry thought that was fairly obvious, and tugged furiously at the siphon. He threw up again, but Voldemort was losing strength.

And now he had the Dark Lord’s attention fully fixed on him.

Harry prepared to do some fast flying.

Ignifer shifted anxiously as she waited for Hogwarts’s wards to part enough to let her and the other fighters out. McGonagall had been reluctant to agree at first, since they didn’t know if Yaxley’s plants were gone or remained to restrict their free movement, but Ignifer had pointed out that her fire could burn most vines and flowers, even magical ones, away. And since the Weasley twins had come back to the castle wounded, and Harry’s allies on the far end of the field were tangling with Death Eaters now, someone had to do something about the giant problem.

Honoria stood close at her side, now and then giving her smiles as if to remind her of what they’d done last night. Ignifer avoided her glances, but only some of the time.

At her back were Harry’s other adult allies and some of the older students. Minerva had also been extremely reluctant to let them risk their lives, but they could make a difference on the battlefield. Scattered though the Death Eaters were, distracted though their Lord was, some of them might make a concentrated effort on the wards, and then they would be fighting to protect the lives of defenseless students. And there simply weren’t enough fighters on the field if they sent only the adults.

Ignifer leaned forward now, staring intently, watching for the moment when the blurred vision of the Hogwarts grounds, courtesy of the wards, gave way—

And then it did. She could see the flagstones of the courtyard just beyond the entrance hall, and the grass beyond that, and the struggling shapes, without looking through a veil of mist.

She led the way out, fire flaring around her, Honoria still keeping her place close beside her. Ignifer wasn’t surprised to see glamous of other fighters take shape, replicating them at first, but appearing different enough the further away they stretched to make the Death Eaters think they were fighting many more enemies than were actually present. Honoria shrugged and smiled when she saw that Ignifer was watching her.

“The more we can keep them from striking at us, the better,” she said. “These will even bleed and scream like the real thing.”

Ignifer stopped herself from saying that Honoria was brilliant, because that would sound too sentimental. Besides, the next moment Honoria was sprouting feathers and hurtling aloft, looking for the place where she could use her illusions to best effect. Ignifer was sure she heard her cackle before she vanished into the storm of gold hovering over the castle.

A giant, brushing off the remains of what looked like a curse that had tried to tie it with ropes, stumbled towards her. Ignifer held out her wand. Though she could not call on the Light for help as she knew some of the wizards and witches today would do, her old sympathy with fire, which normally only the Light-Declared had so strongly, had never left her.

“Ardesco!” she cried.

Flames burst through the giant’s gray skin, and it began to slap at itself inefficiently, trying to put the fire out. Ignifer laughed, and ran forward, calling out the incantation for the Flame Whip. It formed in her fist, and she lashed, curling it around the giant’s leg and pulling. It tottered, but remained standing upright, even as it howled in pain. Ignifer wasn’t surprised. Giants could take a lot of damage before they fell. She supposed she could have slain it in a moment with the Killing Curse, but she preferred not to use the Unforgivables, and she definitely didn’t want to take the chance that her curse would fly awry in such close quarters with her allies.

She laughed again, but that was cut short when the ground in front of her wrenched itself apart and vines exploded out, coiling around her legs and binding her wand arm to her side. Ignifer was a prisoner in moments, and had to stand still as
Pansy knew she didn’t have much time. So, the moment they stepped through the gate and she felt the rhythm of the battle reach out for her, she retreated into cold and darkness instead, reaching for the connection to Sirius.

He was there, a misty white dog, dancing around her like a mortal puppy. Pansy smiled faintly and ran her hand through the fur on his head.

“Ready?” she asked.

Sirius barked in answer, and Pansy began to open a gate from this quiet, dark world, this inner space, to the outer regions of light and life. It was harder than she’d been prepared for; death itself pressed against her, trying to keep them separate. Pansy had to stand still for a moment and let it see that she was one of its servants. She would not open the gates for any perverted reason, the way that the Dark Lord might, seeking a way to live forever. She knew everyone died eventually. She let the cold strike directly to the center of her mind, and share the visions she had seen, and see how she had kept her vows not to tell anyone.

Death was satisfied that she had kept the sacrifices and the vows. It rolled aside, and Sirius streamed into the world with a howl more nearly akin to a scream. Pansy knew that no one save those on the edge of death would be able to see him, but he would pull their wounded enemies into the darkness all the more quickly, and he would inspire and gift their side with strength from an unknown source as he passed by. Sirius had been a Light-Declared wizard in life, after all, one of the reasons he had so irritated his parents, and today was the day of longest Light.

Pansy opened her eyes and found herself kneeling on the grass, shaking. Her mother stood over her, stroking her shoulder and blocking a curse with a Shield Charm.

Pansy?

Her hands asked the question with considerable concern.

I’m well, Pansy answered, and that satisfied Hawthorn. She even smiled for a moment, and Pansy saw Sirius bound past her and hit a group of Death Eaters staggering with the impact of curses from the elder Malfoys. They screamed. Hawthorn laughed, and lifted her wand to deal with the giants.

Pansy closed her eyes. There were two more things she had to do. One required an enormous test of her necromancer powers. The other required nothing but courage and the acceptance of the inevitable.

She raised her hands and called in a voice inaudible to everyone save those who had passed, “Dead in service of an ignoble cause! I respect you, I recognize you, I know your sacrifices and would honor them! As we pass and meet on the road, I going in one direction and you in the other, I would send you to take revenge on the one who condemned you to death! Will you hear and heed me?”

The call echoed and reechoed in a world of loneliness and darkness that lay just behind the living world, the stopping place of the newly dead. Pansy’s task was to get her voice to that point. She could not control who would answer, or how they might respond. That was not up to her. A necromancer spoke to, and for, the dead. She did not compel them.

She felt a cold sigh flow past her, and then a few voices answered, followed by more, until she had a chorus of perhaps a score moaning around her. Pansy stepped back, away, sideways—English had no good words for such a direction—and showed them the gate she’d opened back to the living world for Sirius. Frost struck her side as they, too, took it.

Sirius had had to go back as a spirit because of the long time that had passed between his death and his return, and because he had no body; his had been burned in the Black funeral rites. But these dead were the fallen Death Eaters, and they had bodies to possess again.

Pansy could hear the screaming begin even as she opened her eyes. The newly reanimated dead were taking revenge on those responsible for their deaths, as they saw it—Voldemort’s other soldiers, who had brought them here in the first place. The one who respected and spoke to them was on the opposite side. That further justified taking revenge on their former comrades. Pansy could hear panicky voices screaming curses that would have no effect. The dead had set minds that did not succumb to intimidation or any form of compulsion. The Death Eaters would have to destroy their bodies to make them stop coming.

Pansy laughed at the thought, finding it more than a little ironic that Death Eaters were so afraid of death. What happened to possessing the force that ends life, and insuring your own immortality? she thought, giddy. Is it too much to see the real thing walking?

She had not realized how much easier calling up the dead would make her last task. She was in their company now, and she
felt them reaching out to her, stroking her with cold hands, claiming her as their kin. They knew she was one of them, and Pansy knew she was one of them, and the living world was falling away about her.

She knew what she had to do.

She turned her head, and there she was, a witch with blonde-brown hair and dark eyes and the shadow of leaves beneath her skin, riding an enormous vine that had just burst the soil and was growing upward like a tree. She had lost some of her plants to the golden Gloryflower insects inhabiting the soil, but not enough. Pansy knew she would continue to make trouble until she was driven from the battlefield.

And there was only one way to do that.

With a sense of inevitability, with a sense of the grace of fate, with a sense of turning cycles and turning wheels, Pansy faced Indigena Yaxley and called again. This time, what came down the road that Sirius had taken into the sunlit world was nothing so simple as a spirit. It was the force of cold itself, the force of death, and it struck Indigena’s vine with the impact of a whole winter. Pansy saw the leaves wilt and curl, the smooth green body develop brown spots, the strength leave the vine like running sap or running blood.

Indigena’s head swung at once, focusing on her, the leaves beneath her skin shifting and bunching. Pansy spread the cold wind wider, acting as a conduit now, attacking the vines that held her comrades still and helpless before the onslaught of the giants.

Her head throbbed with cold and the foreknowledge of death and a very great joy.

Her hands lifted and began to move in the final patterns.

"Avada Kedavra!"

Hawthorn watched in satisfaction as the giant threatening Apollonis fell, and then turned, by habit, to see what her daughter was doing, even though she knew Pansy possessed weapons that no one else on the battlefield did.

She was in time to see a pair of green-black tendrils lift Pansy high and turn her around. Hawthorn caught a glimpse of her daughter’s hands, dancing out a familiar set of signs.

Hawthorn’s heart withered. She recognized the signs not because she knew the language itself, but because she knew what every necromancer said right when he or she met the moment of death.

Do not mourn me. This is my fate. Thus I die.

Hawthorn was not sure whether it was one kind of inevitability, the knowledge of disaster, or the second, the disaster that said she would be too late anyway, that held her to the spot as the tendrils wrenched Pansy apart, and she saw her daughter die. The blood came thick and fast, a spatter of gore as her arms were tugged from her body that told Hawthorn she would have needed magical healing in the first few moments to survive. And those moments were past, and then another tendril closed around Pansy’s head and pulled that off, sealing her fate.

Hawthorn’s heart blossomed again, and its single flower was rage. She turned and saw Indigena Yaxley gazing for a moment at the bloodied vines, as if she could not believe the violence of her darlings.

Hawthorn did not cast the Killing Curse again, though she could have. When she had run in the Death Eaters, she had been called the Red Death, and feared for her knowledge of blood curses. That was what she called on now, dropping straight past the times when she was Harry’s ally and a werewolf and a pureblood witch, back into the primal violence of her youth.

"Cædes," she spat.

The spell was a single beam of thin red darkness that touched Yaxley in the shoulder. It did not matter where it had touched her, though, because the effect was the same. Yaxley shuddered and bent over as her blood began to force its way through her skin in gouts, imitating the cascades that had fallen from Pansy. She would die in a moment if that kept on, but Hawthorn did not intend that she do so. This woman had killed her daughter. For that, she would suffer.

"Sanguis sanguis," she cast next, the Blood-Renewing Spell. Yaxley’s body would work furiously to create the blood to keep her alive, no matter what it cost in pain or strength. And meanwhile, the blood went on forcing its way to her shoulder and outward, and Yaxley was finally beginning to sob with the pain. The plants beneath her skin were writhing, bending into fearsome patterns try to and find some way to stop the flow of blood, but Hawthorn doubted that even they could do much against the fury that had powered her spell.
“Incruentus,” she said, and saw the effect when Yaxley jerked and grunted, her hands moving frantically in the air. That was the Bloodless Curse. It Vanished the liquid from the usual parts of her body that would make blood, including the marrow of her bones from which red blood cells could come. That meant the Sanguis sanguis would have to feed directly on her magic, on her flesh, and on the other liquids in her body—including the liquids in the eye—in order to power itself, which it would need to do because the Caedes spell kept draining the blood out from her skin. Hawthorn had perfected the ability of all three curses to work together during the First War. And now for the final touch, while Yaxley was writhing in what would be only the beginnings of pain.

“Semper fidelis,” she whispered. The Permanence Curse settled on top of the other three, binding them in place. Even a skilled healer would have a hell of a time undoing them. Hawthorn laughed, and laughed again when Yaxley somehow gathered the strength to Apparate and her plants fell limp all over the battlefield, and found the laughter changing to tears when she knelt beside the torn corpse of her daughter, without awareness of having crossed the intervening ground.

“That’s why you died,” she whispered. “Because you knew that I would grow angry enough to drive her away if she killed you.”

But also because she saw her ending here—she has known what her death was since Halloween—and knew she could not tell me.

Hawthorn cradled her daughter’s severed head. Blood had never troubled her. She let it run down her arms as she kissed Pansy’s lips.

Then she rose and turned to fight, the rage possessing her more fiercely than it ever had during her werewolf transformation.

Draco clamped his arms around the neck of the second iron beast for a moment. He could do this. He could do this, couldn’t he? He and Harry had talked about it yesterday in the strategy meetings. It had seemed simple then. Do this, and then do this, and then do this. Harry would have to face Voldemort alone because he was the only one who could resist the Dark Lord’s magic, and Draco wouldn’t be able to keep up with the exchange of spells. Besides, Harry would feel the obligation to protect him if Draco was close at his side.

None of which made it any easier to direct the thestral to soar up over the battlefield until he was a good five hundred feet aloft, and then circle there, instead of flying after Harry.

Draco lay along the thestral’s neck and closed his eyes. He knew he couldn’t fall, since the stirrups clamped his feet in place, and he’d had the thestral coil a few of its whippier spikes around his legs, but he still hesitated for a long moment before his mind leaped free of his body and swept the battlefield, looking for someone to possess.

He found it absurdly easy to locate a Death Eater. The Dark Marks on their arms were like brands of foulness in Draco’s mind, steaming piles of shit that he didn’t want to step in. He selected one and landed neatly in his head, seizing his mind and slipping on his body like a glove before the idiot could object.

His name was Walden Macnair. Draco felt a certain warm glow—most definitely his own, and not Macnair’s—at the memories that name brought up. This was one of the Death Eaters who had entered the Ministry last Midsummer night and tried to kill the Minister. Harry had gone charging in like the hero he was, of course, and could have been wounded or even died. Draco would happily use Macnair to further his own ends.

He made the heavset body hold up its wand, and Morsmordre flowed easily off its lips, casting the Dark Mark into the air. Those Death Eaters who could still walk, and hadn’t been drained of their magic, saw it and rallied to Macnair’s side. Draco made the lips stretch in a cruel smile and nodded to each of them as he caught their gazes. All of the man’s memories were open to him, and this was what he would do if he was actually trying to plan a counterstrike. The real Macnair was a small hammering presence at the back of his mind, unable to break through the wall Draco had set on him.

“This is what we do,” Draco whispered in a voice much hoarser and deeper than his own. “Our Lord just spoke to me through my Mark.” He held up his left arm, and all the other Death Eaters looked suitably impressed. Draco fought to keep from rolling his eyes. “He wants us to go to the foot of the North Tower in Hogwarts and attack there. There’s a weakness in the wards. We’ll burst inside and be able to attack the students before any of these fools out here knows what we’re about.”

The other Death Eaters laughed and agreed. Draco again fought to keep from rolling his eyes. Idiots. I’m surprised that none of them think to mention this. For one thing, why would Voldemort send Macnair, of all people? Indigena Yaxley would be the most obvious choice, since she has vines that can bore through stone.
But the twenty Death Eaters he’d gathered followed him across the battlefield without hesitation, ducking around and between the legs of the giants, and more came over as they saw the strength and purpose with which Macnair’s delegation was moving. Draco estimated he had thirty-four or thirty-five behind him by the time he halted at the base of the North Tower and nodded to part of the wards. The Death Eaters with him squinted obediently, as if they could see the nonexistent weak place.


The Death Eaters eagerly intoned the Blasting Curse, and Draco rose out of Macnair’s mind like a falcon just as they reached the last syllables of the incantation. He could hear Macnair shrieking somewhere in the distance as he came back to himself.

It didn’t matter. They had no time to retreat. McGonagall had strengthened the wards at the base of the North Tower, as well as a few other places around the school, especially for this trick, and the Blasting Curse bounced from the layered defensive magic and came back at the Death Eaters threefold. Draco heard several screams, most of which ended in a few moments, but one of which went on and on and on.

He opened his own eyes again, and panted. He didn’t look at the North Tower. He told himself he wasn’t afraid of what damage he’d caused. He just didn’t have the time to pause and survey every disaster he inflicted on Voldemort’s forces. He was doing this for Harry, and Harry needed as many of the Death Eaters as possible dying and down. He was tearing Voldemort’s power base to shreds today, and anyone on the Dark Lord’s side who did survive the battle had to be aware that joining him only meant defeat and death.

Draco gave himself just a moment more of peace on his mount’s steady iron back, and then went to kill again.

Ron found himself breathing hard as he charged. Defending other students from an unexpected Death Eater attack was one thing. Going out into the middle of a developing battle, even if it was to help save Hogwarts from the clutches of the Dark Lord, was…something else.

But he had the rage to do it. There was no doubt of that. Since Ginny’s wounding on the last day of term, Ron had been in a constant state of low-level rage that made him look forward to a chance to yell, sit on, or punch people in Gryffindor who talked nonsense about Harry. Connor had taken to handing repeat offenders over to him. Ron had found it very satisfying indeed to break Cormac McLaggen’s nose. Then Blaise had betrayed everyone, and Ron had held his sister as she cried and dreamed of revenge.

And then, just before he probably would have gone out the gates anyway, as one of the most experienced of the dueling club members, he had heard that George and Fred had come back to the hospital wing, with Fred wounded and not expected to live. Ron had broken into a volley of swearing that made Hermione scold him, before he put the rage back inside himself where it belonged, and planned on how to unleash it.

On his enemies.

He looked upward, and the waves of golden light from the storm were swimming overhead. Harry had explained that the Light respected free will, unlike the wild Dark, and so would not normally interfere in wizarding wars or politics, unless someone dedicated to it committed a great wrong. But because it so respected free will, it would come to someone who called it on a day like this.

Ron was a Light wizard, from a pureblood family that had followed the Light for generations, and right now he was breathless with rage.

He held up his arm, and he yelled, a wild, incoherent appeal of fury and need.

And the Light answered.

A whirling golden cone descended, looking like a localized hurricane as it bore down on him. Ron found himself floating for a moment as it claimed him. Then it set him back down, but he felt magic leaping and burning in him, ready to defend Hogwarts and harm Dark wizards.

A Death Eater loomed up in front of him, no doubt taking him as easy prey over an adult opponent. Ron held out his wand and incanted a variant of the fire spell. “Incendioso!”

The flames that burst from his wand looked more golden than orange, and the Death Eater howled with surprise as his cloak began to burn. He cast it off, and Ron lit his robes on fire, and his shirt underneath them, and then his mask. He staggered
away, howling with pain now, and Ron let him go. He didn’t know who had hurt Ginny, so he would settle for wounding those he could get his hands or his wand on.

It was the giants he was really interested in.

He ducked the sweep of a curse above his head—he was Keeper for Gryffindor, and really, this was no harder than dodging Bludgers, or especially Moody’s curses—and zeroed in on a giant that so far had made it across the grounds with only minor scratches and burns. It had just stabbed a spear through a witch with bright golden hair, and as Ron watched, she spasmed and died. Ron sucked in a deep breath, but he had seen children die two weeks ago. He continued charging.

The Light leaped up in him. Giants were considered Dark creatures, and with good reason; like dragons, they simply didn’t care about any will save their own, and they lacked compassion for the most basic needs of other species.

“Oculis et auribus captus!” he yelled, a spell Moody had made them practice over and over again until they got it right.

The giant bellowed, and Ron snarled, a sound that might have been a smile if he hadn’t been so angry; it wasn’t pleasant, suddenly going blind and deaf. Then the giant swung its club wildly, and Ron rolled under the motion of it and came up on one knee. He was about just beneath the giant’s knees, and he was going to take advantage of that.

Moody had said it would happen this way, in battle, no matter how angry he was. He would see a chance, and he would take it. His instincts had more say in the matter than any strategy. Ron saw what he had to do next the way he saw a move in chess.

“Concutio!”

The Concussive Force Hex left his wand with a jolt that traveled all the way up his arm to his shoulder, and Ron grunted as he briefly went sprawling backward. He scrambled up fast enough to make his vision blur, though, and heard the giant’s knee shatter with a noise not unlike Moody’s wooden leg, when Neville—Neville, of all people!—had finally got through his defenses and put the Hex to work.

The giant tried to take a step anyway, since they weren’t the greatest intellects around, and began to topple like a tree. Ron saw one path out, and took it, not allowing fear a place in his heart, because a Gryffindor didn’t, and ducked forward between its legs. One foot tried to stamp on him, but he was too quick, and came out on the other side as the giant fell beneath him with an impact that jarred him back to his knees.

Ron turned around, but Hermione stepped up just then, aimed her wand at the giant, and said a spell that Ron couldn’t hear. A moment later, the giant began to snore, rackingly. Ron nodded. She’d sent it to sleep. Someone else could handle the Killing Curse; Moody had been emphatic that none of them should try to cast it.

Ron turned, restless as a thestral being fired upon, to seek his next target.

Hermione was relieved that she’d done all right so far. That was what she told herself, at least, as she watched Ron dodge past the falling giant with her heart in her throat. Idiot, to take risks like that! her brain yelled.

She supposed she was taking a risk herself in running up to the giant and casting the sleeping spell right after, but at least it got the giant out of the way. She took a deep breath, and stilled her shaking wand hand. She’d tried to fight back-to-back with Ginny for a moment, but Ginny had seen one of her comrades from the dueling club in danger and gone to help. Since the wound on her arm limited her mobility and the amount of magic she could cast, she was playing mostly a defensive role, and letting other people take care of the offensive.

Hermione knew Zacharias wasn’t on the field yet—he was waiting with the golden horses, to charge when the crowd in front of the gates cleared a little—so that was one less person she had to worry about. And she supposed she could follow Ron for a little while and guard his back. The idiot was so angry over Fred getting hurt that he wasn’t watching out for himself.

She turned around to track Ron’s progress, and a Death Eater jumped gracefully over the fallen giant’s back and came down in front of her.

Hermione felt logical thought coil into a lump in the back of her mind and scream. She recognized the man in front of her. He’d caught her on her way back to Gryffindor Tower from Zacharias’s room one night and held her captive for an hour while he tried to wake Harry up, whispering in her ear all the while about what he’d like to do to her if they were alone, and what the silver collar around her neck would do to her if Harry didn’t cooperate.

Evan Rosier smiled at her and swept her a mock salute. “Do bow, Hermione,” he said. “That’s what everyone does before a
duel. And we must pay attention to the forms of propriety. As one of my favorite poets says, ‘Honour and shame from no condition rise; Act well your part, there all the honour lies.’"

Hermione made herself bow back. She doubted that Rosier knew anything about honor, but he had kept his word to Harry on the matter of the life debt, in a fashion. His adherence to the formal rules of dueling might be all that saved her, because she didn’t think she could survive if he simply hit her with anything. Moody himself had managed to survive duels with Rosier, but not bring him down.

Rosier began to circle, smiling all the while. Hermione fixed her gaze on his collarbone, since she couldn’t look at his face. Lessons yammered in her head, barking in Moody’s voice about watching her opponent’s eyes during a duel, but she couldn’t. She would see her death, and her violation, written in his face if she tried.

“Good girl,” Rosier whispered, in that same breathy tone that he’d used the night he captured her. Hermione wondered if it was possible for a voice to sound like rape. “You’re a good girl, aren’t you, Hermione? A bit naughty perhaps, sneaking out at night to visit your boyfriend, but I can’t imagine you’ve gone very far. There are parts of you no one has ever seen. Those are the parts I would like to put my mouth on. Cogo!”

Hermione already had a *Protego* up; Moody had made them practice the Shield Charm, in particular, until they could do it nonverbally, and she’d brought it up during his last few words. The Compression Curse bounced, though it had come in so powerfully that Hermione’s shield had trembled and cracked. She dropped that shield and quickly replaced it, and saw Rosier watching her with bright eyes, never having stopped his circling.

“Very good, Hermione,” he whispered. “Perhaps, after all, you have some more experience than I thought. Just a little naughty, should we say? Perhaps a bit of knowledge, a bit of wetness at the thought of being touched. *Ardesco!*”

Hermione could have laughed. That one Harry had taught them, and Moody had warned them that Rosier had a fondness for curses like this one—spells that started in the victim’s body, and got in under shields. She knew the counter of it, binding a *Haurio* close to the skin and channeling the magic right into the Absorption Charm as it struck her. She was left unharmed, not bursting into flames. Rosier’s eyebrows raised a little higher.

“Even better than I imagined,” he said, and began to circle faster. Hermione sped up her pace to match him, and when he moved a bit backwards, she moved a bit forwards. She saw a flicker of something in his eyes, and thought she could not imagine it was fear, it made her feel more confident. “Good, good, good. I wonder what would happen if I made you want to spread your legs for me, Hermione. If you—"

She tripped over something on the ground, and fell. Rosier had led her right into the path of a body with the new dueling circle. Hermione struggled frantically to recover, to stand—

And then Rosier’s Severing Curse hit her, cutting her open from collarbone to navel, and all the world was pain.

Henrietta had not been a Beater on the Slytherin Quidditch team for nothing.

She came in low across the battlefield, clinging to her broomstick and hidden under a concealing charm, because otherwise people would be so unkind as to throw curses into the air at her. Behind and ahead of her raced the Bludgers she’d enchanted to crack bone and obey her and only her. There were five of them, and they circled restlessly, her own destructive, impatient little toys.

She neared the middle of the Hogwarts grounds before she saw something she wanted to hit in the sea of madly struggling figures. She whistled, and one of the Bludgers sped forward and smashed a giant in the skull. It looked puzzled and reached up with one hand to feel the wound instead of immediately collapsing, of course; giants were famous for having thicker heads than humans, in all senses. Henrietta whistled again, and the Bluder turned back to hammer at its target. It was too small for the giant to even see, and far too fast for it to catch. It would keep on hitting until its target fell. Henrietta would trust the people on the ground to get out of the way.

She looked back and forth, searching for some place to send the other four Bludgers. If Yaxley had still been here, she would have been the one to hit, as the most dangerous of Voldemort’s Death Eaters. But Henrietta had seen the vines stop lashing a few moments before she joined the battle, so she must be gone, perhaps dead. Henrietta envied whoever had managed to kill her.

*Who is most dangerous, then?*  
*Rosier if he’s here, but Merlin knows if he’s decided to take part in this. Karkaroff, then.*

Henrietta stretched out a hand, and one of the Bludgers sped over and hovered in front of her. Henrietta smiled at the little
eyes that peered at her out of the rounded top. Learning Transfiguration did indeed have its uses.

“Igor Karkaroff,” she said. “Is he here? Lead me to him.”

The Bludger turned and streamed away. Henrietta set herself to follow, ducking and dodging among flailing limbs and curses that hadn’t hit their intended targets and screams of pain and tragedy. This was for Harry, and this was battle—a real one, not that pitiful little debacle on the beach or the scramble at Woodhouse. Here, the very number of the enemy made them dangerous. Henrietta laughed. She was happy.

Abruptly, one of her other Bludgers made a high, keening whine. Henrietta spun around on her broom to face it. She had enchanted them all to do that if they sensed Rosier, but she couldn’t believe that he was really here. There seemed to be too high a factor of chaos in this battle for him to risk it.

“Where?” she demanded.

The Bludger dived. Henrietta followed, letting the concealment charm fall. She knew of no way to fool her Bludgers, and if Rosier was really there, she wanted him to see that his doom was coming for him.

She wasn’t in time to warn the brown-haired girl before she tripped and Rosier cast his Severing Curse, but she did have the supreme pleasure of seeing Rosier look up at her over the fallen child, and the expression on his face change from triumph to madness. He was screaming in moments, a cry of frenzied rage, and his wand snapped up to launch Merlin-knew-what curse at her.

Henrietta laughed. She was happy.

She wasn’t in time to warn the brown-haired girl before she tripped and Rosier cast his Severing Curse, but she did have the supreme pleasure of seeing Rosier look up at her over the fallen child, and the expression on his face change from triumph to madness. He was screaming in moments, a cry of frenzied rage, and his wand snapped up to launch Merlin-knew-what curse at her.

Henrietta smiled and made a throwing gesture with her right hand.

The remaining four Bludgers streamed past her, all aimed for Rosier. He Apparated, leaving Henrietta blinking and disappointed, but appeared again only a short distance away. Like homing pigeons, the Bludgers turned, insanely determined to follow him.

Henrietta chuckled as she plowed to a skidding stop in the dirt and cast a clotting charm to keep the girl from bleeding her life out. Then she scooped her gently into her arms. If Rosier had targeted her in particular, then she was probably a close friend of Harry’s, and Henrietta would therefore save her life. She only hoped the wards would open to let someone transporting one of the wounded through.

Charles cast the Killing Curse, coolly, and the Death Eater witch with long red hair went down. He spun his wand in his hand once, by way of celebration of his victory, and looked around.

He’d been keeping track of both of his sons, a skill born of long practice. Michael was with Severus Snape, shadowing him under a Disillusionment Charm and guarding his weak right side. Snape hadn’t liked it, but when Harry had looked at him yesterday and explained that, due to a change in their original plans, Draco would be riding in the air beyond the reach of most danger, and Michael would be guarding him, the man had relented. Charles had been intensely amused. At times, it was fascinating to watch another father-son dynamic at play, even though he would have hated to be in such a relationship with either of the twins.

Owen was shadowing Connor Potter, essentially serving as a guide to defensive magic at the same time as he protected him. Potter was Declared to Light, and Charles knew he wouldn’t use half the Dark Arts spells that Owen showed him. That was all right. It was essential that Potter fight, since he was better-trained than most of the student fighters and they had so few, even with the other allies pouring in across the back of the Quidditch Pitch. And he had to be protected, since he was so important to Harry. Teaching him was a distant goal compared to his survival and what he could contribute to the battle.

He caught a glimpse of Potter then, wielding a blade that blazed with Light, which he’d apparently fetched from the ancestral Potter estate, Lux Aeterna, over the Easter holidays. Owen spun and shielded him from a Cutting Curse, at the same time avoiding getting hurt himself. Charles felt the corners of his mouth lift in a small smile of pride.

Then Potter charged a Death Eater who was getting ready to deal death to a black-haired Ravenclaw—the twin sister of Potter’s girlfriend, Charles thought. His dark hair flew, and he yelled bravely, distracting the Death Eater into looking at him. Owen struggled to keep up with him.

And behind him came a second Death Eater, stripped of his mask and so familiar to Charles. It was Karkaroff, formerly the Headmaster of Durmstrang, and a traitor to Charles’s sons and every other student who had been in his care. He had entered Owen’s blind spot, if Owen was even watching for danger behind him at all and not for danger to Potter in front. His wand was already moving in the beginning stages of the Avada Kedavra curse.

Charles began to run. He cast Concutio at Karkaroff’s arm. Whether the man heard him or just instinctively sensed danger,
he did jerk away in time, and thus kept himself from acquiring a broken limb. He spun to face Charles, and his eyes narrowed.

Charles dipped his head, the only concession he would make to the formal bow to begin duels, and fought.

He realized in only a few moments that he was outmatched, and why. He himself was a weak Leglimens, and had weak Occlumency walls. Karkaroff was a much stronger Leglimens. He was reading Charles’s every move, every spell, out of his mind before he could cast them.

Charles knew his only chance was to use a spell of such power that it wouldn’t matter if Karkaroff saw it coming; he still wouldn’t be able to block or shield against it. The Blood Whip Curse came to mind. Charles chanted it aloud, and saw with black satisfaction the fear in Karkaroff’s eyes when he recognized it.

Someone shouted behind him, and a stunning blow hit Charles’s own leg, sending his Blood Whip wide. He fell. He tried to roll over, to stand, and he couldn’t. Broken shards of bone clashed together in his knee. Someone had hit him with Concautio. A moment later, the same person hit him with Expelliarmus, and he lost his wand.

That person was a second Death Eater, and he came up to stand over Charles as Karkaroff closed in from the other side. Karkaroff laughed. Charles saw his death in the other man’s face.

Then Igor Karkaroff made a mistake, a rather stupid one.

“When you are dead,” he whispered, leaning close to make sure that Charles could hear him over the chaos of battle, “I will find your sons. Both of them shall remain my prisoners for as long as my Lord says that I may keep them alive.”

Charles narrowed his eyes, and then closed them. He heard Karkaroff laugh in delight. He thought he had made his victim succumb to despair.

In truth, Charles simply wanted to cut off eye contact, and thus Karkaroff’s ability to read his mind.

His magic did not shake as he reached for the spell he would need, the only one he was able to cast like this, wandless, his will and his hatred and his protective rage powering it, and insure that Karkaroff did not go on from this moment to hurt his sons.

Their names ran through his mind, blazed in his thoughts from blue letters to red.


The red letters grew brighter, brighter, brighter. Charles concentrated, and he could not hear Karkaroff and his companion discussing ways to torture him; he could only hear his wife’s voice, and his sons’, pledging to him last night that they would take care of their mother if he fell.

Burn, burn, burn.

“Pyra,” he whispered.

The Self-Immolation Curse blasted out from his belly, a wheel of flashfire that caught and vaporized both Karkaroff and the other Death Eater in instants. Then it turned back on Charles, hungry, burning, consuming him in his funeral pyre.

He knew that he died smiling.

Harry kicked the thestral into another downward spin. The flesh-dragon followed, close and irritating as ever. Any curses Harry had fired at it had simply skipped off the smooth skin.

Harry was getting frantic. He hadn’t been able to absorb magic from the Death Eaters after that initial surge when he’d first flown out of the castle. Voldemort pressed him too closely, and Harry’s attempts to drain him were answered with magic so choked with foulness that it only made Harry vomit it back. And then Voldemort had tried to absorb Harry’s own power, which, considering how much stored magic he was carrying in the stones, would be disastrous.

I have to do something to distract him, to make him back off for a moment.

Harry invoked the communication spell. The air just above his left wrist buzzed and tingled, and a gull-like screech answered him. Harry blinked. Honoria must be in her Animagus form. He hoped that she would be able to perch in a tree or something soon and do what he required of her.

“Honoria? Can you hear me?” he asked, as he spun the thestral up and over another lightning bolt.
A second screech. Harry nodded at nothing, and whispered what he wanted: a complicated illusion, one that would distract Voldemort as long as possible, and make him think a force had arrived on the battlefield to aid Harry that he was the only one able to handle. Since it was an ally that had aided Harry once before, Voldemort should have no trouble believing it.

Honoria screeched back, and Harry cut the communication spell, wheeling up again so that he could face his enemy. The blasted remains of Voldemort’s crimson eyes locked on his across the gap. Harry blinked, then shook his head. *Well, of course his eyes remind me of that strange bird’s eyes. I already decided that that bird is a message from him, of sorts.*

“Did you know,” Voldemort said, in the conversational tone that he had been using for most of the battle so far, “that your brother is dead?”

A moment of coldness made Harry’s lungs stop working, but he shook his head. *Don’t believe him. Don’t believe him. He’s just saying that.*

Voldemort took advantage of the distraction, though, sending a *Crucioc* across the gap between them. Harry shuddered and clung to the thestral, grateful again for the stirrups that held his feet in place, riding out the pain. He caught crazed glimpses of light from below as he managed to end the spell, but he couldn’t tell if they were symptoms of blurriness in his vision or the sight of the Light storm reflecting off the charging Gloryflower unicorns.

Then Voldemort, who must have felt magic coalesce above him, released a cry of shock and rage, and Harry managed to force his cramped, burning neck muscles to let him look upward.

Honoria had done as he asked. The illusion of an Antipodean Opaleye cut the air overhead, roaring, her jaws giving forth fire. She dived straight at the Death Eaters, and Harry had no doubt that she could and would wreak havoc, for all her glamoured nature. Honoria was capable of creating the sensation of fire, and of heat, and the conviction in the minds of her victims would do most of the rest.

Voldemort turned the flesh-dragon at once to answer this new threat.

Harry took a deep breath and went back to magic-gulping, passing the power more and more rapidly through him to put into the stones, doing what he could not to think about madness and pain and death in the field below.

**Chapter Ninety-One: Children of Godric and Helga**

Zacharias steadied his golden horse as it stamped and tossed its mane beneath him. He wasn’t entirely sure if it was picking up on his emotions, or whether the Gloryflowers had crafted it just so that it would do these kinds of things, to make it more like a normal horse.

He didn’t really care. His whole mind was taken up with Hermione.

Yes, the school was buzzing with other things, other rumors, other gossip, but what did that matter? They were the lesser concerns of lesser mortals. Hermione had come in wounded to the hospital wing; the Headmistress had seen a witch hovering with her on her broomstick beyond the school’s wards and apparently recognized the witch, so she’d let them inside. Madam Pomfrey was working on her right now, but the Severing Curse was a tricky spell, difficult to heal. She didn’t know if she would save Hermione’s life yet. And she had insisted that Zacharias would be a distraction if he stayed in the hospital wing and tried to watch.

So he was going out to ride with the others on the golden horses, as soon as the fighting in front of the entrance hall had cleared enough for them to make a charge. The other riders shifted and whispered and exchanged tense notes about whether they expected to survive on the battlefield, or even odds on who else might come back alive.

Zacharias wanted to scream at them to stop it, that death was nothing to joke about. He understood why they were doing it, though. *They* didn’t have someone possibly dying in the hospital wing.

He had already decided what he was going to do. He simply had to clear his mind of boiling fury enough to attempt it. He sat on the horse’s back and let the chatter of his classmates wash over him like the useless blather it was. He had to be calm. He could feel his mother watching him across the gap between their mounts, and wondered if she knew what he was about to do. She was the one who had instructed him in this, long ago, when he was first Sorted into Hufflepuff.

*This is a weapon I hope you will never have to use, Zacharias, and certainly not in the middle of battle. It is tricky, not entirely under your control, the way the magic of your wand is. And you stand a chance of losing a part of yourself if you give in to the seductions of the change.*

Zacharias knew that was all true; what little information was available on the phenomenon agreed with what his mother had said. In taking on the identity of an ancestor, he risked losing himself.
He did not care. He was angry enough not to care. And this, this breathless pause before they went to battle, was the best chance he would have to calm himself and call out in breathless appeal. The Light storm overhead should help. Both he, and his ancestor in life, had served the Light. And their connection through his being in her House should help, too. Zacharias didn’t know if it was going to work, not for certain, but nothing was certain in this process, one reason it hadn’t been tried in decades.

Helga? he called. He knew part of her lingered within the school. He’d sometimes been privileged with a glimpse of her, sliding along the corridors or peering at him from behind a tapestry. Zacharias had always imagined he could see her not just because he was a Hufflepuff student, but because he and his family were her last blood heirs. Most of the time, that meant nothing, was no more than a formality he might use to gain a political advantage over people particularly impressed by the Founders and their legends.

But, if she would agree, then he could yield control of his body to her, allow her to possess him and ride forth to battle. Zacharias continued calling her name, his voice steady and sweet, and some moments later he felt the first approach of the shy gentleness he’d always associated with her.

Why? a voice asked him. He might be creating the voice, but he didn’t think so, not when he was sincere in his desires to have her spirit possess him. He answered back as if it were real, at least.

Because I am angry, and the woman I love may be dying. And because this battle is being fought at Hogwarts, and threatening the students you stayed here to protect. And because I am asking. Please?

He felt her regard for long, silent moments. Zacharias realized he didn’t even know what having part of Helga’s spirit ride out with him would do to the battle. Perhaps it would weaken the defenses of the school, and that would be a good reason for her not to leave. Or perhaps she would have a hard time sensing the other two Founders present in Hogwarts and reconnecting with them, even once her possession of him was done. He hadn’t thought of consequences like that. He’d simply asked.

Then she said, Yes.

And Zacharias gasped as magic flooded him.

Oh, of course he’d felt his own magic rise up before: when he first received his wand, when his mother taught him the more complicated spells, when he was confirmed as the magical heir of his family. But it had been nothing like this. Zacharias knew how deep his magical core was, how joined to the rest of him. He was a powerful wizard, but his power did not extend forever.

This was power that seemed to go on rising, like a mountain being pushed up from the collision of continents. The magic shuddered through him, solid as stone, the strength of the earth. Zacharias contemplated that concept in a dazed fashion for a moment. Most wizards didn’t care that much about earth magic in comparison to the “mightier” forces of wind and fire and water, but those who did knew it was the strongest of all. The earth had only to shrug, and the continents went scurrying, rivers tumbled from their courses, and the volcanoes shuddered and belched fire.

Helga was the same way. Zacharias felt in a moment as if she’d always been sleeping in some part of him, perhaps his blood, and now she had awakened and claimed the rest of his power. He was a powerful wizard, but his power did not extend forever.

The change was noticeable. Zacharias, looked around through dazed eyes, saw the other riders staring at him. He apparently had an image hovering over him, superimposed on his features. He suspected it would be the image of a short, plump witch with kind brown eyes—or, at least, they would be kind if they weren’t currently lit with battle-fire at the danger to Hogwarts’s students.

“It is safe for us to go forth now,” said Helga through Zacharias’s mouth. It should have been strange to feel his own mouth moving without his will. It wasn’t. The voice wasn’t his own, so of course he couldn’t use it himself. Helga turned towards the wards and nodded.

A face formed in the white mist of the wards, nodding back. Zacharias knew it was Godric Gryffindor, though he hadn’t seen that particular Founder before. A moment later, the wards dropped, and the horses foamed forward, heading straight for the break.

Zacharias had ridden horses before, but Helga had ridden all kinds of beasts, horses and flying horses and dragons when she’d had a disagreement with a Hebridean Black over the site of her garden, and she seized control as the better rider. The golden horse lifted and flowed with Zacharias through a quarter-turn that plunged them straight into a mass of Death Eaters, standing back-to-back as they fired curses at a bevy of golden-haired witches and wizards.
Helga let out a battle-cry that hadn’t been heard on any field in a thousand years. “Blood and bone and storm and crow!” Zacharias tried to uncover her memories of what it meant, but they were in the thick of battle before he could figure it out, and then he was hurting the people who had helped hurt Hermione.

A spear formed in Helga’s hand, the memory of a spear long gone joined to the storm of Light swirling overhead, which recognized the Founder and hailed her with joy as an old comrade. Zacharias felt Light surround him with a dizzying corona that made most of the Death Eaters scream and hide their eyes as the spear plunged down, taking the first victim through the area between collarbone and throat. He fell, and he screamed again, a separate cry from the blinded ones, and Helga laughed and danced the horse backward. It moved with a grace no living thing could have had. Helga approved of the Gloryflower horses; she wished she could have had one the last time she fought Inferi.

She spun the horse so that she faced the rest of the tangle of Death Eaters, coming back together after her initial charge. She clasped her hands this time, having no need of reins to command her mount, and imagined a quiet brown plain in her mind, suddenly ripping and fracturing open to reveal a pit of deep green and red waiting beneath.

The earth opened under the Death Eaters and dropped them straight down. They cried out as they fell, too. Helga laughed softly. They should know better than to face a Founder on the grounds of her school, she thought, as the horse jumped easily over the crack and landed on the other side. Because it amused her, Helga channeled her magic through the golden hoof as it gave a delicate stamp. The grass and dirt and stone rolled over the heads of her victims when the horse stamped, as easily as if nothing had happened.

Helga whooped aloud and turned to search out the next group of enemies. It had always taken enormous amounts of destruction, or an enormous threat to the students, to rouse her; she had never been of a temper like Godric, who went forth to war at the slightest excuse, or like Salazar, who would nurse his grudges until they were smoldering like lava under the surface. But now she was roused, and her descendant had called her, and what was this Voldemort but another Dark Lord, like Aelfric, like Yellowgorge? She had fought them in her time, been part of the army that fought them, and she had survived. She would survive this, too, and send Voldemort howling.

It is contemptible that he attacks children. Even Yellowgorge never did that, she thought, and charged at the next group of Death Eaters. She was singing as she rode, and the earth sang back to her, long spikes of stone that she had implanted beneath the soil to serve as a last defense spinning for the surface. The Death Eaters did look satisfactorily surprised when they were spitted on them.

Connor went to his knees, and not only because Owen had slammed a hand onto his shoulder urging him to do so, though the older boy would think that was the reason. He’d known a Killing Curse was coming. What Moody said was true: after a while you learned to identify wand movements out of the corner of your eye, or you didn’t survive.

He scrambled back to his feet at once. That wasn’t entirely his choice. The sword buzzing and humming in his hand tugged him along.

Connor looked down proudly at the sword as he attacked a Death Eater who had cornered Ginny and was threatening her and the wounded girl she stood in front of. He’d retrieved it from Lux Aeterna over the Easter holidays, from behind a ward that opened to him as soon as it realized that he, and not James, was the Potter heir now. The sword had a sharp, barbed blade, and a hilt so bristling with thorn-like projections that Connor had been unsure how to hold it until the sword itself showed him. It talked, sometimes, but not often, and then it had a male voice, as brusque and commanding as Moody’s. It mostly wielded itself, too, which Connor didn’t mind, since he didn’t know that much about swordwork.

And with the storm of Light in the sky, the sword was active and alive and darting happily around.

Death Eater coming at you from the side, the sword’s voice hissed in his head.

Connor knew the opponent must be dangerous. The sword didn’t normally warn him about enemies, even the ones who came so close that Owen had to fend them off. He stopped and spun around, nearly spitting Owen. Owen muttered and leaped out of the way. Connor chose not to pay attention to the muttering.

The Death Eater who faced him still wore a mask, and so Connor couldn’t focus on his eyes the way Moody had taught them, even as the man lifted his wand and whispered, “Sanguinolentus.”

Owen shouted the counter curse. Connor didn’t need him to. He’d already ducked. And his eyes were fixed on the man, still. So far, he’d wounded people with the sword, and then run away again as the tide of battle, and the sword’s hunger to feed on the Dark, carried him on. He had the sense that this would be his first conscious kill.

Yes, it will, said the sword in his head, and a thick, muffling layer grew over his thoughts. Connor thought it had already
been there, but now it was more present, more bracing.

*It’s to keep you from thinking too much about what you’re doing as you kill,* said the blade calmly. *You would only fall into hysteries, and that’s not something you need right now. Right now, you need to be a hero.*

And that made sense to Connor. Of course it did. He stood up, and held the sword at the ready. The crystal blade vibrated and buzzed, but the actual sword hung low in his hands, as if he didn’t know how to wield it. And Connor was prepared to say that that knowledge wasn’t part of his muscles. The sword would wield itself.

The Death Eater whispered, in that same horrible voice, “Dolor.”

The curse came at him. The sword jerked up, and the curse bounced off it. The crystal was glowing like a Shield Charm now, and Connor experienced a moment’s wistfulness that Harry wasn’t there to see it. He always appreciated a good *Protego*. He would have liked to have seen this, Connor thought.

The Death Eater incanted a wind curse next, one that was probably meant to tear the sword from his hand. But Connor stepped forward, and the gust died as he walked into the middle of it. The Death Eater raised a shield and began to speak a long and complicated curse. Connor experienced a moment’s contempt in the part of his mind that was still his own. *You don’t do that. Moody said you don’t do that. It gives your enemy too much chance to hurt you while you’re still struggling to reach the end of your spell.*

The sword cut through the shield and stabbed straight into the Death Eater’s chest.

The man screamed, and Connor saw why when he tried to move away and found he couldn’t. Some of the barbs on the edge had hooked into his flesh. And now the sword was glowing like a heartbeat in time with the lazy currents of Light overhead, inflicting pain on the man. Connor swallowed. “What’s that for?” he whispered aloud.

*The Light knows what he has done,* the sword said in its stern voice. *All the murders, all the torture, all the rapes he has committed. So now it is inflicting that pain back on him, making him feel what his victims felt. That is justice.*

Connor shivered, and wondered if it really was, but then he reminded himself that he was Declared to the Light, and just because Harry wouldn’t approve of this didn’t mean it wasn’t justice. Harry had a hard time recognizing justice and differentiating it from vengeance.

The sword pulled free at last, leaving the man dead on the ground, and turned Connor in a different direction. Just before he completed the spin, Connor caught a glimpse of Owen’s face. His eyes were dark and thoughtful, and not all of what was in his expression was approval, either.

Connor looked away, and let the sword tug him deeper into the tides of battle.

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Snape could not watch Harry as much as he would have liked, because he had to pay attention to the battle on the ground.

He’d already dueled several Death Eaters whose fighting styles he recognized of old, though he hadn’t known their names then, and hadn’t heard of them even during the short time he’d spent in Azkaban before Dumbledore rescued him. It didn’t matter. Their feints and parries and counterattacks were more important in a battle than their names and past histories, in any case. He traded counterattacks with them, and he either finished them or was swept away in the surging chaos. Their side was killing the Death Eaters, but five hundred wizards were not defeated that easily.

And their side suffered losses, too. Snape had heard about the Weasley twins before he entered the battle. He had briefly seen Hawthorn Parkinson, fighting like a woman possessed, and knew that only the loss of her daughter could reawaken the Red Death. He watched from a distance, too far away and too separated by wizards to do anything, as Rosier felled the Granger girl. And after the charge of the golden horses began, he saw the last giant on the field step directly on top of the Chang girl, crushing her out of existence.

More appalling, at least to his eyes and soul, was the loss of the only one of his Slytherins riding a golden horse, Catrina Flint-Digsby. She was busy unleashing binding curses on the Dark wizards in front of her, trying to weaken them and give the younger students easy victims, and she never saw the *Avada Kedavra* that took her from behind. For that matter, Snape never saw her killer. When he turned to look, the faceless figure had already vanished in another wall of surging flesh.

Snape had used the Killing Curse three times in a row after that, on the next three victims he faced, and the Rosier-Henlin boy fighting close at his side had never uttered a word of condemnation.

Now, at last, he burst into a clear space and could lift his head, staring at Harry. Voldemort was still contending with what Snape knew must be an illusory dragon, since Harry had told him about Acies’s refusal to bring a true dragon to the battle.
Harry flew his iron thestral in a circle and drank and drank and *drank* magic. Snape saw numerous pitiful, screaming shapes on the ground, and knew that must be Harry’s doing. Suddenly turning into a Squib would be quite a shock.

He had to quell his fear and pain; Harry was doing magnificently. He either wasn’t aware of the losses beneath him—and Snape had to admit that he might not be aware of *individual* deaths—or had learned to put them aside and do what had to be done. Snape felt a moment of shining hope. If Harry could indeed do what he had planned, it would wound the Dark Lord more deeply than any individual strike ever could.

“Sir, look out!”

Michael flung him to the ground. Snape ducked his head into the earth himself as he realized that Voldemort had destroyed the glamour of the dragon. Bits of magic were raining to earth, spell-flakes from whatever curse he had used. Snape tried not to breathe them in. It was generally a good idea not to let the Dark Lord’s magic affect one.

He looked up after that, though, thinking Voldemort would return to his pursuit of Harry at once. He certainly couldn’t let Harry drain the magic from every one of his living followers on the field. Snape’s left arm burned with the reminder of Voldemort’s temper.

But instead, the grotesque beast Voldemort had created, a mockery of even the illusory dragon he had just destroyed, simply hung in the air. Snape squinted, trying to make out the movements of his wand, but his former master was safely concealed behind that slick pink neck. He had no chance of learning what spell he would cast before he cast it.

He recognized the effect, though, when a dark purple bruise formed in the air not far above the battlefield, and thunder spoke in a death-rattle. Voldemort had not started the spell higher because the storm of Light would probably have stopped it, and because he wanted his victims to suffer more. Snape recognized it because he had once tried to help his Lord create a potion that would mimic the effect before Voldemort designed the spell: *Imbrifer Voro*.

Where the rain fell, it would flay the flesh, as it had in Valerian, the wizarding village Voldemort had devastated in the summer of 1980.

Snape scrambled to one knee and tapped his wand against his left arm, ignoring the pain of his Dark Mark, desperate to invoke the communication spell and warn Harry what they were about to face. He heard a shout, and looked up to see another pair of Death Eaters running at him, but Michael was holding them off, for now, his wand flashing in quick spellwork that made Snape suffer a brief, irrational pang that Rosier-Henlin had decided to send his sons to Durmstrang.

“What is it, sir?” Harry’s voice was tight, and Snape didn’t blame him. Even with the stones in his robe pockets as reservoirs, the effort of passing that much power through his body would tire him.

“How is it calling the flesh-eating rain,” Snape said tightly. “The purple spot a little behind you and off to the side.”

Harry was silent for a moment, and Snape wondered if the communication spell had faltered. But when he looked up, he realized that Harry was flying the iron thestral like a Firebolt—just not in the direction of that bruise.

“How!” Snape shouted.

“There’s a second one,” said Harry, in a voice that said he was speaking from between clenched teeth. “And it’s right above Draco.”

Draco again leaped out of a dying Death Eater’s mind, this time a witch. He shook his head as he opened his eyes and sat up on the thestral’s back again. He had never quite got used to possessing someone female. It always left him feeling as if he had appendages he didn’t, and lacked some of those he did, for hours afterward.

He looked up to see Harry flying at him, and blinked, wondering why. Sure, there was thunder speaking above him, but that was to be expected when there was a storm in the sky, wasn’t it?

A drop of rain fell abruptly on his arm, and Draco screamed, even before he jerked his head away from Harry and stared at his skin. It was peeling neatly away from his left forearm, in a way that Draco had only ever imagined happening if he received the Dark Mark. The iron beast he rode jerked and shuddered beneath him as his panic translated downwards.

Another drop hit on his head, and Draco shouted with the pain. His scalp was splitting open, and he could just imagine the next drop hitting on the tender and unprotected bone of his skull. He began to flee wildly towards Hogwarts, not knowing what else he could do.

“Draco!”
That was Harry’s shout, and Draco, despite his better judgment, turned the thestral around. Harry slid past him, crouched low in his own saddle, a desperate, focused look on his face. He flung his arm out, and a shimmering cage of green light formed around Draco, a ward that Harry added to as he turned and rode past again, and then again. When Draco looked up, he saw the sharp-edged rain being deflected from the edges of the cage.

He looked at Harry in wonder. Harry gave him a grim smile, and then dived. Draco looked on in astonishment as a green ward spread out from him like a spiderweb, a flat plane between sky and ground, fed from Harry’s magic. Draco had never seen the spell before, but that didn’t surprise him. Harry was full of such power at the moment that just being near him had made Draco’s heart shudder and jump. He could probably do much more than this, if he wanted.

*And he’ll be afraid of that, and that’s part of what’s holding him back,* Draco thought, as he went on watching, safe in his own drifting cage.

The ward spread further and further, billow on billow of green. Now it looked less like a spiderweb, and more like a storm in imitation of the storm of Light above. It coiled under Voldemort’s purple bruise, which Draco saw when he looked for it, and refused to let any of the flesh-eating rain through. Draco caught a glimpse of white-blond hair, and was extremely glad of it. The thought of either of his parents flayed alive by that rain was more than he could bear.

Come to that, my wounds don’t look that good, either.

Draco drew his wand and laid it against the wound in his arm, concentrating. Harry had taught him some of the most basic healing spells. He ought to be able to handle this.

“*Integro,*” he murmured, and watched in satisfaction as the skin regrew over the wound. He wasn’t sure about the one on his scalp. It did hurt, but he didn’t want to try and heal it without a mirror. He put his left hand up, and felt gingerly at the cut. It seemed to have stopped bleeding. He decided to trust that it’d clotted, and looked back to find out the outcome of what Harry and Voldemort were doing.

He saw Harry rising up out of the green ward, and Voldemort riding straight towards him, bent over the neck of the flesh-dragon—the ugliest thing Draco had ever seen, far uglier than the iron animals he and Harry rode—and casting a curse that filled the air between them with whirling diamond shards.

Harry was tiring.

He could feel it in every muscle of his body. His legs gripped the thestral too hard. His feet pressed into the stirrups until his ankles ached. His throat burned every time he took a breath, though he thought some of that came from breathing in the reek of Voldemort’s beast earlier. His arms shook when he moved them, and his hand was a joke; he didn’t know how he’d managed to cast the first ward straight at Draco and not out into the wide and empty sky. His vision spun with the effort of watching out for Voldemort’s spells and dodging them, and thinking faster than his opponent. And his magical core was overstretched with the sheer amount of magic he was passing through it into the stones, themselves full and warm with power.

He had not realized being a conduit for the magic was so exhausting. He had to fight himself every step of the way. The *absorbere* gift was meant for swallowing, he was learning now, or for vomiting back a wave of power in his opponents’ faces, and not for simply acting as a tunnel through which the magic could pass on the way to somewhere else. Holding himself open like that, envisioning a passage instead of a mouth, *hurt*. He felt as though someone had been beating him with sticks from inside his skin.

And he had to fight the temptation to feast on the magic and make it part of himself, too, on two fronts. First was the mental distancing effect, the natural attraction that whispered the battle and the purpose Harry intended to use the magic for weren’t half so important as exercising his will. Second was the *absorbere* gift trying to snap shut. He couldn’t let that happen.

And now Voldemort, the bastard, was attacking his allies—no, it was him again, with the sun glittering sharply on the diamond shards that were rapidly closing the distance. At least Draco was no longer in immediate danger, and Harry could deal with the threat without losing his mind.

Harry uncoiled a tendril of the magic and sent forth a cone of intense light and heat, though it was in liquid form, the liquid he had once heard Hermione informing Ron actually comprised the sun. It poured on the shards and dissolved them. Of course, then Harry had to weave a net beneath the sun-liquid to keep it from plummeting to earth and harming his allies.

*That was a stupid mistake,* he thought, as he dodged the thestral around yet another bolt of lightning. *That was a mistake Moody would punish me for. I should have used a different weapon.*
“Tired, Harry?” Voldemort whispered as he sent another attack, a small ball of darkness that broke apart into many small balls and whizzed at Harry like Bludgers, ducking under and around Harry’s defenses and forcing Harry to send many small counteracting balls of light after them. “You could get rid of me if you would only use that magic. I can feel you roiling with it. You could grow, as I have grown. I gave you the absorbere ability that night in Godric’s Hollow, Harry. I know how it works. It is not simply a mechanism that you can use. Its purpose is to feed you and sustain your strength, very like the blood-drinking ability of a vampire. Any moment now, it will close, and force you to absorb what you have taken into your body. You cannot stop it any more than you can stop your stomach from digesting food.”

“Shut up,” Harry snapped, and then realized he was losing his hold on his temper and his emotions. His attention was necessarily divided into three: focusing on Voldemort’s words, maintaining the wards he had spun over the battlefield and Draco to shield them from the flesh-devouring rain which hadn’t stopped falling, and scooping magic from the Death Eaters. He shuddered and bent double as a tide of tainted magic flowed through him. The tunnel he kept envisioning trembled and nearly snapped shut. Harry thought he was holding it open by brute strength now.


Voldemort laughed softly, in delight, and pulled up his flesh-dragon. Harry watched him warily, but he sent no more spells. Instead, the snake stuck its head around the dragon’s neck to watch him. Harry frowned at him in confusion.

“I will watch you,” Voldemort remarked. “This is a possibility that I did not foresee, Harry: that you would swallow so much tainted magic that it would swamp your own and make you into a Dark Lord. In a few moments, you will be my heir now.”

Harry could feel an edge of compulsion riding that word, and he had to fight to ignore it. He clung to his “meal,” and forced away the image of himself as a Dark Lord, uncaring about others, detached from them by the river of power flowing between him and them.

Voldemort laughed again. Harry closed his eyes, and admitted to himself that he needed help.

So he did what he hadn’t dared to do so far, because, after all, he had not Declared. He reached up and asked the storm of the Light, the wild Light if there was such a thing, for help.

And the Light answered him. Perhaps it was only because he was fighting the Dark Lord and not because it considered him a Light wizard. Harry didn’t know. He did know that he was suddenly bathed in a flood of gold, like pure, concentrated sunlight.

It struck through him like the phoenix fire, and made many of the impurities he had swallowed turn to smoke and vapor. It filled him with the memory of gryphon wings and flexing talons, and tearing the flesh of the wild Dark, forcing it back into limits. It reminded Harry of why his restraining himself was good, because to do otherwise would only be another instance of the strong conquering the weak. The self-restraint of Lord-level wizards was the salvation of the free will and sanity of others.

And it made him understand, for a moment, why his parents, and his brother, and Dumbledore, and Sirius, and Peter, had all Declared for Light, what about this great and golden force had attracted them.

Exultant, Harry stretched out his hand and laughed. He opened his eyes to see Voldemort’s snake staring at him, and smiled.

“I am not like you,” Harry said softly. His skin glimmered with gold as he spoke, as if the sun were creeping through him, and he felt courage rushing up behind the gold, propelling him back into battle. It did not matter if the fight was hopeless, because it had to be fought anyway. “I care about free will as much as wildness, and cooperation with others as much as doing things by myself. My parents and Dumbledore came much nearer to making me a Dark Lord than I ever will on my own.” He clasped his hand over the stump of his left wrist and extended them towards Voldemort. “Fiat lux!”

Light burst from his fingers and struck Voldemort. Harry could see the flesh-dragon starting to melt away like a bad dream, its feet melting into the blocks of goo that which had lain on the battlefield when Voldemort corrupted the bodies of his victims. Voldemort screamed and rode the dragon down a short distance, getting out of range of the stream of Light.

Harry turned his head towards the Forbidden Forest as he caught a glimpse of movement from the corner of his eye, and saw centaurs pouring onto the battlefield. They carried spears and war-hammers, and one of them played a drum. Harry laughed. They had told him, once, how many hundreds of years it had been since wizards and centaurs had fought side by side, but he had forgotten.

With a fuller heart than he had possessed in some time, he lifted his hand so that the stream of Light glowed back into the sky like a beacon, and swirled towards the school, to drain those Death Eaters who were trying to attack the wards. For once, he thought as he glanced back and saw Voldemort laboring after him on his half-melted beast, he was forcing the Dark Lord to fight defensively.
Ginny pulled hard at Padma’s arm. “Come on,” she whispered. The Ravenclaw had been wounded on the back by a Death Eater she’d managed to kill, and then wounded again on the arm by the one who’d attacked her after that. Ginny had found her lying in the churned, trampled mud, in shock, and had to slap her several times to get her to move. Now they were almost back to the wards, but Padma had fallen again, and the wound on Ginny’s arm that she’d received in the attack on the carriages was throbbing. She didn’t think she had the ability to carry Padma with one limb so weak.

“Come on, Padma, come on, please,” she whispered, crouching over her and stroking her hair. “Come on, you can see your sister again, she’s safe in the school. You want to see her again, don’t you?” Parvati had been one of the dueling club students who’d remained behind to safeguard the younger ones, since Moody hadn’t judged her trained enough to accompany them onto the battlefield.

Ginny squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head. Her mind was wandering. Mud and blood and death and pain surrounded her in every direction, and she didn’t think Fred was going to live, and she had to get Padma back to Hogwarts.

“Come on,” she repeated, and was about to begin the next round of coaxing when she heard hoofbeats. She lifted her head in fear. They’d barely managed to dodge the golden horses once before, and then the herd of silver unicorns after that. Ginny would have to crouch over Padma now and hope that the horses or unicorns jumped them if they were coming round again.

But it was a herd of centaurs instead, and they were slamming broadside into the Death Eaters like a whole bevy of Killing Curses. Ginny shivered as she watched one spear driven so far through a cloaked figure that it plunged out his back, planted itself in the mud, and then impaled its victim completely. She had never realized what kind of force a spear with the strength of a charging centaur behind it would carry.

The main group pounded past them, but one, a dark chestnut, wheeled around and trotted towards them, his black tail billowing. Ginny stared at him uncertainly. She had been raised on evil tales of rogue centaurs and what they did. Besides, she thought this herd was only friendly to Harry.

“My name is Bone,” said the centaur in a deep voice. “Is your friend wounded?”

Ginny nodded, responding automatically to such a sensible question. “I don’t think she’ll make it back to the castle without help.”

“Then come with me,” said Bone, and dropped to his knees in the mud. “Climb onto my back,” he added patiently, when Ginny just stared at him again. She had never heard of a centaur lowering himself enough to let any human ride him—again, with the exception of Harry, but Harry was the exception to everything.

Biting her lip, Ginny managed to drag Padma the few feet that separated them from the centaur. Then she draped her over Bone’s back, and asked, “Can you carry two of us?”

“You are small,” said Bone. Faint amusement tinged his voice.

Ginny waited, but he said nothing else. Carefully, she slung one leg over his back and then climbed up, holding Padma in place over his withers.

The centaur rose and trotted towards the castle. Ginny didn’t dare believe they were safe until she saw the wards dip for them and then rise, closing behind them. Then she had to shut her eyes so the tears wouldn’t fall, even as she gave Padma over to the eager, reaching arms of her sister.

She turned to thank Bone, but he had already charged out of the wards again and back onto the battlefield. Ginny wondered for a moment if she should join him, but Professor Sprout stepped up then, took one look at her arm, and began to cluck about taking her to the hospital wing and Madam Pomfrey.

Ginny sighed, and tried to be satisfied with what she’d accomplished so far. At least, if she was going to the hospital wing, she could check on Fred.

Minerva knew how many students had been wounded or killed since Voldemort’s initial attack. Godric was keeping track of them for her.

Eighty dead, thirty-one wounded.

For the moment, Fred Weasley and Hermione Granger were in the “wounded” category. Minerva had spoken with Poppy,
though, and the matron refused to reassure her that that would not change by the end of the day.

Minerva stood now in the window of her office and watched as the centaurs joined the battle. They might be enough to turn the tide. They would never be enough, because nothing would, to bring back the dead.

She took a deep breath, and fought the urge to close her eyes as she saw another of the golden horses fall into an explosion of blood and churned earth from a detonating curse, marking the place where another of her students had just died. Godric’s voice echoed softly in her head, changing the toll to eighty-one.

She could not be out there on the battlefield fighting, much as she wanted to, much as her fingers twitched and reached for her wand, because she had a school to protect. And she would protect all the students in it. Though she desperately wanted the wounded Gryffindors, her students, her lions, to live, she could not feel less desperation for Zacharias Smith, whom Godric had told her had called Helga to him, or for the Ravenclaw Patil girl Ginny Weasley had rescued from the battlefield.

*Or even for my Slytherins,* she thought, eyes on Harry as he wheeled low past the school, making three Death Eaters beneath him suddenly slump to the ground. Minerva could feel the force of his *absorbere* ability pulling on the wards for a moment, and then he was past and up and gone. She tilted her head back to watch him. The determination in her solidified like steel forged in a tempering fire.

*Yes, they are my Slytherins, now, as much as they are Severus’s. I think I could set the wards around their common room without help if I had to try again.*

And she would stand by her students in *all* things, she thought, her hands pressing into the stone hard enough to hurt as she watched Harry pause to exchange another flurry of spells with Voldemort. That meant defending what they had done in the name of defending Hogwarts.

She had heard Voldemort’s announcement this morning of Harry killing children by the lake. Everyone had. It was the one thing that could distract her students from talk of the battle—at least, students who didn’t have siblings or parents or cousins fighting on the grounds. They were muttering, building fear in their eyes and their minds and their hearts, wondering if Harry could be responsible for killing them, too, if they pushed him far enough.

Minerva was sure there was a good explanation, and she would wait until Harry could give it to her, and then she would stand by him no matter what happened.

*They are my students,* she thought, forcing herself to be still as she saw the horse that bore Helga just barely escape a Killing Curse. *All of them.*

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Harry surveyed the battlefield for a moment. He had the time. Voldemort was coming up behind him again, but he was slowed by his dragon’s half-melted state, and his own rage. He obviously couldn’t think of many spells to send at Harry that he hadn’t already sent, and he was wary of simply contributing magic to Harry’s growing stream of it.

He was surprised to see how many Death Eaters were dead. Perhaps fifty were left alive, and they were trying to retreat, though his allies weren’t really letting them. The last giant had fallen, and the centaurs were running freely across grass that only an hour ago would have sprouted plants to snare them, bunching for massed cavalry charges against those Death Eaters stupid enough to stand and resist them, and then scattering apart again to chase the fleeing survivors. The grounds were thick with death.

The sight of all those piled bodies did not make Harry feel good. But he felt considerably better than he would have had the sight been a devastated, cracked-open Hogwarts filled with the bodies of students instead.

He lifted his head, wondering if it wasn’t time to begin his final taunting of Voldemort that would sting the Dark Lord into chasing Harry and Draco to the place of their final confrontation.

A flicker of movement in the air caught his eye. Harry turned the thestral quickly. Was Voldemort brewing another killing storm?

But the shape that soon resolved itself was far stranger. It looked like a massed flight of winged horses, bearing riders. From the horses’ bodies depended chains, leading to something enormous that hung and swayed gently beneath them. Harry thought he could see gold, but that was not unusual; the Light storm was reflecting off whatever it was. Polished glass, metal, water? Harry thought it must be a trick of Voldemort’s, since he hadn’t asked any of his allies to do something like this, but couldn’t imagine that it was dangerous. Voldemort would have used such a weapon to threaten the children in Hogwarts before now.
Then the winged horses passed into the shade of a less intense part of the Light storm, and Harry could see what they were supporting. A tank, filled with water and swarming bodies.

And then the sirens began to sing, and as Harry saw compulsion twining around the minds of everyone beneath him, he felt the balance of the day once more tip towards despair.

Chapter Ninety-Two: A Body Made of Music

Harry looked down at the battlefield as the sirens’ songs began, automatically fighting off their influence as he built a core of concentrated rage and flung the attempts at compulsion into his Occlumency pools, and saw his fighters faltering. One golden horse had been charging and creating carnage, sometimes carrying the flickering image of a woman on its back and sometimes carrying Zacharias Smith. Now the horse slowed altogether as its rider stared up at the sirens. Then he or she nodded obediently and turned in the direction of Hogwarts. Harry wasn’t entirely sure if the sirens were going to command his people to drown themselves in the lake or simply go back to the castle, but either way they were targets.

Even Voldemort’s Death Eaters were targets, as they began walking towards the castle, and Voldemort did not seem to care. He was laughing exultantly, and Harry spun towards him, glaring. He caught a glimpse of the snake’s head weaving around the dragon’s neck before Voldemort called across the gap between their mounts, his voice loud and mocking.

“Did you think that you had tamed them, Harry? But they are not for you to tame. What could you offer them but self-restraint, a life of change or of tameness beyond a web? When I explained to them what a...”

Harry didn’t waste his breath on answering. He swung the iron thestral and rode directly at the tank, wondering, as he went, whether he could smash the tank open and let the sirens plummet to their deaths. A single kick from his mount’s hoof might be enough to shatter it.

He had accepted the necessary deaths of Dark wizards who stood to oppose him, and he’d had to accept the same for magical creatures when he realized Voldemort had allied with the giants. He would be sorry to cause the deaths of the sirens, but if they were bent on causing the deaths of his own fighters, he had no choice.

A flung Avada Kedavra nearly made him start, until he realized that it came from a wizard riding one of the winged horses. Harry cursed as he counted a dozen of them, all of them in the dark cloaks and white masks of the Death Eaters, and all of them determined to protect the sirens’ tank. A single kick from his mount’s hoof might be enough to shatter it.

Perhaps I don’t have to close with them, though, Harry thought, and sacrificed a bit of the magic he’d eaten in a long, curling dark tendril, shooting straight through the impressive array of Dark curses and smashing into the tank.

The glass shimmered, and did not crack. Harry snarled as wards, invisible before, sprang to life, wound into the glass. Layered defensive magic, layer after layer, and not all of them spoke of Voldemort’s work, either. Some of it was magic that Harry had never seen before, which he suspected came from the sirens. He tried again, with a stronger bit of magic this time, and realized, as a single sharp-edged ward sprang up to turn it aside, that there could be endless wards strung around it. He might waste moments hammering at the tank before he broke it.

And in the meantime, his fighters were still walking mindlessly towards the school, both centaurs and wizards. Harry cursed again. By allowing the centaurs to fall victim to compulsion, he was abandoning his vates duties.

Only two human figures on the battlefield didn’t seem caught by the sirens’ song. Harry recognized the tall one as Snape; of course, since he was an Occlumens and had had experience with siren songs once before, he’d probably worked on building his mental defenses. And the other was—

Connor?

Of course, Harry thought a moment later, relieved. You cannot compel a compeller.

And then Voldemort lifted his hand almost lazily. One of the dark cones of light he’d used on Harry earlier blasted down and tore into the back of Harry’s defenseless, stumbling allies. A witch who looked like one of the Gloryflowers died without a sound, and others tumbled, bleeding. But they rose to their knees in the next moment and began moving towards the school again, while the sirens’ songs played like silver harps around them.

Harry screamed in anger, and abandoned his attempts to get to the sirens’ tank. He had to defend his allies first and foremost. He flew towards the school, and heard Voldemort laugh again as he passed him. Harry glanced at him, then pulled
the iron thestral up and felt himself go very still.

Voldemort's flesh-dragon had one half-melted paw clamped around the second iron thestral, and Draco sat, glaze-eyed, just under the dragon's jaws. The teeth, jagged implanted spikes of bone, were parted delicately around Draco's head.

"I think we should discuss some things first, Harry, before you go to the rescue," Voldemort said sweetly.

Connor didn’t understand what the fuss was about. People started turning around and going back towards Hogwarts, and he assumed he must have missed a general call to retreat. Then he discarded that. After all, there were still Death Eaters walking around, so the battle wasn’t over. Granted, the air was full of an irritating buzzing noise, but so? That didn’t matter.

Then he realized that buzzing noise seemed to matter to everyone else, and when a shadow passed over him, he lifted his head and saw the block of glass swaying on the end of its chains between the winged horses. The glass was full of water, and swarming shapes with long blonde and red and blue hair, from the glimpses that Connor caught. And fish tails.

Sirens. That’s right. Harry said something about Voldemort having freed the sirens last year.

Connor took a deep breath. Well, he had the ability to resist the sirens. He could, maybe, use his compulsion on the people now wandering witlessly towards the castle, which included even Owen, he saw with a quick glance around. He could urge them to come back. But he didn’t think he could control that many people at once, and besides, that was still compulsion. Connor winced to think what would happen when he had to explain to Ron how he’d ordered him to do things.

What should I do?

He stared up at the tank, and bit his lip. Harry was up there somewhere, but he couldn’t have a solution to the problem, or Connor was sure the sirens would have stopped singing by now. Perhaps he was busy fighting off Voldemort and making sure he didn’t hurt anyone else. That left this particular problem up to Connor.

He took another deep breath, laid down the sword on the ground—it didn’t protest, now that there were no more Death Eaters to fight—and then drew his wand. “Accio Nimbus 2001!” he shouted, remembering how Harry had summoned his Firebolt during the First Task of the Triwizard Tournament last year.

A quick flicker of movement above the Quidditch Pitch, and then a broom came zooming towards him. Connor occupied himself in the moments until it arrived by staring at the walking mass of people and trying to make out his friends. He caught an occasional glimpse of red hair, but it could have been almost anyone. Some people were crawling on their knees, despite dripping wounds. Connor shuddered, and felt fire fill his eyes and his belly.

That is wrong. It is wrong. I am going to go up there and do something about this to set it right.

There were some people who weren’t moving in the general direction of the castle, Connor noticed when his broom finally arrived and he swung a leg over it. They were all in the robes of Death Eaters, but most of them bore the marks of curses: missing limbs, deep wounds in their chests, burned and torn clothing. When one turned towards him and stared with blank eyes, he understood. Inferi, probably, or reanimated corpses.

But though they were dangerous, and had blood on their hands, indicating recent kills, Connor didn’t feel threatened or afraid. He thought he heard a distant bark, and felt a lifting-up of his heart. He smiled at them, and then he rose, heading straight for the tank and the flying horses around it. He intended to keep beneath the tank until he was right up close to it. He didn’t want the riders noticing him and launching curses at him.

Snape stared intently into the sky, letting the compulsion of the sirens’ song slide off him moment by moment, forcing himself to hear it as an ugly buzzing and not a beautiful sound. What was Harry doing? He should have been down among the compelled victims by now, snapping the web of the sirens’ song, or he should have smashed the tank.

Then the flesh-dragon drifted into view, a flash of iron visible close against its side, and Harry circling it on his own thestral. His body was so still that Snape knew what must have happened. Voldemort had Draco. No one else would have made Harry react that way, and forget the others suffering beneath him.

Snape parted his mouth in a snarl. I suppose this is up to me, then. I make a poor guardian for anyone but Harry, but so be it.

He turned and began firing binding curses and Body-Binds at the crawling, stumbling, mindlessly walking people—like Inferi, all of them. Snape felt sharp contempt for those unable to resist the spell of a little music, and used that contempt to
fuel his incantations. When his victims began collapsing to the ground, wrapped in magic or ropes, he used *Mobilicorpus* to separate the Death Eaters from the students and Harry’s adult allies.

He did not allow himself to think about what would happen if he was unable to capture some of them before they reached the castle—where Minerva would probably feel compelled to open up the wards to them—or the lake, where they would drown themselves. He worked.

Harry circled Voldemort, and felt sickness assault his stomach and bite his throat, his vision burning bright yellow. He kept trying to think about battle, and the thoughts kept sliding away under the influence of those jagged teeth posed around a blond head.

“They make a fetching picture, don’t they?” Voldemort whispered. Harry could feel the pressure of his eyes—or, more accurately, the pressure of his snake’s eyes—but he refused to look at him. His whole being was focused on Draco.

*I have to get him out. I have to tear him free.*

“I am tempted to keep them like this,” Voldemort continued. “To know that you are helpless to do anything else, look anywhere else, until your lover’s peril is resolved. How sweet. Love, the weapon of my enemies, is turned upon them and becomes their greatest weakness. So it has always been.” He leaned around the dragon’s neck and ran a hand like a white spider down Draco’s cheek. Harry shuddered convulsively, as if it had been himself that Voldemort touched, and saw the Dark Lord smile.

“The price is the same as always,” Voldemort breathed. “If you come to me of your own free will, if you surrender and bind yourself with an Unbreakable Vow not to hurt me or my Death Eaters again, then I shall bind myself with a similar vow not to hurt your lover.”

Harry tried to breathe. His chest was too tight. He tried to think. His mind was too tight. He kept rebounding on the fact that Draco was in danger, and love and fear were such a twined chorus that he honestly couldn’t tell where one ended and the other began.

“I think I grow bored of this tableau, lovely as it is,” said Voldemort. “We must change the stakes.”

That was Harry’s only warning before the dragon turned and scraped one bone tooth down’s Draco’s head, parting skin and hair as delicately as the flesh-eating rain had done. Harry shouted, but heard no words in his own shout; it sounded more like a half-strangled sob. Voldemort threw a mock-concerned look in his general direction, and then stroked the side of the dragon’s neck, making it gently dislodge its tooth from Draco’s flesh.

“Is something the matter, Harry?” he asked. “Something you would like to say to me? Something you would like to promise?”

Harry tried to wake up. He tried to find that level of thought he’d been able to sustain while the children were under the Life-Web. He had managed, then, to reason out that the correct course of action was to kill them, even though he hadn’t wanted to, even though it was horrible, and part of the conviction had come from the fact that *nothing* was more important than saving lives, he could not save their lives, and people were dying behind him as he hesitated.

But those children had not been Draco.

A gap opened as he hovered there, indecisive, a crack in his morality that let him look straight into his heart, and what he saw there made him sick. He *did* care more about Draco’s life than the lives of a dozen children. He was not the person he had thought he was, who, while admitting that some people were more important to him than others, could supposedly accept their deaths and go on. He could not accept this death. It would destroy him if those jaws closed, and those bone teeth came down, and Draco died. He might turn his back on Draco and go into the battle, declaring one life less important than the majority, but he would not live long after that. If nothing else, his self-disgust would deprive him of his will.

But the choice that Voldemort offered him was impossible, too. He could not abandon his allies the way that surrendering himself to that Unbreakable Vow would require him to.

He bowed his head, and heard Voldemort laugh.

Connor paused halfway up to the tank to cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself, because Moody had taught them all how to cast them and, really, one of his best lessons was that your enemies should remain unaware of you as long as possible.
Then he went on flying, peering closely at the tank.

It appeared to be made of glass, but Connor’s plans to just hurl _Concutio_ at it and smash it that way vanished as he realized that the glass glimmered with the lines of numerous wards. He couldn’t break through them with magic—and where there were that many wards, there would be others. That was part of Moody’s lessons, too.

He flew in a circle for a moment, biting his bottom lip again as he considered the dilemma. He had to do something, because Harry was unable to do something, or he would have done the something already. But what?

Then he knew.

Connor shifted uncomfortably on his broom. He didn’t _like_ the thought of what he had to do, and Harry would like it even less. The only person who had ever given him lessons and thought this was a good idea had been Voldemort himself, in the guise of Sirius. Connor knew, from watching his parents and Dumbledore and Sirius, how what seemed a good weapon at first could corrupt you. He wasn’t going to defeat his enemies but lose his soul.

But no one else was doing anything about the tank. When he glanced off to the side, Harry hovered motionless in front of Voldemort’s dragon, apparently talking to him. Snape was working to slow people down on the battlefield, but that wouldn’t change the balance of the sirens’ voices. They would still compel people, Connor thought, and sooner or later the compulsion would include the order to attack anyone who tried to prevent them from reaching the lake or wherever the sirens were really sending them. And what if people in Hogwarts were hearing the sirens? Voldemort would have a whole school of helpless hostages.

He had no lesson to help him, nothing but the decision to take action now and bear the consequences later.

_Like Harry, come to that_, he thought, and nudged his broom around the edge of the tank’s bottom and towards the first of the flying horses. Meanwhile, he was preparing himself for what he had to do, making moral arguments that were discarded almost as soon as he heard them.

_Harry wouldn’t like this._

But he wasn’t doing anything to stop this.

_It’s not really a Gryffindor or a Light thing to do._

But Sirius was a Light-Declared wizard and a Gryffindor, and he did it, and I don’t think the Light rejected him for it.

_People might hate you for this._

I don’t care.

Connor felt his stubbornness accrue, and then he was rising past the first of the winged horses to get a good look at the wizards on their backs. They all wore earplugs. Connor snorted. He wasn’t surprised.

He struck with compulsion like a whip, reaching out and coiling it around the first of the Death Eaters’ minds. He felt surprise, and shock, and instinctive struggle, but Sirius—no, Voldemort—had taught him how to handle this when they were practicing with rabbits and rats. Connor brought his own will down like a smoothing hand, and the rippled blanket of the other wizard’s mind gradually relaxed into a smooth, quiescent mass, ready to fold or twist the way he wanted it to.

_Loose the chains_, Connor thought, pouring all his will into the command. _Drop the tank._

The nearest wizard turned his attention to the side of his mount’s saddle. Connor turned and caught the next wizard in his net, and smoothed out the rebellion, and gave the same command. The wizards and witches still in the saddle watched with growing bewilderment as their companions obeyed some unknown impulse, but it never had a chance to grow beyond bewilderment to firing curses to stop them. Connor seized them before they could get that far, overrode their wills, and demanded that they listen, too. And the further he went, the easier it was. The last few victims were almost salivating at the chance, as if they thought that this couldn’t be evil or contrary to their Lord’s commands if everyone else was doing it.

Connor rode his Nimbus up above the tank and hovered there, sneaking glances in the direction of the hovering Voldemort and Harry. He had a bad taste in his mouth, but he kept the compulsion curled near the front of his mind, ready to unlash and inflict trouble if Voldemort noticed anything and interfered.

He never did. Connor turned back as the chains let go with a clinking rush and the tank with its sirens began to plunge towards the ground.

Only then did he realize that perhaps he should have given someone on the ground advance warning against the approach of so much glass and water.
Snape had seen it coming. From the moment that the odd, jerky movements of the Dark Lord’s minions in the saddles of the flying horses caught his attention, he had been prepared for it.

*Merlin knows how Harry did it, but there it is,* he thought, with a flash of pride. *Even when he appears helpless, floating in front of Voldemort as if there is nothing he can do, he reaches out and convinces his enemies to help him.*

He began chanting the strongest Shield Charms he knew, linking them together as he had observed one could do in Harry’s mind, building wards against the approach of the tank. He put them a good distance behind both his prisoners and the sluggishly crawling people still under the sirens’ influence. Then he forced himself to turn back to the victims now clawing mindlessly at the castle’s walls. The wards were down, faltering, as the sirens probably exerted their influence on the people inside Hogwarts to open the doors to the intruders. Snape had to prevent that from happening, and that meant the wards he had woven behind them would have to be enough.

He heard a *snap* like the breaking of the world, and turned in time to see the tank falling.

It hit the ground like a windstorm, and Snape fell to his knees. He heard the songs change to shrieks in the moment before he tightened his Occlumency walls again, refusing to let himself listen to the music as it really was. Then the glass cracked up the sides, and crazed, and the water plunged out, turning the field to mud. The sirens were left writhing, most bleeding, in the wreckage of what remained. Snape thought they were still trying to sing in the moments before the dead Death Eaters he had noticed here and there from the corner of his eye rushed upon them and reached out, strangling their slender throats.

And all the singing stopped.

Shouts of dizzy bewilderment popped up across the field as people on both sides of the battle recovered their minds. Hogwarts’s wards sprang to life, strong and glittering.

Snape, surveying the castle in satisfaction before he moved to unbind their fighters, did think he saw one figure in a cloak staggering along an upper battlement, but dismissed his automatic concern. Whoever it was, and whatever the sirens had been trying to compel him to do—jump, open the wards, lower a rope to help the Death Eaters up the walls and into the castle—he wouldn’t do it now.

The crash and *splash* of the tank jarred Voldemort’s attention away from Draco and Harry, for just one moment. His snake pivoted to stare, taking his eyes away with it and aiming them in one direction only.

Harry moved.

He’d been so afraid to use the magic he contained before, for fear of only making the situation worse; if he jarred or jolted the dragon, then it could drop Draco. Besides, Voldemort was able to feel what he was doing before he did it, and could block it or wound Draco permanently. But he had to do something now, and so he did, unwinding the magic he’d collected and hurling it forward in great whips.

One twisted around the dragon’s jaws, holding its head in place, and the other grabbed Draco and tugged him forward. Harry held his breath as Draco’s scalp just barely scraped under the bone teeth, and then he swung crazily out into midair, dangling from nothing but Harry’s will and magic. Harry hastily reeled his boyfriend in towards him. He could hear Draco, awakened from the daze of the sirens’ songs, cursing him and Voldemort and the world in general, but he didn’t let it distract him. Voldemort was screaming and hurling magic at him, and Harry had to open up the *absorbere* tunnel again to eat it.

The whip at last swung Draco up on the iron thestral behind him, and then he was clutching Harry’s back and babbling about the pain on the side of his head. Harry nodded absently to show that he was listening, and reached back to brush his hand against Draco’s waist. Draco squawked.

“If you’d just listen to me, Harry, and realize that—“ he began.

“Do you have the knife?” Harry asked.

Draco sighed and shifted so that the hilt of the knife Adalrico Bulstrode had given Harry came in contact with his seeking hand. Harry nodded his thanks and whipped the blade out, draining magic into it with a sense of relief. The knife was far more magical than the stones, and could swallow most of what Harry was pushing through himself, though if Voldemort kept throwing power like that, heedless of where it went in his rage, it wouldn’t be long before this receptacle, too, was full.
“Are we ready?” Draco leaned forward to whisper in his ear.

“I think we are,” Harry replied. “This is almost as much magic as I can take, and we need—“

A long, tearing scream claimed their attention—everyone’s attention. Harry turned his head, at the same time as Voldemort turned his, or his snake’s, and stared at the North Tower.

A single figure was perched there. Its cloak streamed behind it, and from here, Harry could smell smoke and fire. Acies, he thought, full of wonder and unease. What is this? Why has she come out on the battlefield? I thought she wasn’t going to fight because of what the songs of the Light and the Dark might do to her.

And then he remembered that there had been even more music than that on the battlefield—the sirens’ songs. The air had been full of song. And the dragons were called the Singers.

Harry knew then what was coming.

He kicked the iron thestral into a downward swoop, shouting. Snape looked up at him, and Harry shouted again, invoking Sonorus on his voice. “Get everyone inside! Now!” He was weaving a ward as he spoke—easy, since he was practically leaking magic—a half-circle of white light and phoenix fire around Hogwarts. He didn’t know if it was going to be strong enough. He hammered protection against fire into it as hard as he could, and still he did not know if it was going to be enough.

He completed the first half-turn in the making of the ward, feeling how hard Draco’s hands clutched at his waist, and as he wheeled, he caught a glimpse of Acies.

Her cloak had flown off. Immense shadows projected above her back, shifting and billowing lazily. Wings, Harry realized, when they turned to the side and caught the light of the storm overhead. Wings larger than those belonging to any dragon he had ever seen.

Acies’s body tore open, and her dragon shredded its way free.

Harry had never seen anything like it. Coil after coil, yard after yard, of body unfolded and went on unfolding, overflowing the North Tower—all of it clad in red-gold scales, like blood lit by phoenix fire. The sense of magic and immense strength, the magic it would take simply to support that enormous body and to fly, lapped the battlefield like a second storm. Harry saw the great head twisting, the golden eyes opening, and even from that far away he staggered when he caught a mere glimpse of those eyes. They led into a mind like the sea in storm, alive with wildness. He might tangle with a dragon like that, but he would not win.

This was not one of the living species of dragon, he realized, as she reared on the Tower and opened her wings to their fullest extent, making a darkness under the day. This was a dragon like the one whose skeleton slept on the Isle of Man, making the great hall where the Opallines lived. This was the dragon that had faced St. George, the dragon that wizards had supposedly invented the Killing Curse to kill, the dragon Harry had been interested in enough after the Isle of Man to look up briefly—the British Red-Gold. Extinct for a thousand years and more, and now a living one spread her wings and roared her defiance at the sun.

Harry could hear nothing of Acies in that cry.

*Remember me,* she had asked of him, *when there is nothing human left of me.*

The dragon swung her head slowly from side to side. It looked like doom on patrol. Harry caught a glimpse of the stone crumbling beneath her weight, and knew she might bring down the North Tower. He wondered if he would have to attract her attention so that she would fly from Hogwarts before that happened.

Then someone else attracted her attention. One of Voldemort’s Death Eaters, recovered from the sirens’ songs and staggering about outside Harry’s protective ward, raised his wand and cast Avada Kedavra at her.

The curse fell far short, fizzling out before it ever reached the Tower. Harry thought there was too much fear behind it and not enough hatred. But it got the dragon’s attention.

She opened her mouth, and she breathed.

Fire charged up her throat like a dozen Hogwarts Express trains and slammed into the ground hard enough to make the castle lurch. The wizard who’d cast the Killing Curse didn’t have time to scream before the blast of brilliant white heat overwhelmed him. Harry recalled Paton Opalline saying that a Red-Gold’s fire could vaporize, and so it certainly seemed to. The fire leaped once, like a ball of the sun-liquid that Harry had called on to melt Voldemort’s diamond-shards, and then slammed into Harry’s ward.
He could feel it melting. Nothing wizard-made had had to contend with flame like this in so long that they no longer knew how to do it. The ward was crumbling, and would lose its strength in a moment.

Harry made a decision he knew he would regret. He snapped his ward backwards, exposing the Death Eaters who still lived and who had either separated themselves to the side or been separated by Snape, and wrapped it tight around the students and his allies who were still outside the castle.

The fire roared. Harry heard no cries. The white mass wavered on for a few more feet, then settled to the ground and began to burn out a charred crater. The Death Eaters were gone. They would be less than bones, Harry knew, less than ash. It was a quick death, but a death of immense pain, contracted into a few moments.

Harry fought not to be sick. He felt Draco’s hands clutch at his waist, and the iron spikes curl around his legs, both holding him on the thestral’s back. He looked up at the dragon just as she lazily spread her wings and soared into the air. Trees in the Forbidden Forest bowed to the ground in the wake of her rising. For a moment she hung there, blazing with such magic that Harry shivered.

He thought of trying to stop her. Then she turned her head again, as if she had heard the wish, and the eye swept across and staggered him, and Harry knew he could not. He could not reach a mind that wild, and if he tried to cage her, she would surely react to the binding with another string of flame. He had no faith in himself to withstand anything stronger than that first lazy blast, nor to outfly the fire.

He had to watch as she turned and swirled up into the gold of the sky, turning almost golden herself as she reached it, and then parting the storm and vanishing into it. Harry shook his head dazedly. Acies is gone. What remains is—undoubtedly a problem I will need to deal with later.

But he had wasted too much time already in indecision. He took a deep breath, and forced himself to commit to the course that would leave Voldemort too broken to raise a second army of Death Eaters. He tightened the ward around the students and adults as they retreated into Hogwarts, checked for a moment to make sure the fire was burning where it was and was already the recipient of water spells from behind Hogwarts’s own wards, and then faced Voldemort.

He had anticipated having to taunt the Dark Lord into following him. That was not the case, he saw, as that rage-filled face turned towards him. He merely had to laugh, and he could practically feel Voldemort reaching certain conclusions. The dragon had been planned, he would think, and Harry had destroyed all his Death Eaters.

His flesh-dragon flung the iron thestral away like a toy, and began to scull steadily towards them.

“Hang on,” Harry muttered to Draco, using his hand to push the Midsummer knife into a robe pocket and feel the stones. Yes, he had them all, glowing with warmth, and the knife beside them, and Draco at his back. Though originally they’d planned to fly on separate thestrals, perhaps this was better. This meant that Voldemort didn’t have a chance to catch Draco and hold him hostage on the way there.

“I’m ready,” Draco said, his voice reflecting none of the pain and fear Harry knew he must be feeling. His hands tightened on Harry’s waist like claws.

Harry nodded, and then kicked the thestral and turned it. A map of the country unrolled in his mind, and the thestral responded obediently, flowing south faster than the flesh-dragon could fly, but never so fast as to get too far ahead of Voldemort and lose his interest. The whole point was to lure Voldemort, make him think he could win, as neither Apparating nor Portkeying would have done.

And on and on they went, aiming straight for London.

Chapter Ninety-Three: Many-Legged

Harry wondered how the Obliviators would conceal this one.

The iron thestral flew south with steady wingbeats, now and then hiding behind a cloud when Harry thought they could get away with it, now and then dropping back so as to almost let Voldemort’s flesh-dragon close its teeth on its tail. Sometimes they were high enough to be sure most Muggles wouldn’t see them, but not often. Harry wondered what kind of tales would follow them, and whether Scrimgeour would be angry with him for forcing the Ministry to cover up a flight that he wouldn’t have wanted happening in the first place.

If I wonder about that, he admitted to himself, I can keep from wondering if this plan is actually going to work.

During the periods when the thestral pulled ahead of the flesh-dragon, he worked grimly, emptying himself of as much absorbed magic as possible and tucking it into the Midsummer knife and the gaps in the stones. It had been essential that he
gather as much power as he could. Now that he had it, it was essential that he not carry it when they arrived at their destination.

“Do you still think you can possess him?” he asked Draco over his shoulder, as he pressed another smooth fold of power into the blade of Light. The knife accepted it with a purr. Harry thought it helped that they were riding through the anniversary of the long ago day when it had been forged.

Draco visibly shuddered behind him; Harry could feel the tremors through the hands that gripped his waist. He let his own hand fall, caressing Draco’s fingers and wrist. “It’s all right if you can’t,” he said quietly. “Tell me. It only needs to be for a few minutes, but you can possess the knife, as we agreed. I’m going to leave it with you anyway.”

“I’m not—that is, I think I can do it,” said Draco, his voice firming. They ducked around a cloud, and then rose up into a clear blue sky. They’d left the storm of Light behind when they left Hogwarts, and now Harry thought they were somewhere just south of the Scottish border. “But I’m worried about the other parts of it. What happens if you get consumed?”

“That’s why I’m shifting the magic I hold,” said Harry. “Otherwise, I’d be in incredible danger when that thing came out. But it goes for the strongest target, and Voldemort is the strongest target—or he will be once I finish shifting all this magic.”

He was almost finished, he thought. He’d pulled back to his ordinary magical core, and that way he was less strong than Voldemort was.

“Do you think he’ll really follow us into what he has to know is a trap?” Draco asked, as they hurtled around a looming cloud-mountain in front of them. They’d already gone through a few clouds that big, and both Draco and Harry had found it unpleasantly cold and hard to breathe. “He’ll have to suspect when we reach it.”

Harry twisted around so that Draco could see his grim smile. “And that’s where you come in,” he murmured. “That’s the second reason I need you to possess him, so that he doesn’t just Apparate back out. I think I’ve made him too angry to consider it, but I’ve been wrong on Voldemort’s psychology before. When and if he starts suspecting, you’ll be there to give him something else to think about.”

Draco shut his eyes and leaned his head on Harry’s shoulder. Harry turned back forward just as a blast of the flesh-dragon’s oily black breath curled around them and began stinging his eyes and nose again.

Draco coughed, then shrieked in pain. Harry didn’t want to think about why, and anyway, he couldn’t see the cause in the choking murk. He squeezed Draco’s hand on his waist by way of reassurance, ground the stump of his left wrist into Draco’s other hand, and urged the thestral up until they cleared the fog.

He turned around to check on Draco, and realized that the flesh-dragon’s breath must have stung the wound on the side of Draco’s face and neck, the one carved by its teeth. Draco had his eyes closed and was sweating, and the wound had turned a nasty purple color all around its edges and opened again. Harry grimaced. He’d already tried to heal the injury, and it refused to obey the basic healing spells he knew.

Maybe I can ease the pain, though.

He laid his hand on Draco’s cheek and murmured, “Dolor haurio.”

Draco’s face eased, cautiously, as though he didn’t trust the relief creeping through him. Harry grunted as the painful sensations flowed into him, instead. He accepted them, though; he’d long been used to more severe agony, and at least it didn’t open a wound on his face to match Draco’s. He was going to need all the speed he possessed when they got to their destination, so he didn’t want to be slowed by slipping on blood. He faced forward again and continued flying.

“Thank you,” Draco whispered.

“You’re welcome,” Harry whispered back, even though he didn’t think anyone could hear them. A glance over his shoulder revealed the flesh-dragon had fallen behind again. Voldemort was snarling and lashing one hand up and down on its shoulder, as though he wanted to coax more speed from it but was currently unable to do so.

“When we get through this,” Draco said, “I do want to go to the Sanctuary. I want to do it as soon as possible. I realize there are details to be settled and deaths to arrange, but Merlin, Harry, I want peace and comfort. I want a period of time when I know that you’re not going to die and I’m not going to, either.” One of his hands found its way to Harry’s chest and urged him back until he lay with his head on Draco’s shoulder. “I want to celebrate our next joining ritual on your birthday in style,” he murmured, and gently nuzzled the side of Harry’s neck.

Harry gave a breathless little laugh, and urged the thestral to fly higher and faster. “That you can think about that when we’re in the middle of a flight away from the Dark Lord, Draco, and hurtling towards a trap that you admit you’re not sure will work any more than I am…” He shook his head.
“Why?” Draco insisted. “What’s wrong with it?”

“There’s nothing wrong with it,” Harry said. “I didn’t bring it up to say there was. It just says wonderful things about you. And probably painful things, but I am not about to mention the painful things when we’re on the back of a flying beast a thousand feet in the air and you’ve already admitted you’re nervous.”

Draco’s arms locked around his waist again, this time with less of the painful, frenzied clutch they’d had when they left the battlefield and with more of a tight hold that said he couldn’t dream of letting Harry go. He let his chin fall forward until his head rested on Harry’s in turn, and sighed.

Harry continued steering the thestral south, with a deeply absurd sense of, *It will be all right. It really will.*

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Harry felt the tension of the wards even before they arrived, when London was only a distant smear on the horizon. They asked him, in all but a human voice, whether he was sure he wanted to go through with this.

*I am,* said Harry, and reached for the commanding voice he had learned, of necessity, when dealing with the Black wards and the Black artifacts. *Fall. Let us through when we come.*

The wards acquiesced. That was the wrong word, really, Harry thought, as he dipped the thestral so that Voldemort’s dragon couldn’t breathe another cloud of choking murk on them. After all, the wards weren’t really intelligent enough to argue with him, or hold a conversation with him. Nonetheless, there had been doubt, and now there was none. It was extremely hard to explain to anyone who wasn’t actually linked to wards.

He wondered idly if Draco felt the same way—or did the responsibility for the wards around Malfoy Manor still fall so much on his father that he hadn’t ever talked with them the way that Harry had with the Black ones?

“Harry, he’s coming!”

Harry felt all his muscles tense, and he looked over his shoulder not for confirmation—he trusted Draco—but because he wanted to see the angle Voldemort was approaching from. There had always been the possibility that he would attack before they reached their destination and their trap, though Harry had been more worried about him turning back.

The flesh-dragon was picking up speed again, half-melted wings flopping desperately in the air. Voldemort’s snake wrapped around his waist as the dragon came closer and closer, swaying so that Voldemort could see them. Harry growled under his breath. It might be a good thing to destroy that snake, but then Voldemort would withdraw entirely from the battle. He had to keep his enemy angry, not panicked.

And he had to survive the flight until they could get to Number Twelve Grimmauld Place.

Harry clenched his knees on the thestral and waited for the dragon’s next attack—or Voldemort’s. From the way he was holding his wand, he had given up on commanding his beast to use its reeking breath. A spell was the more likely thing. Harry cranked up his awareness, opened his mind to his instincts the way Moody was always insisting they do in battle, and practically held his breath as he waited.

“*Avada Kedavra!***

Harry heard the first syllables, and was already turning the thestral. No shield or barrier could block the Killing Curse; Moody had repeated that hundreds of times to the dueling club students, never mind that many of them had already heard of it from Mulciber disguised as him in their Defense Against the Dark Arts classes last year. He hadn’t wanted any foolish heroics, any attempts to charge down a dragon’s maw when the dragon was spitting that spell at them.

The beam of green light traveled far above the thestral as they dropped. Harry grimaced as he saw Muggle buildings loom sharply into view. Perhaps Voldemort was trying to chase them into the sight of Muggles—though Harry couldn’t imagine what he would want to accomplish with that.

*Speaking of which, I can at least help the Ministry,* he thought, and wrapped a Disillusionment Charm around himself, Draco, and the thestral. Voldemort could still track them easily, by the pull of Harry’s gathered magic if nothing else, but the Muggles shouldn’t see them now.

When he looked back, Voldemort had taken something like the same tactic, as the outline of the flesh-dragon had faded to a shadow. Harry smirked. *He doesn’t really want Muggles seeing him yet, no matter what he claims. Taking over their world and never fearing what they could do to a wizard, my arse.*

Harry kept an eye on him as the thestral dodged and twisted. He hadn’t bothered with the Disillusionment Charm before because they’d passed so rapidly over the Muggles’ heads, and he hadn’t been sure, then, that Voldemort wouldn’t abandon
the chase and turn back to plague his allies. But he was sure now. Oh, he was sure. A second Killing Curse a few minutes later confirmed it.

“Harry?” Draco asked, when they’d dived so that the Killing Curse had no chance of touching them, and then rose again. “Hmmm?” Harry asked. He was leaning forward. He’d memorized the map between Grimmauld Place and Hogwarts carefully, and he knew the thestral was flying in that direction, but it might still be possible to miss the house. They were going so fast that they might hurtle over it, and the Disillusionment Charm had put a misty barrier between them and the world.

“You really aren’t frightened, are you?”

Harry glanced back at him in curiosity. “Bloody terrified,” he said simply. “Or I will be, once this is finished.” He shook his head, remembering the fear that had gripped him when Voldemort held Draco hostage. Perhaps I used up most of my terror then. “It might not work, and then we’ll have Voldemort in a house full of dangerous Dark artifacts and all this captured magic. That would be terrifying for any wizard. But I think it is going to work.”

“Why?” Draco’s whispered word brushed Harry’s ear like a gnat’s wings.

“Because I have faith in you, and faith in myself, and even faith in the monster we need to let loose to make this work,” said Harry simply, and brushed Draco’s hand with his own again, and then looked down sharply as a familiar, looming shape made itself known. Down! He urged the thestral on with his mental voice and his knees, and the thestral dived.

Harry floated the stones and the Midsummer knife out of his robe pockets with a Levitation Charm as they fell, and tucked them firmly into Draco’s. He had to go into the house with only his own magic about him. Voldemort absolutely must be the strongest wizard when they arrived. He told himself that again and again, to keep from automatically reaching for that drained magic and using it to protect himself.

When they flew through the downed wards and he felt the singing begin, he didn’t try to fight it, either. He bowed his head and murmured to Draco while he still had enough self-control left, “You know what to do.”

Draco squeezed his elbow to the point of pain, but said nothing. Harry took that as a yes.

The thestral landed on the walk in front of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place with a grinding of iron hooves. Harry launched himself off its back and ran madly at the door, Draco right behind him. If Voldemort caught them before they could reach their proper places, there would be bugger all they could do about it.

The door burst open in front of Harry, as if sensing his urgency, and he and Draco parted at the foot of the stairs, Draco flying towards the room where he’d carved his rune circle over the Easter holidays, and Harry running like mad towards the door from behind which the tempting song curled. He could hear legs dancing, and a voice like many voices murmuring, Let me out. Let me out. I must be free.

It was practically a relief to give in to that song, to lay his hand on the door Canopus Black had covered with warding spells and to blast Dark magic, the only kind that would work, through them.

Draco slid into his rune circle with a gasp, and, reaching out, drew the Midsummer knife to slit a tiny cut on his finger. Then he squeezed with rough pinches at his finger as he held it above the appropriate rune, eyes on the door all the while. He could hear the grating sound as the flesh-dragon landed, and knew Voldemort would be coming through the front door in a moment, clad in power. Fall, you stupid drop of blood. Why in the world is this taking so long to fall?

The drop of blood did fall, at last, and land on the rune Draco needed it to land on. The circle flared with dazzling power around him, sealing itself. Draco sat back, panting, and then flung his mind outward, seeking the core of Voldemort’s mind. There it was, before him, all blazing, rotting foulness. Draco would have hesitated to dive into it, but he knew that he absolutely had to. Voldemort could not go up the stairs and find Harry before Harry finished releasing whatever the singing beast was.

It was a mad plan, but someone had to help Harry do it and not die. Draco took a deep breath and leaped through Voldemort’s barriers, possessing him.

A locking spell faded away. Harry smiled. He was very nearly one with the song now, which thrummed in his brain like
strings of silver given a voice, and was finally able to say something other than the banal pleas for freedom it had been giving for so long.

Thank you. You will not regret this. I am not of this world. We are not of this world. We will show you such things as you have never seen, such wonders as wizardkind never tells of. Only open the door, and let us show you...

Harry thought that was a good thing, a good idea. He knew he had fallen into compulsion—knew it and rejoiced in it. He was so tired. The revelation he’d had on the field when Voldemort took Draco hostage was one he would rather not have had, and had raised questions he would rather not answer. He would have liked nothing so much as to collapse and let others take over his life for a while, normal people who knew better than he did, and here was someone who would do it for him, if he would only listen to the song.

I can have my free will back when I want, can’t I? he asked the creature, and it sang to reassure him.

Of course, vates. Would we compel someone who is dedicated to free will forever? No. Only let us go, and you will see the extent of our compulsion. There is a meal waiting for us downstairs, a powerful wizard. That is wonderful. That is exactly what we wanted. We will go free, and eat, and then I will come back upstairs and teach you what compulsion and free will mean.

Harry smiled, and closed his eyes, and another locking spell faded from the door. The many legs danced in anticipation.

Draco realized almost at once that possessing Voldemort was going to be different from possessing either Dumbledore or Snape. Yes, both of them had been powerful wizards, and both had been Leglimens.

Neither had had, as Draco was quickly discovering Voldemort did, the ability to possess someone back.

The moment Voldemort felt the intrusion to his mind, he tried to grasp and read the thoughts of the intruder. Draco slipped free of the hold and plunged further into the reeking insanity of the Dark Lord’s thoughts. It felt worse than the choking cloud of breath he’d experienced from the flesh-dragon. He had to pause, gasping, and Voldemort caught up with him.

For a moment, he felt his own will melting, or being shoved away into a tiny corner of his mind. For a moment, he felt his own body in the rune circle, horribly present around him when it shouldn’t be, lifting a hand as if he would smudge the runes and let himself out—and let Voldemort have access to the stones and the Midsummer knife that he carried, filled with the magic Harry had stolen.

No. I won’t let that happen. Draco was already ashamed enough of how Voldemort had managed to use him against Harry on the battlefield, and how he had gone tamely along with it because he’d surrendered to the sirens’ compulsion. That wouldn’t happen again. He imagined himself as oiled snake, oiled flesh, oiled thoughts, and shoved away from his body again. He melted through Voldemort’s grasp and roiled through the thoughts he carried far from the surface, seeking one that would let him have a solid grip.

Voldemort roared and dived after him. Draco could read enough of his mind now to know that he thought Draco was searching for one specific bit of information, the one that would tell Harry why Voldemort was immortal. He really, really didn’t want Draco to find that information.

Well, then let’s look for it, shall we? It would be better than Voldemort realizing what Draco was really doing: holding him here until the beast, the better distraction, could come for him.

Draco lunged in and out of Voldemort’s thoughts, pretending he knew where he was going, and all the while uttering random words. When he did, they bounced back to him like echoes off those memories that contained their concepts. Normally, Draco could simply see anything in a victim’s mind he wanted, but given Voldemort’s inherent resistance to possession, he had to use this method instead and hope he stumbled on something worth reading. Heart, mind, love, darkness, sun, immortality, death, necromancy, ghosts, corpses, Inferi, soul—

The shriek Voldemort gave when he heard Draco saying “soul” was devastating. And then the claws of his mind reached down and hooked into Draco, making him scream in pain. It was worse than when he’d awakened after the dream Harry had created to trap the Dark Lord with the false prophecy.

Voldemort turned him over. In a moment, Draco knew, he would read everything, and know what Harry was doing, what his plans were, and even that the prophecy that had lured him to Hogwarts on Midsummer Day had been false.

In desperation, Draco did the only thing he could do. He taunted, We already know all about you and your soul, you bloody arse, and Harry is going to do something about it in a moment.
There was a breathless pause, a shocked moment before the storm, and then Voldemort hurt him.

Harry released the last locking spell. The door in front of him looked ordinary now, a wavering wooden panel, hardly fit to contain a creature of the magnificence that waited behind it.

In the creature’s excitement at being free, it ceased to sing for a moment.

And then Harry recovered his will, and knew what was going on, and rolled out of the way.

The wooden door bulged and tore open down the middle. The creature poured into the world beyond like an exultant string of shit; so Harry felt the compulsion that came with it, now that he was awake. Not silver strings, but the trembling voice of a thousand screaming and murdered insects, he thought, shivering as he leaned against the wall and watched the creature heading for the stairs.

It did indeed have many legs, all attached to a segmented dark green body like beads of metal. It resembled a centipede as much as it resembled anything—if centipedes had no head, and many faces embedded in their sides, shielded and then revealed again by fluttering, white, wing-like discs. The faces were all human, all distorted, and all screaming with wide and yawning mouths. The mingled voices appeared and disappeared again depending on whether the wings were obscuring their faces or not. Harry shuddered as he thought of what the faces probably were: the remains of the creature’s previous victims.

His speculation, or what he remembered based on what Narcissa had told him about the creature, was right. It ignored him and headed downstairs. It was aiming to consume Voldemort, who was the strongest wizard in the house now that Harry had shed the magic he’d gathered.

Harry sprang to his feet, waited until the last green bead was out of sight, and then ran after it. He needed to be not far behind the creature if he wanted to defang Voldemort. Because even that creature, in the end, was not his ultimate weapon against his enemy; it was only a distraction, to hold Voldemort still while Harry rendered the Dark Lord impotent. He might have depended on Draco alone, but he didn’t think Draco could hold Voldemort as long as the creature would.

He hoped, as he pounded down the stairs and caught sight of the creature’s last pair of legs just turning the corner, that Draco had managed to hold Voldemort for as long as it had taken him to free the creature.

Draco had never hurt so much.

Everywhere he turned, everywhere he looked, there was pain. He tried to reach out and grasp Voldemort’s mind or magic, but every thought turned knife-edged and flung him away. He was bleeding, he knew he was, shedding memories or opening wounds in his mind. And this time, he didn’t think they would be so easy to repair as they had been after Harry’s dream. Snape wasn’t here to heal them, anyway.

Worse, Voldemort was tainting him, bleeding himself into Draco in some way that Draco didn’t understand. Or maybe that was just what possession by the Dark Lord felt like. Draco shuddered convulsively as he thought about that, and heard Voldemort chuckle, low, in his ear.

_Do you like this, little one?_ Voldemort asked, in a voice that echoed from everywhere Draco turned, and sparked more and more pain. _You were so eager to possess me. Do you not like being in the confines of another mind?

Draco gasped, and then cried out. And then he knew he was back in his body, in the rune circle, and had been forced out of Voldemort’s mind completely.

The Dark Lord stood in front of him, his flesh-snake wrapped around his neck, staring at Draco with crimson eyes. It was the most terrifying thing Draco had seen, not least because he could feel the power pounding around Voldemort. He crouched very still, a mouse before the hawk that had already noticed it.

“Little one, little one, little one,” Voldemort whispered. “At my mercy, again, and I need no sirens or dragon this time. And I need no other weapon to torment my heir, or press a blade against his throat. He will swear to help me conquer the wizarding and Muggle worlds, or kill himself slowly, by torture, if that is what it takes for you to be free of me.”

Draco closed his eyes, his stomach and his brain swimming. He knew he was helpless. His head hurt so badly that he didn’t dare attempt possession, and he had no other weapon that could defeat the Dark Lord, or allow them to contend as equals.

“You will begin,” Voldemort said, in a gentle, inexorable voice, “by spilling your blood on the rune circle, and opening it, and then tossing those stones and that intriguing knife to me.”
Draco didn’t see that he had a choice. When he tried to gather himself to defy Voldemort, the Dark Lord twitched one pale hand, and Draco fell with a shriek as a shock of pain coursed through him. And he could not die. That would kill Harry more thoroughly than to see him as Voldemort’s victim and prisoner. He could only try to delay.

Moving as slowly as he could, pretending he was too afraid to move faster—which was very nearly true—he reached into his robe pocket and scooped up one of the stones. Then he dropped it because his hand was shaking. Voldemort laughed, sounding more amused than angered.

Then he turned his head, and his snake pivoted to face the room’s door and hissed.

Draco looked up as he heard the tap of multiple feet and the screams. Then he tensed as the creature came hurtling around the corner and headed straight for Voldemort.

And the Dark Lord didn’t run, instead staring at the creature as if it were the most fascinating thing he had ever seen. Then it was on him, grabbing him around the waist with two of its legs and drawing him close, pressing his face against what Draco soon saw was one of the many, many mouths in its side. Its body whipped around him like a necklace as he went, unresisting, and more mouths, revealed by those fluttering wings, closed on Voldemort and began to feast—on his magic, Draco thought.

Harry slid around the corner of the doorway, panting. Draco, his hands now as shaky with relief as they’d been with fear, took a moment to squeeze the cut on his finger and coax another drop of blood onto the rune circle, opening it and dropping the protection it had afforded him—and allowing physical objects to cross the circle. Harry held out his own hand, and the stones and the Midsummer knife zipped out of Draco’s robe pockets and across the boundary to land in his palm with a smack.

Harry slipped the stones into his robe and spent a moment surveying Draco as he clutched the knife. Draco tried to smile back, but he knew he hadn’t fooled Harry. He didn’t know how Harry could ignore the sucking beast and its victim to focus on him, but he did.

“Are you going to be able to do this?” Harry asked quietly.

“Yes,” Draco whispered. Harry stared. Draco forced himself to cough and repeat it more loudly. “Yes, Harry, I am. I can do this. I can’t Apparate, so I’ve got to possess it. I will.”

And Harry bowed his head, accepting that with the faith he had in him, and whirled to face Voldemort, holding the Midsummer knife high. It shimmered in the sunlight coming in through the one window. Draco shuddered. The knife had been forged from the last ray of sunshine on a Midsummer day, Harry had told him, and she was full of magic. He supposed it was only right that she should shine.

Harry spent a moment muttering to himself, as if he were counting. Then the beast turned, and Voldemort’s foot lashed out of the protective circle of green body.

Harry stabbed down, plunging the Midsummer knife into Voldemort’s calf.

Even Draco felt the rush of magic that followed.

Harry rode the rush of magic through the knife, pushing himself forward with his will, using the power he’d stored in the blade to rise through Voldemort’s flesh and blood and straight into his magical core. He would never have been able to do this if Voldemort was aware of himself, of course. But he wasn’t, caught in the compelling embrace of the beast, and since the creature was ignoring Harry for the sake of the much tastier meal he’d brought it, he was free of its song.

He dug into Voldemort’s magical core, and felt a few feeble defenses shatter before him. Then he spoke/willed the spell he’d chosen into existence, the spell he’d had the inspiration to use when he saw Augustus Starrise and Adalrico Bulstrode dancing at the spring equinox.

“Ulcer regis piscatori!”

The Fisher King Curse created the wound that could not be healed except by the caster, just as it had when Augustus used it on Adalrico—but instead of opening it on Voldemort’s ankle, Harry opened it in his magical core. At once he began to spew power, losing it like blood.

The wound would continue to exist until Harry said it should not. Voldemort could still swallow magic—Harry knew of no way to take the absorbere gift, an innate power, away—but it would run out of him again as fast as water pouring into a sieve. Harry knew it would force Voldemort to retreat, to hide until he acquired some means of defending himself.
Voldemort screamed. The pain, and the drain of the power, had awakened him from the beast’s spell. For a moment, he wavered on the brink of giving in to the compulsion again, but then he gathered himself up and Apparated, already barely able to do even that much. Harry, yanking the Midsummer knife and his own consciousness out of his victim in the moment before the Apparition happened, couldn’t restrain a scream of victory.

And then he had to watch out, as the beast, deprived of its meal, turned to sing to the second strongest wizard in the house.

Chapter Ninety-Four: The Shining Road

Harry could feel the beast drawing in its breath to sing, if it had a breath. He didn’t know how long Draco would be able to possess it, and given how wounded he thought Draco was, from the way he held himself, he rather thought they should save that moment of possession for a more opportune time.

Before the creature could start to sing, then, he drew a stone out of his robe pocket and held it up.

The creature gave a sound oddly close to a purr, and the voice Harry remembered from behind the locked door came back.

Will you give that to us? We want it. It is beautiful. We are hungry. We want it. The eyes of all the faces were looking at it, Harry saw. The wing-like discs were drawn up so they could see, and they had stopped screaming for now, as if their meal of Voldemort had eased their pain.

Harry, his heart pounding—the creature could start singing again at any moment, after all—said, “I’ll give it to you, but not here. This house is stained with the remains of my enemies. It is only fitting that you go and sing in a new place.” With the stone still in his hand, his eyes on the creature, he reached out and pulled at Draco with a gentle Summoning Charm. Draco drifted over to him and settled in the crook of his handless arm. The creature didn’t appear to notice. As Narcissa had told him, Harry thought, it was interested only in meals of strong magic. Taking a step backward, Harry continued, “Do you know the Black house Silver-Mirror?”

We do. I do. The nearest face turned to watch the stone, the stretched mouth twitching in yearning.

Harry reached out to the wards on Silver-Mirror and commanded them to fall, now. Luckily, Silver-Mirror was the property that gave him the least trouble. Wayhouse would have been inclined to argue. “Then follow us,” he whispered, and tugged gently on the stones and the Midsummer knife, so that they tingled with magic and shone to the creature’s multiple eyes. He bowed his head over Draco’s and prepared to Apparate with him to Silver-Mirror.

With his face so close to his boyfriend’s ear, he could murmur, and be reasonably sure that the creature wouldn’t hear. “When we arrive. Possess it, for one moment. Keep its attention. Can you do that?”

Draco said nothing. But a moment later, his hands clasped on Harry’s binding arm so hard that they momentarily cut off the flow of blood. Harry nodded in acknowledgment, and then closed his eyes and Apparated.

Side-Along Apparating someone else, especially someone he wanted to be as careful of as possible, hurt. Harry landed on his feet, however, and moved gently back from Draco with the stone in his hand, not allowing himself to think of failure any more than he did when he was chasing the Snitch in a Quidditch game. This was going to work, because it had to work, because it was the plan he had devised and it was going to work. He said so.

The beast appeared, coiled in the entrance hall, beneath the golden pool that slid drops of flame down the chains to the lamps.

Draco leaned forward.

Harry knew the moment when he possessed it, because the creature called out in all its many voices, and he moved.

Draco wanted to do nothing so much as curl up in a corner and go to sleep. His mind hurt, and his head hurt, and his magic hurt. He thought he could still feel the taste of Voldemort’s taint in his throat if he spat.

But Harry had asked him to do this, and Draco knew that Harry would not have asked for help unless he truly needed it.

He looked up at the beast and lunged outward, reaching across the gap between them, touching its mind.

It hurt like stretching a cramped muscle hurt, and that was only the use of possession itself. Much worse was trying to grasp a mind so thoroughly alien. Harry had told him that a dragon’s mind was alien like a storm, and Dumbledore’s had been filled with ideals Draco found foreign, and Voldemort’s had been a seething pit of Dark magic so foul even Draco’s father would have refrained from using it.
But at least Dumbledore and Voldemort had been human—or had once been human, in the case of Voldemort. This was not. This never had been. It was not a conglomerate, a patchwork, of its victims’ memories, as Draco had assumed it would be. It was—

It was hunger.

Draco moaned as he tried to grasp that incredible drive to eat and eat and eat, to consume and swallow magic until nothing was left, and could not. His stomach was already aching, and he knew that was a bad sign, that he could feel his own body and not the creature’s. Hunger puddled in him. He wanted to give up his own magic to allay that yearning, or, more, swallow some of the power Harry had stolen. Why did he have that much? He didn’t need that much anyway.

The creature came closer. Draco looked up and found himself staring into one stretched, narrow face embedded in a body segment like a great glass bead. The wing-like projections stretched out, trembling, and sniffed at him. Draco felt the interest and curiosity coursing through him like shards of broken glass.

*Interesting,* said the creature. *You are strong in your possession gift. Perhaps we will eat that.*

“Singer!”

And Draco knew that meant Harry was ready, and he could let his hold on the creature’s mind loosen, and drop back into his body. He shuddered, wrapping his arms around himself. Merlin, he hurt. Hollowed-out and cold and bleeding and oily and befouled. He bowed his head and hoped that Harry wouldn’t ask him to do anything else, because he might do himself permanent damage this time.

Harry had already chosen the one he wanted to use, of course. That had been part of the purpose of planning the way he had, all ahead of time. Draco’s rune circle and his decision to surrender to the creature’s compulsion long enough to free it and the Midsummer knife had all been part of the plan, and so was this.

He threw a subtle brightening spell at the one of the portraits hanging on the wall that he’d chosen as most useful. Then he had to adopt a suitably befuddled expression, and wrap his Complete Vanishing spell around the stones and the knife so that they would appear not to be there at all, and call, “Singer!”

The creature turned towards him, as much as it could be said to turn towards anything when it didn’t have a head. The mouths gaped and stretched at him.

“I dropped the magic!” Harry called, and nodded at the portrait that showed a silver road stretching into the distance. “In there!”

The creature needed no instructions from him. It knew that it could enter the portrait. There did come one dangerous moment when Harry thought it might choose to swallow the picture’s magic instead of go through.

Harry used that moment to say, in a voice as seductive as possible, “All of these lead to magical worlds. Imagine the feasts that wait for you there.”

Many legs drummed. The creature hurtled forward and at the portrait, unwinding its body from the floor as it went, to half-rear. Harry shuddered as he watched the first beads of the body hit the paint and begin to vanish. It was still probably the ugliest thing he’d ever seen, and he wasn’t sure whether the stretched faces or the insect-like legs made it uglier.

The creature hurtled through, at last. Harry took his courage in hand and forced himself to step up to the picture, to look and see what it was doing. It could have been waiting on the other side, ready to eat him.

Instead, he saw the green body rapidly making its way into the distance on the starlight road, a part of the portrait now. Harry took the frame in his hand and gently turned the painting to face the wall. Regulus had told him that if he did that, no one and nothing who had entered the picture could come through again, and Harry trusted Regulus.

*I couldn’t trap Voldemort in the pictures, because he knew about them,* he thought, as he turned away and let himself relax a little. *But the creature wasn’t a wizard, and could be tricked.*

Draco was sitting on the floor, his arms wrapped around himself and his head bowed until his hair completely hid his face. Harry hurried over to him and embraced him. Draco leaned against him, quaking. Harry wasn’t sure if it was from cold or pain or fear.

“What can I do to help?” he whispered, stroking Draco’s hair. “Tell me.”

“I’m so tired,” Draco whispered back, which made Harry add weariness to the list of suspects for the shivering. “I just—-I
felt Voldemort bleeding into me, mingling with me, almost possessing me in turn. He said that he was going to use me against you. And he hurt me—tore part of my mind, I think. And then possessing the creature taught me what hunger means. And I just want to rest, and I don’t know who can heal me. Snape, maybe? Madam Pomfrey? I don’t know.” He pressed himself against Harry like a young dragon blindly seeking shelter.

Harry told himself that now was not the time for guilt. For one thing, it would keep him from doing what had to be done; for another, Draco had chosen to come with him, chosen to fight, and feeling guilty because he’d got wounded in doing so would diminish his sacrifice. “Do you want to stay here while I go back to Hogwarts and fetch them?” he asked. “Or do you feel as if you can be moved?”

“I can be moved. You have to do what you gathered that magic in the stones and the knife for,” Draco said stubbornly, and then his eyes widened as he stared over Harry’s shoulder. “Where did they go? You didn’t really drop them in the painting and give them up to that creature, did you?”

“No, stupid,” Harry muttered, gently scooping Draco up with half his own strength and half Mobilicorpus. “I Vanished them. See?” he added, and removed the Extabesco plene so that Draco could see them. “And of course I’ll do what I gathered the magic for, but it doesn’t have to be here. It would probably be better done in Hogwarts, anyway, because that’s closer to my targets. Or I’ll ask Connor if I can use Lux Aeterna. Don’t worry about it.”

“Of course I’ll worry about it, Harry,” Draco said, with a faint arrogant tone to his words that did more to reassure Harry than any protests about how well he felt. “Until you do that, then you won’t want to go to the Sanctuary, and I want to. We are going there as soon as possible. And you’re not going to think of anything besides healing and me, are you?”

“Not in that order,” Harry said softly.

Draco stared at him for a moment.

“You don’t have any idea how magnificent you were, do you?” Harry shook his head in wonder. “Draco, I couldn’t have done this without you. There’s no way Voldemort would have held still long enough for me to stab him and inflict that wound on him, or wouldn’t have sensed what I was doing at once. You fought beside me, and you were wounded in doing so, and you still managed to perform one last feat of heroics.” He wished he could have touched Draco’s face, but his hand was caught beneath him, supporting his back, so he settled for ducking his head and rubbing his cheek against Draco’s.

“You’re wonderful, Draco.”

“Well, I’m glad you realized that, at least,” Draco muttered, and closed his eyes.

“How many Apparitions do you think you can take?” Harry asked, forcing his mind to turn to practical matters. “The iron thestral is surer, but slower, and I want to get you healed as soon as possible.”

Draco sucked in his breath. Then he said, “I can—I can take four or five Side-Along Apparitions, I think, Harry. Can you jump the distance between here and Hogwarts in that many?”

Harry smiled in relief. “I certainly can.” He firmly his grip on Draco with both his arms and his magic, remembering just in time to float the stones and the Midsummer knife back into his robe pockets. “Hang on,” he murmured, and pictured Grimmauld Place, and Apparated.

Harry landed, with Draco firmly in his arms, on the road just outside of Hogwarts. He wasn’t sure if McGonagall would have restored the wards that made Apparition impossible on school grounds, and he didn’t want to risk bouncing from them and injuring Draco if she had.

It looked as if she had, if the buzz in the air was any indication. Harry nodded to no one in particular and tightened his grip on Draco again. He imagined the wards would inform McGonagall the moment he walked in.

“Just a bit further, Draco,” he murmured, and then realized that Draco was unconscious. Well, Side-Along Apparition was unpleasant. Harry told himself it was that and nothing else as he headed up the path towards the gates. He would not waste time in useless worrying. He would do something useful instead, like getting Draco to the people who could heal him.

He came in across the Quidditch Pitch, and had to close his eyes for a moment at the sheer destruction. The ground was churned mud and grass, and covered with blood. The slanting sunlight of early afternoon seemed to have lost its power, and the usual sounds that Harry remembered from Hogwarts at this time last year—birds, creatures’ calls from the Forbidden Forest, the high singing of the wind—were gone. All this destruction had happened in no more than a few hours, since the battle had started at dawn.

And there were bodies.
Harry performed a small charm to keep his and Draco’s faces clean of the stink as he walked among them. The giants were first, great gray lumps too huge to be real, lying sprawled in the mud with clubs and spears close by their sides. Their flesh smelled cooked more often than not, since they’d been the victims of numerous fire spells. Harry avoided one with a cracked skull that lay in a pool of its own brains.

Then came the people.

Harry couldn’t close his eyes, because he had to pick a steady path for himself that wouldn’t jounce Draco. So he moved, and he looked into faces, and he recognized the dead when he could.

There, sprawled in the mud with a broken half of a giant’s spear through her, was the body of a golden-haired witch whom Harry thought must be a Gloryflower. Laura would mourn. Not far from her were two Death Eaters who seemed to have died trying to kill each other. Harry was uncertain why, until he realized that one of them had actually died from a Severing Curse through her belly, and had her fingers clamped on the neck of the other. He nodded. She must have been dead, and someone had summoned her back—Pansy? She had fallen now that the battle was over and she had no more vengeance to take.

He passed the remains of the sirens’ tank, and had to step more carefully than ever, over bits of broken glass and strangled bodies. He forced himself to meet the sirens’ dead eyes, for the most part pools of blue and green with no pupil anymore. He wondered if their pupils disappeared when they died.

He passed a sprawled mess of tendrils, Indigena’s plants. And in the middle of them was a small torn shape in black robes that, even now, winds that didn’t exist elsewhere tossed about. Harry checked his step, longing to hesitate further. He knew, though the body’s head was missing, who it must be.

_Pansy._

He couldn’t linger, though, not with Draco possibly suffering more and more pain in his arms. _Take care of the living first,_ he heard, as if from a distance, one of his mother’s lessons that had not ceased to matter. _The dead will take care of themselves._

He turned and went on, and saw Hogwarts’s wards shimmering fierce and tight around the castle. The fire Acies had caused was out, though it had burned a crater into the ground which still smoked. A breeze blew the scent of cooked flesh towards Harry. He blanked his mind, hiding the remembrance of the burning Death Eaters in the Occlumency pools, and went on towards the castle.

Flung hands and squashed golden horses and broken weapons and bodies lying motionless and unmarked from the onslaught of _Avada Kedavra._ Staring eyes and torn robes and footprints carved in mud as if in stone and blood flung like a new constellations. Dead and doomed plants and the tattered remains of Hagrid’s hut and a dead centaur with all his legs broken and the distant, trailing sound of a dog barking, which Harry didn’t understand.

All of it crashed into him, wounded him in ways that Draco’s wounding and his own desperate struggle against Voldemort and even the death of the dozen students by the lake had not. By the time he reached the front doors of Hogwarts, Harry knew that he _had_ to turn Draco over to those who could care for him and then go and do what he’d collected the stolen magic for in the first place. He needed something good to come out of this battle, something more than defeat and death for his enemies. He needed to have an upsurge of life and freedom.

“Harry!”

That was Honoria, running towards him from the doors of the castle. Illusions of lions danced on her shoulders, all of them with paws spread in welcome. Harry summoned a faint smile for her, and evaded her attempt to embrace him, afraid it would make him drop Draco.

“Can you call Madam Pomfrey, Honoria?” he asked quietly. “Draco is wounded, both in body and in mind, and he needs help.”

Honoria managed to tame all the impulses that would have probably insisted she joke with him about this, and just nodded. “And how is he wounded?” she asked, as she extended her arms above her head, ready to form into wings.

“He took a wound from a dragon-tooth on the side of his face. He possessed Voldemort until I could stab him and wound his magic, and then he possessed a strange creature, an alien—thing.” Harry still had no name for it. He shook his head. “Tell them to talk to Narcissa Malfoy. She was born Black, and she might know more about the creature than she told me, since it was in the Black house.”

Honoria stared at him for a long moment. Harry wondered impatiently why she wasn’t going, and then she said, “Voldemort’s wounded?”
“Yes. Not dead,” Harry added hastily. He could easily imagine how Honoria’s exuberance could cause her to exaggerate the news, and what kind of consternation it would cause when the Dark Lord turned out to be alive. “But wounded, with a hole in his magical core draining out every attempt he makes to use a spell. I imagine he’ll find something to repair it in time, but he should be quiet for at least the duration of the summer. And all his Death Eaters are dead.”

Honoria murmured, “Thank Merlin.” Then she nodded briskly to Harry. “Bring him towards the hospital wing. I’ll get Madam Pomfrey.” A moment later, the gull climbed above him, towards one of the high windows.

Harry murmured, “Extabesco plene,” as he cut a small hole in the wards and moved inside the castle, repairing the hole behind him. He didn’t want anyone else grabbing him and delaying him on the way to the hospital wing. The important thing was getting help for Draco, not—yet—pausing to explain their defeat of Voldemort twenty-two times.

He saw plenty of people in the corridors as he made his way upward, but, of course, none of them sensed him. Most younger students stood in corners murmuring, as if glad that it was over, or else asked older students questions with wide-eyed curiosity. Some of those older students, their limbs in slings and their bodies moving with the tenderness that marked recent experience with healing magic, bragged about their part in the battle; others simply shook their heads and looked away.

Harry saw numerous faces pale and stiff with tears, and knew it was for the casualties. He saw Hawthorn, sitting near the entrance of her guest quarters with her hands over her face, and his heart gave a steady, throbbing ache that struck all through him. He wanted to stop and comfort her, but, once again, he wouldn’t get help for Draco that way, and he didn’t think any comfort he could give before someone else saw him would ever be enough. He wanted to wait until she could have the time and attention she deserved.

He reached the hospital wing at last, and saw both Snape and Pomfrey waiting beside an empty bed. Harry let the Complete Vanishing Spell go, and saw Snape’s gaze lock on him, first, before it moved to Draco.

“He possessed Voldemort,” said Harry, before anyone could tell him anything, and laid Draco gently on the bed. “For several minutes, I think. Voldemort possessed him back. It hurt him—mental wounds. And there’s the wound on the side of his face that Voldemort’s dragon caused.” Madam Pomfrey was already running her wand over that injury, muttering under her breath. Harry continued, though now he was growing aware of the stares from other beds and a few people already edging forward to talk to him. “He also possessed a strange creature locked in the Black house, but only for a moment. It looked like a centipede, headless, with the faces of its victims set into its sides, and it ate magic. Contact his mother about that. She might know details that I’ve forgotten.”

“And what about you, young man?” Madam Pomfrey asked, briefly looking up from Draco.

“Not physically wounded,” said Harry. “Exhausted, but I’ll live.” His training once again came in useful as he felt Snape’s attempt to reach for him and ducked it. “I have something else to do right now,” he added impatiently. “Where’s my brother?” Only after he had asked it did he realize that that question could easily have been answered with a “Dead.”

“Here, Harry.”

Harry turned. Connor was just stepping away from another hospital bed. Harry swallowed as he saw Hermione lying there. He forced himself to bring his eyes back to Connor’s face. So many obligations, and he would prioritize and attend to them, but for now, he needed to do this.

“Can you convince the wards at Lux Aeterna to let me in?” he asked.

Connor, his mouth open to, probably, comment on something else entirely, blinked and said, “Of course. Why?”

Harry took one of the stones from his robe pocket, shining with the force of its captured magic, and held it up. “I owe the northern goblins a debt,” he said.

Harry appeared easily enough outside Lux Aeterna. He remembered what it looked like; the memories burned all the brighter in his head for the fact that after the one summer he’d spent there, his bond with James had been doomed, and he hadn’t known it.

He carefully undid the locking spells on the front door, but relaxed when the wards slid over him, snuffling like dogs, and recognized the feel of someone their master had permitted. They fell before him, and he could step into the grand entrance hall and look up at the ceiling. The windows were flooded with the light of the setting sun. It had taken Harry that much time to convince Snape and Connor and McGonagall and Peter that he couldn’t collapse yet, and yes, Draco was wounded but Harry could do nothing to help him right now either, and no, he wasn’t going to retreat into a secluded room and cry on
someone’s shoulder.

Far better than any retreat or seclusion now, which would let him brood on the thought of the deaths he’d caused, was the thought of what light and life and healing he could still bring.

Just to make sure, he did touch the stump of his left wrist and speak to Tybalt first. Tybalt’s voice was lazy and self-satisfied, not that the second was unusual. “Yes?”

“You did secure the linchpin?” Tybalt had said that he was on “the brink of success” in his last communication, but refused to say that he was sure his plan was going to work.

“Harry! Yes.” Tybalt’s voice grew quicker and more eager, and he sounded on the verge of bragging. “Yes, of course I did. I told you I would. My uncle would scold you must severely, you know, for doubting a Starrise.”

“Then I ought not to doubt your brother’s ability to fight back, either,” Harry retorted, but he could feel one tortured knot in him relax. “How did you take the linchpin away?”

“Simple,” said Tybalt. “It’s actually a good thing that you didn’t persuade our families to forsake the notion of common inheritance, Harry, and just tie our assets to one person, the way you persuaded your brother. Then, the linchpin wouldn’t have come to me at all unless I killed Pharos. This way, though, I asked the linchpin which it would prefer: a Starrise more in the mode of my uncle, a leader and someone proud who would help restore the fortunes of the family, or a Starrise who was cowardly and a follower and had been so overwhelmed by my uncle that he would never know how to lead on his own.”

Harry concealed a chuckle, the first true laughter he’d uttered in more than a day. “And it accepted you?”

“It did.” Tybalt’s voice soared to a new height of smugness. “My uncle was careful to designate Pharos his legal heir, so that the estate didn’t pass to me automatically when he died, but it didn’t matter. He forgot that linchpins are concerned more with the fate of the blood family than any one member of it. The wards listened to me, and fastened to me. Because I asked. Augustus never bothered asking if they actually wanted to be bound to Pharos.” Tybalt laughed himself. “That’s one of the lessons you taught me, Harry. Sometimes all you have to do is ask, and trust in another being’s free will, and you’ll get what you wanted far more easily than if you tried to compel them. I don’t know why there hasn’t been a vates before now. You’d think more Lords would have learned compulsion isn’t worth it.”

Harry shook his head, knowing he was smiling and not trying to stop it. “I don’t know if I would frame my principles in quite that way, Tybalt.”

“Oh, that’s all right,” Tybalt said. “You don’t have to, because I’ll do it for you.”

Harry didn’t try to resist the uprush of joy in his heart. That was part of the reason he had decided to do this now, after all: so that he would have the strength of some happiness, of some unalloyed triumph, when he had to turn back and face the mixture of triumph and tragedy that Midsummer Day had become. “Thank you, Tybalt,” he said. “Doesn’t this mean that you’re bound to your family, now, and that you’ll have to produce an heir?”

“It does,” said Tybalt, sounding entirely comfortable. “But it was never my family name that I objected to, Harry. It was my uncle’s stiffness and his trying to live in the past and mourn my mother’s memory to the exclusion of everything else. And as for heirs, my other uncle, my mother’s brother, has plenty of daughters, and one of them, Portia, is already showing signs of being independent and strong enough to lead. John and I have agreed to adopt her.”

Harry smiled again. Sometimes, the Light families’ insistence on not having magical heirs does make it easier for them to continue their lines. “I wish congratulations and good luck to you both.”

“Thank you,” said Tybalt. “You’re going to proceed now?”

“I am,” said Harry quietly.

“Good luck.”

“Thank you.”

Harry ended the communication spell and turned to his stones and the Midsummer knife. When he called, they began to revolve around him, the Midsummer knife purring and shining as her blade caught the light.

Harry reached out and began to pull the magic he’d gathered back into him. As it came at him, he separated it into two streams. One was the magic purified by his phoenix fire—the magic that had originally come from Dumbledore, and from Voldemort when he’d drained him in the Chamber of Secrets—and the magic purified by the Light when Harry had called on it. The other was the still-tainted magic he’d drawn from the Death Eaters on the battlefield that morning and had had no
time to cleanse.

That was all right. For the purpose he had in mind, this tainted magic was perfect.

Harry reached north. He could feel the northern goblins’ web, though he could not see it without the special tools that Helcas had shown him—almost two years ago now. The thought saddened him, until he shook his head and forced himself to ignore how much had changed since then.

In front of him was something else, something that had not changed in much too long.

The streams of magic broke through him, charging floods, one clean and one befouled. Harry could feel himself shuddering with many things: weariness, the sheer power of the magic, the temptation to claim it and use it for himself. But all of them faltered before his determination to give the northern goblins the freedom they deserved.

Once, it would have meant sacrificing his own magic to do this. Now, it would mean sacrificing only magic he had acquired for just this purpose.

Since he had to feel out the edges of the web and the linchpins’ wards, he paid more attention to his sensation of touch and less to his sight. That meant that when odd images of streams appeared before him, golden and deep green, pouring away from him and to the north, he could ignore them. Visible musical notes thrummed in front of his eyes; he ignored them, too. Sometimes he saw dangling family crests as he identified which linchpin belonged to which wizarding family. That didn’t matter. He pushed forward, and at last the linchpins trembled in his hand like a drop of water ready to fall from a leaf, swollen with power, and the magic played all around him, restless rain waiting to be used.

Harry breathed.

The magic rushed out of him, and twisted, and then separated finally and for good into those two streams. The pure, cleansed one twined around the linchpins. The wards that linked them to the web and the bindings on the goblins turned around in interest. Their owners had already given them permission to look at this magic, and Harry could feel their interest and curiosity growing; it was beautiful magic, vaulting, sunlit, a waterfall or a stream of purity. The wards detached slowly from the earth, and reached out to wrap around the beautiful golden magic.

Harry forced himself to envision how many separate cores of power he would need, several dozen for the several dozen linchpins. Then he broke the golden stream forcefully into many quiet pools, each with a linchpin’s wards wrapped around it, rooting in it. They were no longer bound to the web, but to those pools, which, not used for anything else, relaxed and allowed themselves to be used as anchors. The Light nature of the magic blended well with the Light nature of the families’ ancient wards, anyway.

At the same time, Harry grasped the goblins’ web, which had started to shift and slide and send the land once secured by the linchpins hurtling towards the sea, and slammed the dark green stream of tainted magic into it. These pools, when he broke them off, took the form of false linchpins. The tainted magic did not mind doing that, because subterfuge and deception were often tools of the Dark. In moments, the web was secure, wrapped around and tangled on its new burdens, and never noticing that they were not linchpins.

It was, in fact, so concerned with them that Harry found it easy to reach out and pick up all the trailing strands of the web that were previously connected to the northern goblins, and wind them around the pools of Dark magic instead, letting these strands understand that the pools were Dark. The web had been set by ancient Light wizards to confine creatures they were afraid of and wanted service from. It knew all about confining the Dark, and the descendants of its original owners had given permission to this wizard to change things around, so everything must be well. It hummed to itself as it clutched the new, Dark “linchpins” a bit tighter.

Harry’s mind felt strained, the same way it had when he performed the ritual to free the southern goblins. He was seeing several dozen different separate things in his thoughts, holding them all and not combining them, and he made his body an endless conduit for the magic, and he wove and wound and pulled, and by now he had come so far that he had no idea whether he was using his eyes or his sense of touch.

He felt the moment, though, when he freed the goblins. Helcas briefly reached down the flickering strands of the web as they whipped and unwound from his people, and Harry felt a touch like a handclasp.

Thank you, vates.

Harry smiled before the connection broke, and hoped that Helcas had heard his own pleasure and gratitude.

And then he fell, tossed as from a great height by the ending of the magic, and lay on the floor breathing for a moment.

He started when arms came around him. He could have climbed back to his feet when he’d taken a few minutes to rest. He
craned his neck, and met his brother’s eyes.

“You didn’t think I’d let you come alone, did you?” Connor asked in disgust when he saw Harry staring at him. “I Apparated in with Peter a few minutes after you left.”

Harry sighed. “Thank you for not stopping me.” Gently, he forced himself to stand and step away. “I did tell you I’m not physically wounded, and the strain of pushing all that magic through me will pass in a moment.” He called the empty stones and the Midsummer knife to him, and slid them into his pockets.

“It was never even a temptation to you, was it?” Connor asked. Harry couldn’t read the emotions in his voice. “To hold on to all that magic, to keep it for yourself?”

Harry blinked. “Yes, it was,” he said. “Of course it was. But I don’t need to listen to the temptation.”

Connor studied him for a moment, then nodded slowly. “All right. I can understand that.” He slung his arm over Harry’s shoulders again. “And now you’re going to come back to the school and rest, right?”

That, Harry thought, as he pictured Draco’s still face and Hawthorn’s broken one and Pansy’s ripped body, is what you think.

Intermission: Counting Up the Dead

Hawthorn didn’t know how long she had sat with her head in her hands. She didn’t even know how she made it to the guest quarters the Headmistress had assigned her, to tell the truth. She remembered the haze of battle, and casting blood curses that give the Death Eaters she cast them on some pain, but not enough, never enough, before the dead her daughter had summoned, or the course of battle, or a Killing Curse, swept them away from her.

She had come away from the battle when the sirens’ compulsion started. She thought that, at least. She could not remember being under the compulsion. Far stronger was the urge to kill and kill and keep on killing until the hunger for blood that burned in the pit of her belly was satisfied. And then she had walked away when there were no more Death Eaters to kill.

But right beside that compulsion burned another one. It was a truth that she had acknowledged when Dragonsbane became a full-fledged necromancer, and a truth that had occurred to her as she knelt over the body of her first vengeance kill, and a truth that had slammed home into her as she listened to Harry speak about vengeance a few days after the spring equinox, his eyes bright with disgust.

Death cannot bring back the dead.

She might kill. It would not end. She could not even lose herself in the quest for revenge as Augustus Starrise had done, because she knew the world was waiting, and would not cease to change, or give her her daughter back, just because she slaughtered others. Indeed, go too far in the slaughter, and the world would put her into Tullianum and forget about her.

She hated that she knew that world existed, and that she was alone in it now.

A hand fell on her shoulder, and Hawthorn turned her head to nuzzle it even before she fully recognized the scent. Delilah Gloryflower leaned her chin down on top of Hawthorn’s hair in response, and from the other side, Claudia Griffinsnest rubbed her scarred face against her neck.

Remus had been teaching them how to build a pack bond before he chose to leave, Hawthorn thought. She had thought, apparently mistakenly, that it would only endure when in the presence of someone who had been a werewolf from childhood. But her sorrow had drawn her two packmates. She had not been aware they had come to Hogwarts, but here they were, and they were making noises, shared whimpers and growls and protests against the unfairness of the world and of life, low in their throats.

Hawthorn felt a thick bubble building in the back of her own throat. She lifted her hand to wipe at her mouth, thinking she would cough out another bundle of tears. Instead, she found herself howling, a soft call of misery.

Delilah tipped her head back and joined in. Claudia said nothing—Claudia was often silent—but curled herself almost around Hawthorn and watched her with large solemn eyes. A student, apparently drawn by the howling, peered around the corner, but Claudia showed her teeth, without even a snarl, and the girl squeaked and pounded back down the corridor.

Eventually, Delilah and Claudia persuaded Hawthorn to move off the step in front of her quarters and into her room. Hawthorn expected them to leave, but they didn’t. Instead, away from the eyes of outsiders, they became more demonstrative; Delilah licked her cheek, and Claudia bit her chin. Hawthorn found herself touching and stroking back, as much with her neck, her cheeks, and her spine as her hands.
“You need to rest,” Claudia said, when the silent soothing had gone on for a good many minutes and some of Hawthorn’s grief had blended into tear-colored haze, like the shades of gray that she saw as a wolf.

Hawthorn didn’t object, because it was as impossible to object to that as to the fact of hunger when it presented itself. She lay down on her bed, and Delilah lay down beside her, arm and hair flung haphazardly over her. Claudia went to watch by the door, but Hawthorn could feel her warmth and smell her scent from there.

She closed her eyes and went away for a little while. The world would still be there when she woke. It would not give her Pansy back. So she could make it wait.

Wait, she said.

George sat with his fingers wound in his twin’s. Fred’s breathing was shallow. Madam Pomfrey had used healing spells George didn’t know on him, and ones he did, and Skele-Gro to replace the shattered bones that had to be taken entirely out of his left leg, and bits of bandage when she couldn’t heal all the wounds magically and there were other patients waiting to be taken care of. Her face had been in an agony when she told George that she had done as much as she could for Fred and that all they could do was wait. Making it through this first night would be the deciding point for him. Shock was a complicating factor, and so was how much magic she’d poured into him. Sometimes, when wounded in a way that would have killed it without magic, a wizard’s body simply fought back, rejecting the attempts to heal it and continuing on its course of death.

She hoped he would wake up by the morning. She hoped he would.

Only the look of anguish on the matron’s face as she turned away had kept George from hexing her for using the word hope.

Now he sat by Fred’s side, and watched.

Their parents had already been in earlier, and Ron, and Ginny. Percy was going to come from the Ministry tomorrow morning, Mum had said, distractedly, confusedly. They wouldn’t let him leave tonight, important business for Minister Scrimgeour. Bill and Charlie were traveling in from Egypt and Romania; they’d been in Britain last week, but left when it seemed there was no way to break the siege before Midsummer. Mum had stroked and petted Fred’s hair and cheek constantly when she was here.

George hadn’t told her that Fred’s last words had been defending her from his insult, because then he would have had to explain the context of the joke, and because he didn’t want to think of them as Fred’s last words.

He leaned his head nearer to his twin’s chest. No one else was awake in the hospital wing—even the others watching over injured friends or relatives were asleep—but plenty of people were breathing. George sometimes wished they wouldn’t. It covered up the sound of Fred’s shallow, wheezy breaths, and he had found that merely watching the motion of Fred’s chest wasn’t enough to content him any more. He had to hear.

Someone had asked him if he felt alone. George couldn’t even remember who it had been, whom he had given a withering glare until the person fled with tears running down her cheeks. Ginny? Hermione Granger? No, Hermione was in another bed somewhere behind them, with Zacharias Smith asleep clasping her hand.

Alone made about as good a description of his condition right now as bloodbath did of the battle. It gave the most general outlines to the idea possible, but it didn’t tell you anything.

He felt chained to the bed, unable to move away. He felt chained in his mind, too. Before, it had always bubbled with thoughts of the future. Anything moving or not moving, spoken or living or dead, might prompt a new joke idea. And since Harry had given them the Galleons, they didn’t need to entertain ridiculous ideas for robbing Gringotts or laboring for years in positions they hated just to get the necessary money for their joke shop. They could go out and start showing Zonko’s who the real geniuses in the joke field were right away. They were going to leave school and go out into the real world, where NEWT’s didn’t matter, where their mother’s worries didn’t matter, where the Ministry was only something to be ignored when possible and evaded when impossible. They were just beginning.

Everything was just beginning.

And now it might be ending, and George was trying to contemplate a he instead of a they, a future that did not have Fred in it, and getting nowhere. He had to stare. He had to think about the moments passing right now, and listen to Fred’s rasping breath. He closed his eyes.

“I won’t tell anyone.”
George sighed. Someone had awakened and was having a whispered conversation with someone else. Zacharias and Hermione, probably. Smith seemed to be a light sleeper, and he’d regularly whispered things to Hermione as the night went on, stroking her forehead. She hadn’t opened her eyes yet, either. George wished he could care more.

“I won’t tell anyone,” the voice repeated, “that you blubbered so much that I had to come back just to shut you up.”

George sighed again and leaned back in his chair, waiting for the conversation to end.

An elbow jabbed him hard in the chest. He opened his eyes, and Fred said, “Are you paying attention? I’m talking to you, you great lump. Merlin, he disturbs a man’s peace and then he doesn’t even have the courtesy to pay attention to him when he talks—”

That was the last sentence he got to finish on his own for a while, because George had hugged him hard enough to cause his ribs to creak, and then they had to call Madam Pomfrey, who came, gave them both an incredibly hearty scolding with the words “internal injuries” in it, and then fed them a sleeping potion. Well, she gave Fred a sleeping potion, but it didn’t matter who drank it, George thought, his hand firmly clasped in his brother’s, because they were a them again.

Luna solemnly piled the candles, one on top of each other, their waxy ends sticking together without magic. It was very important that they meld without magic. She’d asked the house elves for them, and they’d given them to her without questions. That was only right.

When the candles were piled, seventeen of them, a perilous, swaying stack against the outline of the window in Ravenclaw Tower, Luna stepped back and cast a spell to rid the area of Wrackspurts. There didn’t seem to be any. Satisfied, she drew out several Knuts that had seen travel and travail in their day, and laid them in a circle around the candles. Then she cast *Incendio* on the top candle. It beamed and burned brightly, and asked her what she had lit it for.

“This is for Cho,” Luna told it. “She was seventeen, you know. She just turned seventeen a few days ago. And now she’s gone, and she can’t light her own candles or collect her own Knuts. Well, obviously. If she’s gone.”

She paused reflectively for a long moment. It would have been better if she’d had something of Cho’s to burn, the way she’d had something of her mother’s when she died, but of course Cho’s family wouldn’t want her to burn her possessions, and no one had wanted to hear of Luna going out on the battlefield to get some of Cho’s hair. Something about it being too dangerous. Luna had tried to tell them that it wasn’t dangerous on the field, because there were Crumple-Horned Snorkacks coming to chase the spirits of the dead away, but no one had wanted to listen.

“Most people don’t want to listen,” she told the candle. The flame swayed and agreed. No one listened to candles, either, when they asked why they were burning. Well, no one but Luna, but then, no one listened to her, either. She thought it had made her hearing better.

“Cho was seventeen,” Luna went on. “She was a Seeker. She was pretty. She had a crush on Cedric Diggory, and one of the doorways in Hogsmeade told me they kissed there one day. It was in the spring. It was a day when the sky was more white than blue, but that doesn’t matter. It was still spring.”

She stopped again, thinking of what else to say. She hadn’t been Cho’s close friend, so she didn’t know all that much that the stones and walls of Ravenclaw Tower, softly chattering witnesses to this ceremony, wouldn’t already know. The bit of information about Cho and Cedric kissing in Hogsmeade was the only new piece Luna could contribute.

*Oh, wait.* Of course. Cho’s death had been on the battlefield, beyond reach of the walls’ sight. So they would want to know why she was gone.

“She rode to battle because she wanted to help,” said Luna. “She rode a golden horse. She owed Harry a life debt, but I don’t really think that’s why she went. She wanted to help.” Luna let a moment more pass, and then added, “She died well.”

She waved her wand again, and all the candles lit at once. And then the Knuts glowed, too, with replicas of the spells that the wizards who had last owned them had once cast. Luna smiled. She thought Cho would like the light, if she could see it.

“I hope she has fun,” said Luna, and then set about blowing the candles out. It had to be done properly. And then she had other people to say goodbye for. She would do it because no one else would explain to the walls and the doors and the stones of Hogwarts where their children had gone.

Hermione did not want to wake up, even though people were asking her to, because it all hurt. She gave an irritated little
wriggle and squirm, and someone called, “She’s awake!”

No, I’m not, Hermione thought, and tried to hide in a corner of the bed, because Rosier had wounded her. I’m pretending. It’s your imaginations. Go away.

But someone felt her forehead, and someone else pried her eyes open, and someone bellowed into her face, “Hermione, are you awake?”

She had to stare. There was no option, no matter how much she wanted to rest and escape the pain, because it was Zacharias, but he’d changed. He looked older, and wearier, and there was a tiny imprint high on one cheek, like a tattoo or a scar. It was a crouched badger, done in black and yellow.

She tried to reach up and touch it, and Zacharias caught her hand and kissed her knuckles. His eyes shone so bright with relief that Hermione was distracted from the image of the badger.

“You’re back,” he whispered. “You really are back.”

“I haven’t decided that yet,” Hermione retorted haughtily, sitting up and wincing as tenderness flared all along her chest and her ribs and her belly and her breasts. She’d been slit open from collarbone to navel. She remembered it like a recurring nightmare. She shuddered, even as she managed a smile for Ginny and Connor, who were hovering next to her bed. “Maybe it’s your imagination. Now, where did you get that?” She nodded at the badger symbol.

“I summoned Helga Hufflepuff.” Zacharias’s gaze ran over her, as though he thought she had somehow changed in the time between her falling to Rosier’s curse and her opening her eyes. “She possessed my body and rode into battle.”

Hermione spluttered. “That’s dangerous!” she managed to say at last. Zacharias had told her about that particular ability of a Founder’s Heir one day when they were having an argument and he was trying to impress her. It had impressed her mostly as a dangerous and ridiculous thing to do.

“And going into battle wasn’t?” Zacharias held her hand again, this time hard enough to hurt, and spoke as if they were the only two people in the hospital wing.

“She could have drowned you,” said Hermione, deciding to pretend that no one else was watching, too, “and then you would never have come back.”

“I didn’t care,” said Zacharias, “not when I heard about you.” And that just wasn’t fair. Hermione slapped him on the side of the head, and then nodded to the badger scar. “And that?”

“She left it for me as a sign of what she’d done.” Zacharias shrugged. “Maybe it will impress someone. I think my memories are all intact. All the important ones, at least.” He looked her straight in the eyes, showing what memories he regarded as important.

Hermione was almost grateful for the way Madam Pomfrey swooped down on them then, scattering Ginny and Connor and herding even Zacharias away while snapping about how she needed to run some diagnostic tests on Hermione. It made it easier to lie back and think about what the look in Zacharias’s eyes meant, and especially the way he’d held her hand.

He’d said he loved her. For some reason, Hermione’s usually analytical brain had accepted the words and taken them literally. She hadn’t thought he’d meant he was in love with her.

She wondered if he was actually thinking about marriage. Purebloods were bound to think that way, she knew, even Light ones. Knowing Zacharias, he might be planning how best to piss off people he didn’t like by emphasizing both her Muggle heritage and her knowledge of rituals and traditions.

We’ll see about that, Hermione thought in determination as she swallowed the sleeping potion Madam Pomfrey wanted to give her. I want to choose at least some of the people we’re going to piss off. And the wedding date, for that matter, if it actually does go that far. None of this pureblood nonsense about marrying almost the moment you’re out of school, having children early, raising them, and then going on to live your life. What if I want to do something different? I’m not going to let him talk me out of it.

Owen let Michael hug Medusa. He was good at that. He was closer to their mother. Owen was—had been—closer to their father. He had been Charles’s magical heir, after all.

And now he was the head of his family.

Owen looked at the far side of the kitchen while he thought about that, and listened to Medusa’s soft, wordless sobs.
was best for the Rosier-Henlin family? Should he asked to be released from his oath to Harry, so that he could fight for their fortunes and their political futures, while Michael stayed to guard Harry?

But it didn’t take long for Owen to conclude that he shouldn’t. For one thing, Michael needed him more than their mother, or at least he would by the time they went back to school for their seventh year—at Hogwarts, Owen was sure. The fact that Medusa mourned freely now while his brother was in shock indicated that. They would have two months to spend with her. That was enough of a recovery period. Owen could look into his father’s documents and set wheels spinning to draw Rosier-Henlin towards the top again in that time.

And then he would go back, because Rosier-Henlins kept their promises. And, more than that. Owen knew that he wasn’t just Harry’s ally, or someone who had decided to join the vates for political gain. He owed Harry his life and his sanity, and his brother’s life and sanity, and he had sworn himself his companion.

Owen didn’t think Harry really knew what that meant, yet. He had read histories of the ancient Lords and Ladies, but understood just enough to reject them, Owen thought. They used compulsion. They often started off with high intentions and then fell into bad ones. They manipulated other people shamelessly, using the attraction of their power and the many loopholes for strong magic built into traditional Ministry politics. They usually ended up treating even their sworn companions horribly. Owen could understand why Harry wanted to avoid that, and so would not Declare himself a Lord.

But there were exceptions. Calypso McGonagall, Light Lady though she had been, and her Sunburst Guard. Lord Windthorn Yaxley, the Dark Lord who had left none of his Sworn Brothers to die alone, and so lost none of them. The Dark Lady Genevieve, who had supposedly first brought Dementors into the world, and retained the love and loyalty of her companions through and despite that.

Their companions were protectors and protected, befriended and friends, loyal and loyally held to, when both companions and Lord were true. And Owen knew, because his father had told him, that there was no greater loyalty than that chosen with eyes open and heart laid down because it was the rational thing to do. Harry would move through the world alone if he could, never asking for things many would willingly give him. So he needed people who would both ask for him and teach him how to ask.

*I will remain at his side,* Owen thought, catching Michael’s eye over Medusa’s bowed head. *We both will. Father would have wanted that.*

And, for the first time since Owen had learned that Charles Rosier-Henlin was among those who had perished on the battlefield, he felt a kind of peace.

She had no choice, but that didn’t mean she had to like it.

Indigena had Apparated home to Thornhall. She had screamed in agony there for many minutes, and then one of her house elves had managed to bring her some of the healing potions she kept in her laboratory. None of them had helped. Nor had any attempt to end the curses by sheer force of will, or to lessen the pain.

So Indigena had come to her largest greenhouse, and the cocoon of tendrils she’d prepared long ago, when she first thought that she might someday die with most of her breeding experiments unfinished.

She did not object to dying of old age. And she had even thought, when her Lord called in his debt of honor, that she might not object to dying in battle. The cocoon certainly hadn’t been at the forefront of her thoughts.

But now she had found out she did object to it, so she crept, shaking, to her greenhouse, and she had wrapped the vines around her. She felt their roots slide through her skin, linking up with the leaves and flowers that already lay there. She felt a shiver of sap and strength run through her, and the pain of the Bloodless Curse began to ease. The others were continuing yet.

Indigena’s eyelids drooped. To work their deepest healing on her, the vines had to put her to sleep. And she might sleep for months before she woke. The vines would do whatever was needed to save her life. When she did, she would be less human than ever.

*Needs must,* she thought sleepily, as the tendrils drew her down into the dirt and the first great wave of slumber rolled over her.

It was not as though she could not afford to sleep for a while. Her Lord would be in hiding after this serious defeat, and not require her help. The plan he’d assigned her special attention to was already in waiting; Indigena had done the required research and made the necessary arrangements through the *Daily Prophet* and a reporter who’d seemed delighted to get the
information. She’d contacted the paper under a false name, of course, but everything had its price.

She closed her eyes and dropped into the dark sleep of winter, unaware of anything but the healing pulses of sap and the motion of the turning earth, and the very slowly growing need to rest and wake and rise.

Harry waited steadily by Draco’s bed. He imagined that he should probably sleep at some point.

And he would. When he felt tired.

One night had passed. This was the morning after the battle. Harry knew that many people were eyeing him sideways, from Ginny—able to think of something now besides her possibly dying brother and possibly dying friend, because they were both awake—to some Slytherins who undoubtedly wondered what he intended to do about Blaise. But no one had actually dared approach him yet. Harry didn’t know if it was respect or fear, probably springing from the rumors about what he’d done to the children at the lakeside, that kept them away. Either way, he blessed it, and he waited for Draco to wake up and look at him and listen.

He wasn’t bored. He didn’t feel hungry, either, and his eyes barely ever blinked. He realized, distantly, that he’d fallen into the kind of patient, motionless waiting Lily had taught him through long winter evenings at Godric’s Hollow. Waiting was as much a part of battle as the fighting, she’d said; in fact, it was usually the part that more people failed at, moving too soon and letting an enemy spot them, or moving an entire army too soon and being taken in a prepared ambush by someone quicker and cleverer. Harry had learned to let the whole world run away from him and sit like a stone when necessary. The loudest thing in his ears was his breathing.

He almost regretted that his experience of war so far hadn’t involved more scenarios like this. He’d had to scramble, to respond to attacks and ambushes, to rescue people in danger, to suddenly change his plans. There hadn’t been many chances to bask in the stillness, to let his mind sink into the silence like a stone itself falling into a dark pool. He stared, and stared, and breathed, and breathed, and the only thing that could call him back was Draco’s eyelids fluttering open, which eventually happened.

Harry reached out and stroked his hand, feeling almost unnaturally calm. Draco turned and stared at him, then murmured, “Harry? I—my head still hurts.” He swallowed. “Are my parents here? Could I have some water?”

“Of course,” Harry murmured, and reached over to fetch the goblet of water Madam Pomfrey had left on the bedside table for him. “Your parents aren’t here, Draco. They came and watched over you for a while.” Narcissa had tried to speak to him, Harry remembered dimly, but Lucius had touched her arm and shook his head when he saw the state Harry was in, and she’d refrained. “They’re at home recovering right now. Your mother took a pain curse in the back that took some effort to heal. She’s fine,” he added as he saw the rising panic in Draco’s face. “But your father was tired. They’ll come back in—” he cast a quick Tempus charm as he helped Draco sit up to drink the water “—a few hours.”

“Thank you,” said Draco. He took a deep breath. Harry realized he was preparing himself for far worse news. “And what’s wrong with me?”

Harry smiled gently at him. “Voldemort did tear some wounds in your mind, and mix some of his taint into you. Do you remember Snape closing the worst of the wounds?”

Draco shuddered, and his face turned so white Harry was momentarily worried that he might faint. “Some of it,” he whispered.

Harry nodded, and gave him some more water. “He can’t heal everything right away, which is why your head still hurts,” he said. “We’ll work on it in tandem, since we’re both Legilimens, later. Snape’s confident he can heal all the gaping wounds with my help, and then he’ll give you potions that will help repair the rest. He doesn’t think you lost memories, but you had some of your other pathways ripped up badly. So you might have physical symptoms for a while. Blurred vision, trouble walking, that kind of thing. Snape said it will all heal.”

Draco relaxed a bit. “And the taint?” His voice had more fear in it this time.

“The Seers can help you with that,” said Harry. “I spoke with Vera. She reassures me that there are people in the Sanctuary skilled at this. Even though it entered through your mind, it’s really more of a soul-wound, like seeing too many of the horrors of war. So it’s a good thing we’re going to the Sanctuary.”

Draco nodded. “When can we leave?” he demanded, sounding a bit more like his old self. “I don’t want bits of Voldemort floating around in my soul for long.” He made a face. “Did he ask before he infected me with his taint? No, he did not.”

Harry felt a spontaneous smile break out on his face. He stooped and kissed Draco’s forehead. “You’ll leave in a few days,
“probably,” he replied. “Maybe a week. When Snape and I have had time to heal your mental wounds, and he’s started you on a regular course of the potions.”

“Don’t think I missed that, Harry.” Draco curled insistent fingers into his jumper. “When you leave, you said. What about you?”

“I don’t know.” Harry met Draco’s eyes, and held them, and let him see his frank uncertainty. “There are situations I need to lay to rest, first. Voldemort announced that I killed those children to the rest of the school. I’ll need to talk with their parents. I have to make sure the werewolf situation doesn’t explode while I’m gone. I’d like to find out where Acies went, or the dragon who was Acies, and what kind of trouble she’s likely to cause. If we can track Indigena Yaxley, who Apparated away alive from the battle, I’d appreciate that, too.”

Draco shook his head. “Tell them to sod off,” he said. “You need to rest, Harry.”

“One reason I defeated Voldemort the way I did was so that we could have a summer resoundingly free of him,” said Harry firmly, and helped Draco lean back on the pillows. “I don’t want to be called away from the Sanctuary a few days after I get there because of one of these problems. Just let me get them settled, Draco, and I’ll follow you.”

Draco sighed. “And what happens if they take longer to be settled than a few weeks?”

Harry shrugged noncommittally. “Then they do.”

Draco tried to scowl at him, but he was already yawning. “Did anyone we know die?” he muttered sleepily.

Harry sighed. He couldn’t keep silent on this, even though he knew it would shock Draco. He didn’t want to lie to him, even by simple omission on account of his weariness. “Several people,” he said. “Charles Rosier-Henlin.” Draco did stare at him in shock, then. “Cho Chang. Catrina Flint-Digsby.” He hesitated a moment, and then finished, “Pansy. I’m so sorry, Draco.”

“That bitch.”

Harry blinked. “What?”

“She knew,” Draco spat. “She had to have known that her death was coming, she’s a fucking necromancer, and she didn’t tell us!” He made a sharp slashing gesture with one hand. “Fuck that, and fuck her!”

“They’re not allowed to tell anyone about their visions of death, you know that,” said Harry. People were staring, and he didn’t want Draco to sound as if he were blaming Pansy for her own death, in case Hawthorn came in.

And then he realized Draco was crying, sharp sobs he was at pains to hide, and he was able to curve an arm around his shoulders and draw him against him, murmuring nonsensical, comforting words. Harry remembered he had known Pansy since they were both children together. Draco’s grief would not be as keen as Hawthorn’s, but it would still cut.

He murmured and almost sang until Draco went limp and soft in his arms, and Harry realized he had cried himself to sleep. Gently, he arranged his pillows, laid Draco on them, and spent a moment watching his face.

Then he went to find Snape. He was needed on battlefield cleanup—identifying the bodies, where that was possible, and arranging for disposal of the Death Eater bodies, compiling of lists of the dead, and informing the families.

No one approached him as he moved through the corridors of Hogwarts. Harry could see slitted eyes watching him, though, eyes bright with grief and rage and hatred.

It wouldn’t be long.

Well. It was done.

Sirius stood in his dog form on the battlefield and looked around, slowly. It was getting to be dawn again. The second day he’d been back in the living world, and already he knew it wasn’t the place for him, anymore. Everything was too hard, too substantial, and even the mud wounded his paws. And he’d been right about Connor. He’d moved on, accepted Sirius’s death and gone on to live his life. There was nothing Sirius could do for Lily or James or Remus, now, and no way to make things up to Peter even if he’d been able to speak to him.

But Harry…

Sirius was waiting for one more glimpse of his godson. He faced the school and sat down, patiently, on his haunches, snapping at the ghost of a flea that thought it could hitch a ride on the dead Grim.

Harry came out of Hogwarts then, trotting over to join Snape, Trelawney, and Vector as they identified bodies. He did have
a brief argument with Snape before he did, Sirius saw, an argument he almost lost. Good. Snape would probably force Harry to get some rest soon. It soothed Sirius to know that his godson was being taken care of by at least one person, even if that person had to be Snivellus.

*We certainly didn’t do right by him, eh, James?*

But Sirius had been dead for more than two years now, and really, the sting of that wound had modulated. What was important was that Harry was living now, and going on in the world he still belonged to, and to which Sirius didn’t, any more.

He satisfied himself by trotting close to Harry and watching his eyes. They were too shuttered, too grim, too old, he thought. Harry was making himself into someone who would heal and comfort and soothe other people, and face his crimes—as he saw them—but Sirius wondered if he would take time for himself.

*He better, Sirius thought. Or Peter and Malfoy and Snape will yell at him until he does.*

He couldn’t. His part was done, now, and he was going away.

He licked Harry’s hand with a ghostly tongue. He was pleased beyond words to see Harry start and glance down at his hand. He barked, and Harry lifted his head, eyes disbeliefing, mouth forming the word *Sirius?*

Sirius barked one more time, and then the world around him faded and the darkness was back. He looked up, and there above him were the holes into somewhere else, like stars the color of rotting muscle.

The voices called from them. From one came a faint smell of starlight.

Sirius rose, and went home.

**Chapter Ninety-Five: The Greatest Of These Is Love**

Minerva found Harry talking to Hawthorn Parkinson in her guest quarters, with the door open as though to welcome anyone who might pass by. Minerva stood in silence a moment, watching them. Godric hovered close at her shoulder, but as a shadow, so that no one else could see him.

Harry was currently listening to a low-voiced stream of despair Hawthorn was pouring out, his hand clasping one of hers so hard that Minerva wondered she didn’t wince. But it seemed bodily sensation was almost beyond her; what mattered were the words, and the ear willing to hear them. Whenever Hawthorn did stop to ask an anguished question, Harry responded instantly, though Minerva couldn’t hear the answers, either. His hand stroked hers, and he never looked away from her face. Now and then he blinked, but he wasn’t forcing back tears of his own. Minerva wondered that he could be so dry-eyed.

She hated to disturb him, but it had been three days since the battle, and that meant news had had time to spread—especially since some of the friends and older siblings of the children who’d died by the lake had combined knowledge of what Voldemort had said with knowledge of where their friends or siblings had died, and written their parents. Two of those parents were waiting in Minerva’s office right now. She’d argued by Floo with them, until one of them threatened to confront Harry out of her sight and the other threatened to take this straight to the Ministry. Reluctantly, Minerva had allowed them to come through.

“Come in, Headmistress,” Harry said, when a pause came in Hawthorn’s narration.

Minerva started, then scolded herself. She’d been foolish to think that Harry was unaware of anything happening around him in the wake of a battle like that. She stepped into the room, nodding to Mrs. Parkinson. Hawthorn leaned back against the pillows of her bed, closing her eyes. The strain in her face had eased, Minerva thought.

“Oh, Harry, I hate to disturb you,” she began.

“But there’s someone who needs to talk to me?” Harry nodded and climbed off the bed. “I thought there would be.” He turned to Hawthorn while Minerva was still trying to understand what that statement meant. “Don’t worry, ma’am,” he murmured. “I think it could go wrong, but you did what you did in the heat of the moment. If Indigena Yaxley is still alive—and most people seem to think that’s what Thornhall being shut up in wards means—then we’ll bring her down eventually. I won’t say that her life is reserved for you to take, of course.”

*She was talking to him about her daughter, then, and the revenge she took on her daughter’s killer, Minerva thought, and felt a surge of both helplessness and anger. Why are we leaning on him, depending on him to absolve us? It’s ridiculous. We should be able to take comfort from someone else and let him rest.*

Hawthorn gave a quiet laugh. “I would never ask that, Harry.”
“Good.” Harry smiled at her, and then turned to face Minerva. She was startled anew to realize that he was taller than he had been at the start of the year, his head almost reaching her collarbone. “Shall we, Headmistress?” He arched an eyebrow at her, and she nodded and led him down the hall towards the gargoyle.

She kept glancing at him as they walked, trying to gauge something of his mood. She couldn’t. The expression on Harry’s face was serene, bone-deep determination, and nothing more than that.

Minerva had been aware of him and his activities over the past few days, of course. It was hard not to be. Harry seemed to be everywhere: in the hospital wing, helping to heal young Mr. Malfoy of the gaping wounds in his mind; with his grieving allies, talking them out of their grief; listening in silence to those who needed to scream out their pain, whether or not that pain was directed towards him; helping to identify bodies and send them home to their families; helping Severus brew more potions, both the ones Mr. Malfoy would need and the ones he wouldn’t; incinerating the giants’ bodies; speaking with the creatures in the Forbidden Forest, to make sure there were no Death Eaters hiding in the trees.

Minerva had passed him a few times in the hallways, and asked if he was well. Harry had smiled at her each time and nodded, except for the last, when he’d said, “Yes, Headmistress. Believe me, I’m doing what I want to be doing. It’s what I wish I could have done during the siege, but I was consumed with grief then. Now I can look outside myself, and I see how many other people need help.”

The statement continued to make Minerva uneasy, but she wasn’t sure what she could do about it. Most people in the castle did seem to look to Harry, even if only as a pair of welcoming, listening ears. And if Harry had adopted the role of his own free will and wasn’t depriving himself of food and sleep to do so—and she had seen no signs that he was—then did she have the right to object?

Harry was singing softly under his breath, Minerva realized, when she came back to herself. “Who are the parents, Headmistress?” he asked, breaking off his song the moment he realized she was looking at him.

“Aurora Whitestag,” said Minerva. “Her son Abelard was one of the children who died by the lake, a first-year Hufflepuff. And her daughter Heloise slid into a coma in the hospital wing and never woke.”

Harry nodded. “And the other?”

“Philip Willoughby.” Minerva hesitated a moment. “He’s a Muggle. His daughter Alexandra was a first-year Ravenclaw. She died by the lake, too.”

Harry blinked. “I’m glad our owl reached him. I wasn’t sure how much the Muggleborn students’ families knew about what was happening here.”

Minerva pressed her lips together as she thought of the angry, grieving man she’d left in her office. “Mr. Willoughby was very involved in his daughter’s life,” she said slowly. “He was proud that Alexandra was a witch. He had a fireplace installed in his home so he could use the Floo connection, he regularly receives the Daily Prophet, and I believe that he was learning the history of the wizarding world with her.”

“And?” Harry prompted.

Minerva gave him a look meant to chill him out of asking anything further. Harry just returned it with his serene one, and Minerva sighed. Harry might be one of her students, and in some things he could be treated as one, but not in this.

“And she was his only immediate family,” Minerva admitted. “His wife died some time ago, apparently. He has no other children.”

Harry closed his eyes.

Minerva turned to face him and gripped his shoulders. Now she did think of something she should have done, but, of course, too late, too late. Both Whitestag and Willoughby had threatened to “do something” if she wasn’t back to her office with Harry in an hour at the most. Minerva should have talked about the children under the Life-Web with Harry, and how they mirrored her own sacrifice of killing children too wounded to live at Ottery St. Catchpole seventeen years ago. Minerva had acquired the full story from Severus, but not had any chance to talk to Harry about it.

“Harry,” she said. “He will say many unfortunate things. He already has,” she added, thinking of what he’d said through her Floo connection, which had finally been repaired the day after the battle. “That does not mean you should take them to heart. You did what you had to on the battlefield, what I think needed to be done and what no one else could have managed.”

Harry opened his eyes and gave her a confused look. “That’s not what I was upset about, Madam,” he said. “I know that he’ll be angry and grieving, and so will Aurora Whitestag. How can I possibly condemn them for that? I was only sorry that
he’d lost his only daughter, and that Mrs. Whitestag has lost two of her children. I wished I could resurrect them, somehow, but I know there’s no magic that allows one to return the dead to the living world, not truly.”

Again, Minerva felt as if she’d missed something. Harry’s face was already serene once more, and he started up the corridor, though he paused a few steps on to look back at her over his shoulder. “Headmistress? Are you coming? Did they ask that you be there when they spoke with me? Perhaps you should rest.”

Minerva shook her head and caught up with Harry. As a matter of fact, she did need rest—all the professors did—but there was no way that she would let Harry face this alone. She had not had to do this, since the parents of the children massacred at Ottery St. Catchpole had been told that their children died of their wounds rather than being killed, but her fellow rescue-murderers had not left her alone in the days immediately afterward, either. Minerva would stand with Harry.

And if I can learn what I’m missing, then so much the better.

Harry had himself braced when he entered McGonagall’s office. It could not have been easy to lose two children or to lose your only child. He told himself that, and kept grief and sympathy at the forefront of his mind. He kept, as well, his own determination to accept what came, and to balance it with the other duties that he had yet to complete. He could not act as if he were above the laws of the wizarding world, not and be a good leader. On the other hand, allowing these two parents to send him to prison just now would not serve Draco, or the grieving people in the castle who still needed to talk to him, or his arrangements for Edith Bulstrode to go to France with a private tutor—Harry had granted Henrietta permission to join the battle so long as she never tried to see her daughter, but Edith was too intolerably nervous with her mother in the same building—or the werewolf problem and the necessity to reply to a letter from Loki he’d received yesterday. He would explain his perception of the situation to Aurora Whitestag and Philip Willoughby, and hope they would be reasonable, and see that he couldn’t stand trial for war crimes or anything else right now. He had too much to do.

He’d locked his own emotions deep in Occlumency pools, and called on his magic to support his body and mind. He really should have done this during the siege, but the grief had been too strong for an Occlumency pool then and his magic too occupied with other things. No one was calling on him to use his magic now, except in healing Draco, but his ear and his mind and his money and his political power. So it could go to making sure his mind stayed clear and thoughtful, and his body strong when it wanted to collapse, and his possible soul-wounds in abeyance.

A woman and a man waited in chairs in front of McGonagall’s desk. Aurora Whitestag, when she faced him, had a cascade of dark hair that reminded Harry of her daughter Heloise, before they’d arranged transportation of her body home to her mother. Her robes were white, lined with silver, and simple—the robes of an undeclared witch. Her dark eyes were narrow as she studied him, but she actually nodded to him, and a soft smile ran across her lips. Harry inclined his head back, and turned to face the man.

Philip Willoughby was an impressive figure, fully as tall and strong as Bill Weasley, though considerably heavier. His brown hair was frazzled, and his hazel eyes, which Harry thought were probably as kind as Connor’s normally, already bore the look of too many tears and not enough sleep. He stared at Harry as if he were the answer to a riddle he’d been pursuing for years. Harry did his best not to let it disconcert him as he nodded back.

“Mrs. Whitestag, Mr. Willoughby,” said Harry, and took a third chair that sat off to the side of McGonagall’s desk. She’d placed him closer to her than to the parents, Harry noticed, and subtly shoved the chair back to a more neutral, central position when the Headmistress wasn’t looking. “My name is Harry. Please, ask me any questions or tell me anything you wish.”

“I want to know the circumstances of my daughter’s death,” said Philip. “Obviously.” His hands clenched over and then into each other, almost tearing the skin. He hadn’t blinked yet.

“I would also like to know the circumstances of my son’s,” Aurora added, in a softer voice.

Harry nodded. “Voldemort attacked the school on the eighth of June, thirteen days before Midsummer,” he began calmly. “Besides having Death Eaters attack the carriages that were taking students home, he captured a dozen children—mostly first-years and second-years—and put them in a Life-Web.” He looked questioningly at Aurora, but her face reflected blankness, and of course so did Philip’s, so Harry explained. “A Life-Web gathers many lives and puts them in the control of the caster. Voldemort could will them to die, injure themselves, go mad, become wounded, or suffer in many other ways as long as he held control of that web. Other magic could still affect them, but only until he noticed and ended the spell’s effects. And only he could undo the spell.”

Aurora was staring at him. Philip was looking down at his hands.
“I did what I could to ease their suffering,” Harry said. His grief and rage were somewhere far under the stony surface he’d constructed for himself. He couldn’t be blinded by his own emotions right now. His magic traveled in a smooth, continuous flow through his body, easing muscles that might have tightened, supporting him when he might have sagged, eating built-up weariness. “I tried a healing spell, and I tried to eat the Life-Web—”

“I don’t understand,” said Philip abruptly, looking up. “Eat it?”

“I can eat magic,” said Harry. “I tried to absorb the web into myself. It didn’t work. There are some laws of magic that can’t be broken, and apparently the Life-Web being altered only by its caster is one of them.” He sighed. “Voldemort said he would free the children if I went down to him.”

“And you didn’t even consider that?” Philip’s voice sounded as if the words were torn out of him, probably carrying large chunks of his throat with them.

“Voldemort doesn’t keep his promises,” said Harry. “I would have gone down to him, and he would have continued torturing them.”

“But you don’t know that,” said Philip intently, leaning forward. “Perhaps he would have kept this one. How can you know?” Harry winced; his voice was gradually edging upward. “How do you know that Alexandra isn’t alive only because of your selfishness, and not because of—“

“Because Harry is the only one who can kill You-Know-Who,” Aurora interrupted. She had never looked away from Harry. Her voice was as soft as her smile had been. She leaned back, hands clasped around her knee. Harry eyed her. He found it hard to read her. “He’s the Boy-Who-Lived. If he went down to him, the war would be over. Alexandra might have lived, and Abelard too, but the war would be over.”

“I could have taken Alexandra back home,” Philip said. “No one would ever have to know. She loves this world, and so do I, but I’d trade it for her life.”

Harry winced, and kept his voice respectfully low as he said, “Mr. Willoughby, Hogwarts keeps records of all its students. Voldemort targets Muggleborns particularly, because he thinks they’re polluting the wizarding world. He would have learned about Alexandra’s existence and come after you eventually.”

“You don’t know that,” Philip insisted. “You don’t.”

Harry inclined his head. “Perhaps I don’t.”

“I would like to finish listening to the story,” said Aurora mildly.

Harry turned back to her. “I had to choose. While Voldemort taunted me with the children in the Life-Web, other children were dying behind me on the battlefield, and since my magic is so strong, and I can eat my enemies’ power, I could make a difference in turning the tide there. I didn’t know of a way to make Voldemort’s captives stop suffering. I didn’t know of a way to free them. So I chose to give them heart attacks, as quick and painless a death as I could. Voldemort didn’t sense the spell in time to stop me, and I think he believed I would never kill them anyway, so it worked. And then I turned to rescuing the others.” He turned his hand up. “That was what happened.”

“You don’t seem that torn up about it,” Aurora said, her voice cool for the first time.

Harry met her eyes. “That’s because I’m using Occlumency to suppress my emotions, ma’am,” he said. “I spent a lot of time grieving during the siege of Hogwarts, enough that I almost went outside and let Voldemort have me. My brother made me promise not to, but it was a near thing. And right now, if I let what I was really feeling through, then I’d be weeping too hard to talk to you, and certainly too hard to tell you what really happened or listen to your grief and understand it.”

Aurora stared at him again, but Philip had another question. “And if you really can kill You-Know-Who,” he asked, knuckling one eye as if that would keep the tears from falling, “why didn’t you kill him, and free the children from the Life-Web that way?”

“Because I’d tried before,” said Harry, “with the strongest curses I know. Nothing happened. Voldemort has made arrangements to keep himself immortal; that shows because I bounced his own Killing Curse back at him the night he came after me and my brother, and he still survived it. I’ve wounded him now, and he has to hide. That means I have time to figure out what’s keeping him immortal, destroy it, and then kill him.”

“You can’t, really,” Philip whispered. “I thought when Alexandra told me about this Boy-Who-Lived nonsense that it was just that, nonsense. And it is. If you can’t kill him when he holds a dozen children captive, then when can you do it? I think you chose your life over theirs.” His voice was rising again. “I’ve been reading wizarding history. Dark Lords, Light Lords, this supposed vates—it’s all the same, all about power, and they’ll grant exceptions to powerful wizards that they won’t to
anyone else.

“Well, no more. You may be a powerful wizard, but you’re still a murderer, and I’ll see you brought to trial for that.”

Harry flinched, but forced himself to nod. “I don’t know if you would win, but I don’t intend to blast your head off or use compulsion to change your mind,” he said quietly. “I think there is one difference between me and a Lord, sir. I try not to hold myself above others, and if that means submitting to wizarding law because the Ministry has decided to try me for war crimes, then that’s what it means.”

“Harry,” said McGonagall sharply.

Harry glanced at her with a frown, wondering why she had interrupted. She wouldn’t want them to think that she was ignoring their children because she’s prejudiced in my favor. The Headmistress of Hogwarts has to be more neutral in public than in private. “I’m not done explaining yet, Headmistress,” he said calmly, and then turned back to Aurora and Philip. “I do have other problems to handle first,” he told them. “People I’m trying to heal of wounds they received in the battle. Arrangements to make regarding political struggles I’m a part of. Accounts to set up. So, while I certainly can’t dictate how you react, that’s where I’m coming from. It’s not that I don’t care about what happened, or feel guilt.” He wished he could let a bit of the grief out, but it was too powerful. It would mingle with his grief for Pansy, Charles, Cho, and all the others who had died, and leave him a sobbing wreck. “But I can’t stop living my life and only care about what trial you might put me through.”

“I, for one, will not be calling for a trial,” said Aurora Whitestag quietly.

Philip snapped, “I don’t really need your help. I’ll pursue this on my own, if I have to, but first I’m going to talk to some of the other parents who lost children.”

“Why?” Harry asked her. In some ways, he thought she would have been even more likely to demand a trial, since she would understand the consequences of the magic and the ways of the Ministry better than a Muggle.

“Because I do believe that you are the Boy-Who-Lived, and the only one who can defeat You-Know-Who,” said Aurora. One hand trembled, but she quickly caught it with the other and hid it in her lap. “We need you. A trial will only divert your attention and sap your political strength. At the same time, chaos seems to follow in your wake, and having you at Hogwarts is a danger to the other children. So, for the sake of those children who are still alive, and not because I think Heloise and Abelard deserve to see you be imprisoned, I’m going to push for you to be put in private custody, Harry, somewhere far away from Hogwarts, and trained until you can defeat You-Know-Who.” She met his eyes, her own open and honest and quietly determined. “Our world needs you. But it needs its safety, too.”

McGonagall leaned forward. “Mrs. Whitestag, Mr. Willoughby,” she said. “You should understand that Voldemort’s early attack was not Harry’s fault. The wards failed to protect the children as we thought they would. The blood of the children who died that day is on the hands of Voldemort and his Death Eaters, not on Harry’s. And a quick death is surely better than ___."

“You wouldn’t say that,” Philip snarled at her, “if you had lost a child of your own.”

McGonagall’s eyes were glacial when she looked back at him. “I did, Mr. Willoughby. I am the Headmistress of this school. Every child who died, on the battlefield and before the siege, is a child of mine. And I’ve been responsible for not just deaths, but suffering, and being the guardian of the suffering and trying to ease them. Harry has been asked to play a role that no one else has, that of guardian and protector of our entire world, and for us to condemn him for the consequences of that role is selfish and hypocritical.”

“Someone who is guardian and protector of our entire world should be more responsible,” said Aurora. “Not only with his safety, but with the safety of others.” She nodded to Harry, her face like a glass mask—set, with light shining from behind. “I am sorry, Harry. I truly think this is the best course. The protection of the living is more important than vengeance for the dead.”

“On that, we can agree,” said Harry. “But I don’t think that imprisoning me is the best answer, Mrs. Whitestag.”

“I said nothing about imprisoning you,” she murmured. “I do think you should be kept in a private location and trained. Our world needs you, Harry, and not as a student in a school. You have to take on an adult role, and that means that you need to be treated like an adult.” She rose and nodded to McGonagall. “Thank you for taking the opportunity to meet with me, Headmistress. I will be in contact.” She strode over to McGonagall’s fireplace, taking out a pinch of Floo powder and casting it into the flames. A name that Harry couldn’t quite catch, and she was gone.

That left Philip, who was leaning back with his head against the chair behind him, his chest heaving as he struggled to control sobs or shouts; Harry didn’t know which. He let some moments pass, and then said, “Mr. Willoughby.”
Philip’s eyes snapped open, and he gave Harry a look of acute loathing, enough that Harry recoiled. Then he rose like an old man and stared at McGonagall.

“I’m going home now, too,” he said. “Be sure I’ll be in touch, Headmistress.”

Harry watched as he hobbled to the fireplace and called, “Willoughby house!” as he used the Floo powder. Harry swallowed all his mingled emotions as he watched him go. He wished Philip wasn’t doing this, but how could he condemn the man? He was acting out of love and grief.

“Harry.”

Harry started and turned to look at McGonagall. She had her mouth set in a thin line, and she had leaned over and taken hold of his hand without his noticing it.

“Willoughby will have a difficult time bringing you to trial,” she said. “You are underage as yet. Wizarding law usually refuses to try someone for war crimes and murder until they are at least seventeen.” Harry nodded, thinking of Evergreen, the sixteen-year-old werewolf, whom the Wizengamot had preferred to keep in Tullianum indefinitely rather than condemning him to a permanent stay there, and Gilbert Rovenan, who would have suffered no worse than expulsion and wand-breaking. “I am worried about Whitestag, however. She may press the Wizengamot into trying to take custody of you precisely because you are the Boy-Who-Lived as well as underage. I think few of the Wizengamot members who sat in on your parents’ trial would really believe that you do not consider the ethical ramifications of your actions, but in light of what is happening with the werewolves, they may do—something unfortunate—in the name of the safety of the wizarding world.”

Harry nodded again. He knew. “What do you think is the best course then, Headmistress?” he asked.

“For Severus to remove you from the school as soon as possible,” said McGonagall bluntly. “You need time to rest, to recover, to heal, Harry, and I do think it would be better done away from Hogwarts, where there are not so many memories to plague you. And if you were in an isolated place where no one could find you easily, then we could easily tell Mrs. Whitestag and anyone who asked that you had gone for training. They would not know the difference. By the time you returned to Hogwarts at the end of August, then we could claim, in turn, that you had completed your training and now were on the path to defeating Voldemort.”

“I don’t know if I can learn the truth about defeating him in that time,” Harry said.

McGonagall laughed. It was not a happy sound. “There are times when you need to think more like a Slytherin, Harry,” she said. “Of course we won’t give out any details when Whitestag and her supporters demand them. They could leak back to Voldemort, wherever he’s hiding. We need to keep them secret for the good of the wizarding world. So you can pursue research when you have time for it, and if it takes a while—no one can blame you for not defeating Voldemort immediately.”

Harry stirred uneasily. He knew the perfect candidate for the isolated place where he would convince most people that he was training in ethics and in magic. The Sanctuary’s location was unknown to many, Vera had reassured him, and the “shadows” surrounding it, which tended to delay owls, also made it impossible for anyone with hostile intent to find it.

But if he went there with the situation still unresolved and brewing, wouldn’t it look like he was running away from efforts to bring him to trial, when he needed to show everyone that he didn’t consider himself above the law?

He said as much to McGonagall. Her answer was unexpected.

“That is what I have been missing,” she exclaimed, slapping her hand onto her desk. Harry blinked at her.

“I had the idea that something was strange about you, Harry, but I couldn’t tell what it was,” she said, her words burring slightly. “You are doing what you can to heal others and help, but you have once again pushed your own healing away.”

“I haven’t,” said Harry. “I promise you, ma’am. I haven’t been neglecting myself the way I used to whenever I got angry. I haven’t drowned in grief. I’m only maintaining this mask over my emotions until I have some time to grieve. And that isn’t yet. As you pointed out, there are other people to be healed.”

McGonagall said nothing, simply watched him as if he were a mouse. Harry was the one who shifted after a moment. He needed to go speak to Connor, and then talk to Snape about his upcoming Apparition to Cobleby-by-the-Sea. There were some treasures there, powerful and magical but capable of nothing useful, which Harry intended to drain of their power. He would do his best to restore the magic of the children who had been turned into Squibs when that was done.

“Can I go, Madam?” he asked after a moment.

“Go,” McGonagall murmured.
Harry stood up, nodded to her, and walked out of the office, wondering at his own urge to flee.

“Severus. If you have a moment?”

Snape turned in surprise. McGonagall stood watching him from the doorway. Snape smothered his irritation that he hadn’t heard her approach. She had probably had one of the Founders remove his wards.

“Minerva,” he said, with a shallow nod, and cast a temporary charm on the Veritaserum to hold it in its current stage. “Is this about Harry?”

McGonagall smiled faintly and moved into the room. “Of course,” she murmured. “What else would I speak to you about?”

“I am Deputy Headmaster.” Snape folded his arms and told himself he would not get huffy. No one but Dumbledore had ever been able to make him get huffy. “The defense of the school and the continuation of my brewing healing potions seem likely items.”

“This is not a problem truly concerned with defense of the school, though some people would think it is.”

McGonagall described the meeting between Philip Willoughby, Aurora Whitestag, and Harry, and what the parents of the dead children intended to do about it. Snape stood still throughout. He noted the names, and thought distantly that it was a pity neither of them was a werewolf.

“And they think they can do this?” he hissed, when McGonagall was done. He had other questions, including why he hadn’t been summoned to this meeting, but that was the most prominent.

“When word gets out of what happened to the children in the Life-Web, as it inevitably will?” McGonagall massaged her forehead and sighed. “With the Minister on a short leash with the Wizengamot at the moment? With Harry’s name linked, rightly or wrongly, with so much other trouble in our world? I fear that there will be many queuing up to help them.”

Snape coiled his wandless magic back inside him. It wanted to lash out and break a head, or at least a leg. But since McGonagall was the only person in the room with him, that wouldn’t be productive. “Then he must be taken away,” he said. “Your solution is the only one that makes sense, to remove him from the school and pretend that someone is training him to defeat the Dark Lord.” He permitted himself a sneer, feeling as if he would burst if he didn’t. “As if one could be trained to do that. If that was all it took, Moody would have trained himself into readiness long ago.”

“I know, Severus.” McGonagall leaned forward. “And I think the Seers’ Sanctuary, where he intended to go anyway, is the best choice. But for the deception to be complete, you will have to disappear as well, to make it seem as if his guardian decided this was the best thing for Harry. And I know that you have no wish to go to the Sanctuary.”

Snape snarled. “I do not.” There were locked boxes in his soul that no one had the right to touch, and doors that would remain shut. But, on the other hand, it was not as if he were going to be healed, as Pettigrew or Lupin had, as Harry and Draco would. He was certain he could remain himself even in the midst of people anxious to “help” him. “But I have never yet spent a full summer with Harry since I have known him, and I think that has helped hurt him.” He met McGonagall’s eyes. “I wish to spend this one with him.”

McGonagall closed her eyes and nodded. “Thank you, Severus,” she murmured. “Good. But then, of course, we have another problem. Harry thinks he will be seen as running away from wizarding law if he goes to the Sanctuary, and that is not something he wants.”

Snape smirked. This one, at least, he knew how to approach. “Leave that to me,” he said.

“You think you can persuade him?” McGonagall frowned. “Forgive me, Severus, but Harry’s convictions of justice are so strong that—”

“Not me,” said Snape. “I agree, he would think I was acting solely out of a guardian’s duties, and he would refuse to listen, because he thinks his own duties more important. But there is someone whom he will never resist.”

“Perfect.” The relief in Harry’s voice was unmistakable to Draco, even more so than the tendril of Legilimency he used to stroke Draco’s mind as he retreated from yet another healing of wounds. “They’re coming along nicely, Draco. The last big holes are almost closed. Some of the effects will linger for a time—that’s what the potions are for, of course—but you should be able to go to the Sanctuary as early as the day after tomorrow.”
Draco opened his eyes, and gave Harry a smile he knew was strained. But Snape had come in earlier and explained exactly what Harry was doing to himself and why, and Draco was horrified and disgusted and more than a little disappointed in Harry. *After everything he promised...*

“And you won’t be coming with me, will you, Harry?” he asked.

Harry started, and then he relaxed and smiled. Draco reached out intently now, and caught the faintest whiff of roses—Harry’s magic. It was working to make that relaxation and the smile look natural. Draco growled softly under his breath. *He’s relying on his magic just to function. He said he wouldn’t.*

“Of course I will, Draco,” Harry said. “I promised. I can’t give you an exact date, yet, but I should be no more than a week or two behind. At the very latest. It *might* take three weeks to settle the werewolf problem—I’m still debating how to reply to the letter Loki sent me—but—”

“You promised otherwise,” said Draco, and heard his voice grow darker all on its own. He thought he might have had to feign the emotion. *No need.* “You promised, Harry. When I was wounded, you said that we would go to the Sanctuary together, and you would spend your time thinking about healing and about me.”

Harry’s stare sharpened. “Did Snape put you up to this?”

*Damn, damn, damn.* Draco felt as he had when he confronted his father. Potentially devastating emotional consequences were spinning past him, and he had to choose which one to ride.

He chose the truth.

“He told me what you’ve been doing,” said Draco. “Helping everyone else. Putting aside your own grief. Yielding to these mad plans to bring you to trial or force you to remove yourself from Hogwarts. And now I can smell your magic, Harry. You’re using it to just to keep your feet.”

Harry ran his hand through his hair, and looked put out. “It would be stupid to do something I’ve promised I wouldn’t, Draco,” he said. “I haven’t been skipping meals or sleep, I promise. The only reason I’ve tamped my emotions down with Occlumency is because otherwise I would be a sobbing wreck, and I would get *nothing* done, including healing you, which I *need* to happen.” The look in his eyes as he said that almost took Draco’s breath away. “I can’t show that I think I’m above the law, or that I’m frightened of what they can do to me. And yes, I’m using my magic, but it’s only to get everything done that I need to. The world doesn’t stop spinning just because there was a battle here, Draco. Loki has not stopped being an idiot, for example.”

“There are two words you need to learn, Harry,” said Draco.

“Only two?” Harry cocked one eyebrow, and the very last remains of Draco’s empathy let him catch what felt like a quiver of anger. Harry was enraged, or close to it, but keeping it mostly off his face and out of his voice.

“Yes,” said Draco. “In this case, only two.”

“And what are they?” Harry’s rage was almost gone again, but it reassured Draco to know he had felt it.

“*Sod off,*” said Draco.

Harry nodded once, his lips tightening, and started to turn away. Draco caught the stump of his left wrist.

“I didn’t mean that *you* had to sod off, Harry,” he said, lifting one hand to hold Harry’s cheek. He could feel him shaking from this close, and his determination increased. Yes, he wanted this for himself, wanted Harry beside him as he healed and rid his soul of Voldemort’s taint, but, by Merlin, Harry *needed* this, too. He’d fought so hard for them to have a summer free of war, and now he was going to sacrifice it on an altar to grief and misguided honesty. Draco wouldn’t let him. “I meant, tell them that. There’s a point at which you’re not granting people reasonable requests, but letting them take advantage of you.”

“I know that!” Harry snapped, and the headboard of Draco’s bed rattled. Harry’s eyes closed, and he pulled himself away until only Draco’s grip on his wrist held him there. “You and Snape keep talking about it,” Harry went on. “But I don’t know where it is. And when I do indulge my grief, it’s a horrid mistake, and then when I don’t, it’s another horrid mistake again. I don’t understand you.” His mask broke for a moment. Draco could see the misery battering away just beneath the surface, combined with guilt and Harry’s terror of doing the wrong thing. Then they went away again as Harry bolted the serene lie back on top of them. “I’m erring on the side of caution,” he whispered. “If the choice is between giving up a summer holiday and being a leader, or hiding myself away from the outside world and ignoring problems that won’t solve themselves…if I can prevent evil, Draco, and I don’t, that’s evil, too. And Merlin knows what the werewolves would do if I was out of contact for that long, or the Ministry, or the parents of the dead children. And yes, I *hate* that they’re talking...
about bringing me to trial, or else taking me away from you and Snape and everyone else I love, and part of me wants to tell them to go fuck themselves. But I don’t know where that point is where they’re taking advantage of me. Maybe a trial is a perfectly right and reasonable thing to request, and I’m heading down Dumbledore’s paths by trying to justify those children sacrificed in the name of war. I don’t know, Draco. I’ve lost my footing, and all the roads look the same unless I can ease pain somehow.”

And Draco knew what to do, then. The tumbling swords of consequence could fall where they will. He knew what to say and how to say it.

“And that’s why you need to come to the Sanctuary with me, Harry,” he murmured, gently. He stretched up from the pillows, ignoring his pounding head, and put his hand behind Harry’s neck, pulling him closer. “They can help you find your footing again. I want you with me because I want you there as I heal. I want you there because I want to see you healed. And I want you there because I can see a life beyond the war. This war won’t last forever, Harry. What happens if you make yourself into a leader and a weapon, and then someday, our world doesn’t need you to be those things anymore? You would fall apart, I think.” He tugged Harry forward again, until their foreheads rested against each other. “And I don’t want you to fall apart,” he whispered. “I want you to stay alive for a good long time.”

Harry said nothing. His breathing had a sound of tears. Draco held himself still, and waited. Snape had thought Harry wouldn’t be able to resist a plea from him, which was wrong, of course. But more than that, Draco thought Harry deserved a choice, with all his options laid out starkly before him.

“All right,” Harry whispered.

Draco felt his heart clamp closed. He pulled away and considered Harry’s face, the tight lines and still-shut eyes, carefully. “You mean that?” he said at last.

“Yes.” Harry forced his eyes open. “I’m just so tired, Draco. I can’t do this for much longer. And even though I do think it’s self-indulgent, in some ways, it would be better to retreat and heal myself than break down when the Wizengamot questions me, or when one more person asks me why I didn’t save his friend or her sister. I want some joy in my life again. And I don’t think I could really have let you go to the Sanctuary alone.” Harry swallowed. “I promise. Three days. I promise. I give you my word by bone and blood and breath that I’ll go with you then.”

Draco couldn’t find words to explain what that meant to him. So he kissed Harry instead, the fiercest kiss they’d shared yet, flavored with teeth and tongues and blood. Harry kissed back, forcing some of his grief and rage out, Draco thought. When that was done, Harry hugged Draco hard enough to make his head throb.

“Thank you again,” Harry said, “for loving me and having faith in me.”

Draco closed his eyes, and let the warmth soak in.

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Harry sat down at his desk in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom—it was easier to find space to be alone, now that most of the students had gone home and Acies, of course, was gone as well—and placed a piece of blank parchment in front of himself. It was important that his handwriting in his letter to Loki not be shaky, even if only from the wobbling of a book on his knee.

Now that he had made the decision to go with Draco to the Sanctuary, he had a very clear picture of what he needed to accomplish in the next few days. That meant that the letter he was writing now had to be one that would convince Loki to leave matters alone while Harry was away from the wizarding world and unable to receive owls quickly. Whatever else it did was secondary.

Harry chose bluntness. Subtlety and wit and attempts to make Loki see other perspectives sure as hell didn’t seem to work.

June 25th, 1996

Dear Loki:

I am going into hiding this summer, to train in the unexpectedly Voldemort-free time that this battle has produced. That means that I won’t be in the wizarding world. You may think this means that you will be able to bite whomever you like, and I will not object. Conversely, you may think the Ministry has the freedom to do whatever it likes to werewolves.

That is not true. I do object, and when I return, if either of those things has happened, I will bring the force of all my magic down on the offender. My oath to help werewolves says nothing about helping them bite others who have not chosen to be werewolves and violate their free will; in fact, my task as vates says that I cannot encourage such things unless I want to
risk becoming no more than a Lord. There are other werewolves besides your pack, Loki, and I shall throw my strength behind theirs, so that they will achieve what they want and not what you want. And if the Ministry threatens werewolves, I will help them—but, once again, I will not do it merely to help your pack, but to help all your kind.

You have claimed to want and need my influence in the political arena. I am removing it for the summer. When I do bring it back, do you really wish to be responsible for my opposing or ignoring you? Your best choice, it seems to me, is to refrain from encouraging the Ministry to hunt you without my protection. Reclaim a moral position and the defensive ground. If you do not, if you are hunted not because you are werewolves and the Wizengamot is unfairly prejudiced against you but because you have bitten others, then you will have a second enemy when I come back.

Harry.

Harry would send that with Hedwig, so that Loki would understand he was serious about this. Then he turned to his second letter. This one, luckily, could be written in a tone of more reconciliation and kindness than the first one had been.

June 25th, 1996

Dear Minister Scrimgeour:

I would like to meet with you within the next three days, assuming that you have the time and freedom to do so. If not, then I will send you a final letter when the three days are over, explaining my position and what I intend to do this summer.

Yours sincerely,

Harry.

That would go with one of the school owls. Harry looked at the next dozen sheets of parchment that waited, and drew in a harsh breath. He had asked McGonagall for the names of the parents whose children he had killed. She had argued with him, telling him that it would serve no purpose for him to write to them, especially Aurora and Philip, and only strain him more. She had relented and given him the names only when Harry assured her that he intended to go to the Sanctuary for the summer.

He didn’t want to write the letter, but he had to. They deserved to know all the details of the story, not mere rumors and false information. And they deserved to decide what they were going to do about it. Harry still did not want to be brought to trial, and when he thought about it too closely, there was the impulse to scream and lash out with his magic against anyone who would take him anywhere against his will, but he could not make their decisions for them.

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Addlington...

He began the first letter, not letting his hand tremble, once again. He would convey as much sympathy as he could through the paper, but shaky handwriting would only give a false impression, either weakness or that he was striving to show that he grieved as much as they did, and of course he never could.

“Harry.”

Harry turned around, blinking. Somehow, he had thought that Millicent and her father had left yesterday, but then, he had thought many things in his whirlwind haze of things to do after Draco had convinced him. He’d been on his way to McGonagall’s office for something he dreaded more than writing those letters, though, so he slowed and nodded, grateful for the distraction.

“I suppose you’ve come to say farewell?” he asked, putting out his hand to Adalrico. The older man clasped it tightly, studying Harry’s eyes as if he were struggling to see to the bottom of them.

“Of course not,” said Millicent, looking vaguely surprised. “Not yet. We want to know what’s going to happen to Belville, since he did betray the alliance we’re a part of. And Zabini, Findarvin, and Tipperary, of course,” she finished, with a slight sniff. “I know that the danger was to you, primarily, Harry, and of course two of them won’t be returning next year anyway, but Blaise is a different matter. Is he going to remain in Slytherin House, a danger to us all?”

Harry swore, but only inside his head. He had thought Blaise stood a chance of getting off easy, since Draco was still in no condition to come out of the hospital wing and administer the “justice” he’d talked about the night before the battle. Snape was Head of Slytherin, and since Blaise was also one of his House, Harry hoped that sympathy might play opposite Snape’s concern for him. Looking at Millicent’s uncompromising eyes and her father’s stern face, however, Harry had the feeling that that wouldn’t be happening.

“I’m not sure yet,” was what he said, and turned towards McGonagall’s office. Millicent fell into step beside him. Adalrico limped behind, with that gait he’d perfected which didn’t deprive him of any dignity. Harry walked with his head up, never
glancing sideways. He could feel Millicent’s gaze growing sharper and sharper all the while.

“You really don’t want anything to happen to him, do you?” she asked at last, in a soft, amazed tone. “Even after he nearly delivered you up to the Dark Lord and ended the war right then and there?”

“He snapped,” Harry said. “He was frightened. We all were. And he didn’t complete the crime. Surely attempted kidnapping matters less than kidnapping that actually happens?”

He saw Millicent turn from the corner of his eye so that she looked at her father. Harry didn’t glance back to see what Adalrico’s eyes and face might have been saying or not saying. His focus was forward.

Then Millicent’s hand clamped on his arm with a pressure he remembered, and knew not to resist. It was the kind she used when he wasn’t eating, or wasn’t sleeping, or otherwise doing something stupid. Reluctantly, Harry turned to meet her eyes.

“He betrayed us as well,” Millicent insisted. “All of them did—well, except the Death Eaters, but the Headmistress did say they’ll likely be turned over to the Ministry anyway, since they didn’t know much about the Dark Lord’s plans. Belville and the other students—Harry, we need justice.”

Harry inclined his head in a quick, shallow nod. “I’m trying to make sure there is justice,” he said. “And not vengeance.”

“You are too focused on that,” said Millicent, voice a soft growl. “In the name of justice, you would let people escape without punishment for what they’d done. You would have done it for your parents, and you’re going to do it here, unless someone else keeps you on track.”

“I would rather let a hundred criminals go free than see one innocent person suffer,” said Harry quietly.

“Even if those criminals cause suffering elsewhere?” Millicent pinched his arm, hard enough to make him wince. “Besides, Harry, have you considered that there’s something that applies to Belville and Blaise but not to the others? Belville was actually part of the alliance, and Blaise knows most of our secrets, both from his mother and from sharing a room with you and Draco. To protect ourselves, we can’t just turn them over to the Ministry. Even explaining their crimes would give our enemies weapons to use against us.”

“I’d considered that, yes,” said Harry. That was what was really making his guts churn. Justice wouldn’t be simple for either Belville or Blaise. It had to be kept private, and his allies were expecting him to handle it.

Millicent said, “I would be more than happy to punish them for you, Harry. And so would my father. And so would Hawthorn—”

“I know,” Harry interrupted her. “But I have to do it myself. I can’t ask any of you to take on a task I’m not willing to perform.” He pulled his arm free of her grasp and walked towards the gargoyle again. “Now come on. I don’t want to keep the Headmistress and our guests waiting.”

He tried to brace himself as he walked, for what he suspected his allies would ask of him. Now that Millicent and her father were there—and he knew that McGonagall had asked Arabella Zabini in—Harry suspected Hawthorn would be, as well. Worse, he saw, when they rode the moving staircase up to the office. Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy were there.

To Lucius, things were very simple.

One took vengeance out of love. So he had gone, during the thirteen days when Draco was trapped in Hogwarts and he and Narcissa could only communicate with him thanks to Rosier-Henlin’s spell, to the small house in Finland that sheltered the family of the Death Eater who’d hurt his wife. He’d exacted his own vengeance there. The walls had been blue when he began. They were purple when he was done.

One covered one’s own tracks out of caution. So Fiona Mallory was enchanted into her own mind and left there, and wouldn’t be able to come out of the trance again unless Lucius decided to release her.

And one made sure that the people connected to one’s family, whether or not one loved them, were protected. That made for punishment. Lucius did not care what name he had to give this, vengeance or justice. Harry cared too much about words. What mattered was that Belville and young Zabini had to understand the reason it was unacceptable to betray or harm Harry. He had accepted joining to the Malfoy family. He was theirs. Draco loved him.

Lucius knew he might not be able to arrange their deaths, but he was going to arrange their suffering.

He watched Harry as the young man stepped through the door of the Headmistress’s office, and halted, staring at him. A pity he was going to the Sanctuary for the summer, Lucius thought. He would have preferred to have the boys come to the
McGonagall shook her head. “Both William and Aidan are seventh-years, Harry, and seventeen,” she said quietly. “Their here to see to their sons?”

“They were low-rankers and knew almost nothing of Voldemort’s plans. They will be turned over to the Ministry for prosecution.”

“Mr. Malfoy,” said Harry a moment later, and his eyes shifted to Narcissa, sitting in the chair beside Lucius. “Mrs. Malfoy.”

“I told you to call me Narcissa, Harry,” Narcissa said, rising to her feet and walking over to Harry. She still moved stiffly, a result of the pain curse she’d taken in the back during the battle. Lucius knew the one who had cast it was dead, but watching her made his hand want his wand anyway. She stooped, put her hands on Harry’s shoulders, and kissed him. She then whispered something into his ear that Lucius couldn’t hear, but he had no doubt what it was. Narcissa had been ecstatically happy when Draco told them last night that he’d convinced Harry to go to the Sanctuary.

“Narcissa, then,” said Harry, with a faint smile at her. He darted another glance at Lucius, but didn’t ask what they were doing there, to Lucius’s infinite relief. He must know that would have been stupid, and Lucius could not enjoy the thought of someone stupid being joined to his family. “Is anyone else arriving?” he asked the Headmistress.

McGonagall sat behind her desk, of course, prim and confident and in control. Lucius studied her, making sure his irritation was veiled. It was better than having Dumbledore as the head of the school—at least she was not a Legilimens and a Lord-level wizard—but she was still a Gryffindor, and she was still doing things that Lucius did not agree with. She had utterly refused to punish Blaise Zabini without his mother present, for example. Lucius saw the way her eyes softened as they rested on Harry, however, and suspected he might have found the fastest way to manipulate her.

“Professor Snape, of course,” said McGonagall. “And Arabella Zabini.” She hesitated for a long moment, then added, “Both Owen Rosier-Henlin and Hawthorn Parkinson waived their rights to be here. I think they needed more time to grieve.”

Harry nodded his understanding. “We’ve tried to find Mr. Rhangnara, but he’s apparently in some distant part of the library, Rowena says. I think she approves of him. Miss Pemberley and Miss Apollonis have gone flying. And I did not think it would be a good idea for Mrs. Bulstrode to be here, given her temper.”

Harry inclined his head. “I spoke to her about that already. She understood my reasoning.” He turned abruptly, staring at the office door, and a moment later, it opened. Lucius nodded. Nothing wrong with his reflexes. But he needs them relaxed and blended with the rest of his life, so that he acts like that every day, and not only in the aftermath of battle. He will make a fine partner for Draco if he can but learn control. And when to use power.

Severus came in first, of course, his gaze traveling rapidly around the room to catalogue threats to Harry. Lucius exchanged nods with him, and hid his own amazement at this deep transformation in the man he had always known as one of the most vicious and violent of the Death Eaters. That Severus could have chosen a son—much less, the blood son of his worst enemy at school—was remarkable in and of itself. That he would consent to speak his love for that son aloud, even during a joining ritual that required such language of its participants, was the real sign of the change, however.

It interested Lucius. He could not help wondering if it made Severus weaker, particularly as the only vengeance he had taken for his son so far was through the legal channels of the Ministry. He would have to test Severus a time or two, and if he was weaker, then Lucius knew what to do.

Behind him came Arabella Zabini. She had wound all the gold and silver bells she possessed in her hair, it seemed, far more than were necessary to proclaim her skill as a Songstress. She walked with her head up, her beautiful face set in faint, smiling lines. She fully intended to stand against them all and walk out of here with her son intact, Lucius suspected. He felt a faint thrill of admiration at her courage and nerve, and contempt for her blindness.

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“Please have a seat, Mrs. Zabini, Professor Snape,” said McGonagall, with a cordial nod. Her voice did not even cool on the woman’s name. Lucius had to respect that. He watched the expression on Arabella’s face as she sat down in the chair nearest the door and studied Harry. He could not make out all the disparate parts of it, but fear and anger were certainly there.

“The captured Death Eaters have been questioned under Veritaserum,” the Headmistress began, without preamble. “They were low-rankers and knew almost nothing of Voldemort’s plans. They will be turned over to the Ministry for prosecution.”

Her hands folded over each other. “Unfortunately, that leaves us with four people whose cases are not so easy to settle. One, Mortimer Belville, wrote two letters to Voldemort under the name of the Serpent, destroyed the Hogwarts Floo connections, and was trying to poison or rot the food in the kitchens when Harry captured him. The other three are students, Blaise Zabini, William Findarin, and Aidan Tipperary, who fed Harry, and other members of their House, the Draught of Living Death and tried to take Harry to Voldemort during the siege.”

“Where are their parents?” Harry asked abruptly. “The Findarin family and the Tipperary family, I mean? Shouldn’t they be here to see to their sons?”

McGonagall shook her head. “Both William and Aidan are seventh-years, Harry, and seventeen,” she said quietly. “Their
parents cannot defend them from deserved punishment. As well, they were not part of our alliance, and I am afraid of what might be revealed in front of them. And Aidan’s family has already disowned him.”

Lucius made a mental note to send a congratulatory owl to the Tipperary family. It would be anonymous. No need to let them know who exactly approved of their actions, heroic and in defense of their family.

Harry took a deep swallow of air, then nodded and finally sat down, in a chair that faced Narcissa’s and was beside Snape’s. “I understand,” he murmured. “I—who are you going to bring out first, Madam?”

“Belville,” said McGonagall simply, and rose and went to a door in the far corner of the office, where, Lucius supposed, she had kept the prisoners.

He studied Arabella Zabini while they waited. The faint traces of deeper emotions had vanished from her face again, and she looked as calm and confident as a queen waiting on her favorite courtier to bring her the heart of her enemy. Her bells gleamed and softly rang as she tilted her head this way and that.

McGonagall came back with Mortimer Belville in tow. Lucius sneered at the man from the corner of his mouth. He had always despised the Belvilles, a once-poor pureblood family that had achieved prominence again only by litigation and “reclaiming” of monies they were supposedly owed for illegal use of their land. That they had taken some of those Galleons from the Malfoy vaults was only a side reason to hate them. The main one was their standards of honor, or rather, lack of them.

When McGonagall released Belville from the Body-Bind, the man put his feet on the floor in a position that didn’t allow him to stumble and stared at all of them with narrowed eyes and slightly tilted head. He had obviously prepared for this, Lucius thought, and might even have arguments that he thought would release him from punishment. He noted with infinite satisfaction that Belville’s confident look faltered when his eyes passed over Lucius’s face.

“I want to know why,” said Adalrico, in a voice Lucius remembered from the day he had perfected the Black Plague spores. “None of the rest of us have had a chance to hear your confession yet, under Veritaserum or not.”

Belville gave an arrogant shrug, his attention fastened on Harry now. “I wanted respect, notice. I wavered for a long time, but then I thought I was more likely to find that notice and attention in the service of the Dark Lord than in Harry’s service. Obviously, I was wrong.” He turned his palms up. “But can you punish me? I was only following the best pureblood traditions. When in doubt, choose the winning side.”

“You endangered the rest of the children in the school,” said Harry, voice without inflection, and so quiet that Lucius was glad he had come. The boy was going to let Belville out without so much as eating a scrap of his magic, he thought. It would be up to someone else to inflict proper punishment. “You destroyed the Floo connections. You went beyond simply offering some service to Voldemort in return for power. You suspected that he would attack earlier than Midsummer, didn’t you? That’s why you came so early.”

Belville laughed easily. “Of course I suspected it. I can show you the very letter from Indigena Yaxley that suggested I’d want to join you as soon as possible.” He cocked his head and smiled. “But you’ve already seen it, Harry. You know all about me. This is only for the benefit of those who don’t.”

“Coward,” Lucius thought. Sneaking traitor. He does not have the strength to stand up for his ideals. He noticed the way that Belville looked towards his left arm, and Adalrico’s, and Severus’s, more than once. He thinks he will be forgiven because others of us have been. I wonder if he realizes that recent crimes committed against a private alliance are far different than crimes from fourteen years ago for which we’ve been publicly tried and found not guilty?

“I could forgive you,” said Harry, voice still just as quiet, “if all you had done was put me in danger—tried to lead me into a duel with Voldemort, for example.” Lucius frowned, displeased. That sounded much like Harry was going to try and forgive Zabini, Findarin, and Tipperary for what they had done. But that was not possible. Lucius would not let it happen. “But you suspected the early attack, and did not warn me. You were indirectly responsible for the deaths of over ninety of the students. Then you made sure that those students still alive could not flee the school in the way that would have been safest for them, with the wards against Apparition and Portkeys necessary to protect them from the Death Eaters. You would have poisoned or rotted our food and made the siege harder.”

A pressure was growing in the room. Lucius felt it as a band of pain tightening around his temples. He noticed Severus sitting stiffly in his chair, and Adalrico and his heir sniffing discreetly, as if they caught the scent of a thunderstorm.

Harry’s magic is building, Lucius realized, staring again at the boy, whose face was now calm and blank, reflecting nothing. He is much angrier than he shows.

Harry took a deep breath, and, with his next words, turned a corner in the path that Lucius had not thought he would turn.
“And I have been told,” said Harry, voice thick and slow as treacle with reluctance, “that by trying to doom me, you tried to doom the war. If I am the only one who can defeat Voldemort, then I could not have gone down to him or surrendered my life, no matter what he did to compel me to it.” He lifted his eyes, and the masks fell. Lucius could see his rage now, deep and cold as an ocean at the bottom of a cliff. “But he did not give up trying to compel me. And because of that, you are indirectly responsible for a decision that I would rather not have made, a decision that has marked my soul and caused me to mercy kill children rather than leave them to Voldemort’s sadism.”

The world inside Lucius’s head changed very quickly then. He had heard the story of what Harry had done, from Draco, and been sure it was confused somehow. Harry did not have the necessary hardness to choose death over life, a smaller sacrifice over a larger one, in circumstances like that.

Perhaps the Harry he had known did not. But the young man in front of him, who looked as though he had never cried, did. Lucius watched him carefully, and revised some assumptions about what might happen, what could happen, what would happen, with Harry as alliance leader and Draco’s joined partner.

“I hope,” Harry said softly, “that you like what you had a part in creating, Belville. I am inclined to give you a lesser form of the punishment that I gave Voldemort, who was most directly responsible. I am going to drain your magic.” He flicked a glance around the room, whip-quick, dagger-sharp. “If my allies agree that this is a fitting punishment, of course.”

Adalric was grinning, looking younger than Lucius had seen him since he’d taken the Fisher King Curse. “No objections from the Bulstrodes,” he managed to say through the grin.

Severus simply shook his head. Lucius could see the ferocity in his eyes, though, and changed another of his assumptions.

Love appeared to have made Severus stronger, not weaker.

Well, it has done the same thing for Harry, so I cannot be too surprised.

Arabella said nothing; she was wiser than to try. Narcissa simply gave Harry a warm smile, as if he had received a dozen OWL’s.

When Harry looked at him, Lucius chose a careful mixture of pride and cold approval, and let it through into his face. Harry inclined his head in an equally careful nod, and then turned to the Headmistress.

McGonagall smiled like a lioness crouching over a kill. “He hurt my children,” she said. Startled, Lucius thought he heard several other voices speaking with her own, at least two female and one male. “He deserves whatever you do to him, Harry, and this will hurt more than death.”

Harry nodded, and turned to Belville. It was only then, Lucius realized, that dear, dear Mortimer really believed he was about to become a Squib.

He was laughing desperately, backing up a step as if that would somehow lessen Harry’s determination. “Let’s think,” he said. “Let us think here. Let us be rational. I didn’t do much that hurt you in the end, Harry, did I? I was indirectly responsible for your decision and endangering the safety of your schoolmates. You said so. There’s no need to be so hasty. And I know that you don’t like draining people of their magic. You said so. You—”

Lucius felt the indefinable pull as Harry called upon his absorbere gift. The magic went draining from Belville like a wind, swallowed by Harry’s power. Harry didn’t move or make a sound the whole time. He simply watched Belville, until the end, when Mortimer opened his mouth and crumpled to the floor with a sound like a dying cat.

Then Harry turned away, a bit too swiftly, and Lucius caught a glimpse of revulsion on his face.

He still needs to be taught, then. Molded. Lucius’s own breathing was just returning to normal after the sight of a Dark pureblood—minor and annoying though the Belvilles were—becoming a Squib in front of him. He can still feel revulsion, and he should not. That gift is pure power, and nothing more than that. One does not feel revolted when one exercises power.

Harry did look back at Belville after a moment, and then narrowed his eyes. Lucius felt a brief flash of magic. He must have done something nonverbal, because the next moment, the huddled man looked up with wide eyes.

“What have you done to me?” he whispered.

Harry shook his head. “Put a Babbling Curse on you, tied to the secrets of the alliance. If you try to betray anything about us to someone who doesn’t already know, then you’ll simply spout nonsense, spoken or written. I won’t Obliviate you; that would invalidate the point of draining your magic. And one set of Unbreakable Vows was enough. Good luck getting even Veritaserum to break through that curse, Belville.” He smiled, and if he was still disgusted, he hid it very well. “Farewell, Mortimer. You can return to your home alone, I’m sure. After all, even Muggles and Squibs can use Floo powder.”
“You don’t—you don’t understand,” said Belville, standing. “I only chose the side I thought would win. It has nothing to do with personal enmity!” He was shouting now, the cords in his neck standing out. “I’ve only followed the best traditions of purebloods. It wasn’t personal.”

“And that only make you more worthy of contempt.” Harry’s voice was bored. “Good-bye, Mortimer.”

In the end, Belville chose the wiser part of valor, walked over to McGonagall’s fireplace, and cast the Floo powder in. Lucius didn’t watch him. His eyes were on Harry instead.

*It will be interesting to watch how he handles Zabini, Findarin, and Tipperary. He may not need that much help after all.*

Harry felt exhaustion tugging at him as Belville vanished. It wasn’t physical exhaustion, or magical; with the magic he’d just swallowed humming around his body in contentment, he felt able to learn the Animagus transformation on the instant, if he wanted to. It was mental and moral exhaustion. He hadn’t enjoyed that. He’d come so far from enjoying it that he wanted to go back to his room and put his head under the pillow rather than do it again.

Or go to the hospital wing and curl up with Draco. That would be even better.

But he had three days, and three days only—more like two and a half, now—to make sure that everyone else thought him strong enough not to do stupid things during the summer. So he kept the iron mask on as McGonagall floated Blaise, Findarin, and Tipperary out of the room next to her office.

Blaise’s face had frozen into a look of shock and dismay and horror. Harry flinched a bit as he looked at him, and then hoped no one had seen the flinch. It did hurt to think one of his own Housemates would betray him, but he understood all the reasons, all the motivations. Blaise had been frightened, and apparently there had been comments from his mother that made him think Harry might lose. Blaise was a Slytherin, a pureblood, and not above using Dark Arts. It was more likely Voldemort might spare his life if Blaise turned Harry over to him than almost anyone else.

Harry had spoken with Arabella Zabini by letter, and she had stated that she had never encouraged her son to betray him. Of course, she had also flatly refused to believe Blaise had done this in the first place. Harry kept his eyes on her as McGonagall released all three boys from the Body-Bind.

Sure enough, Arabella spoke first, her bells ringing as she tilted her head. “Blaise,” she whispered. “Why?”

“You said that you missed me!” Blaise cried. His voice was hoarse from lack of water; the version of the Body-Bind McGonagall had used preserved its victims in utter stillness, but did nothing to remedy a throat already dry when the spell began. “You said that you thought Voldemort was strong! What was I supposed to think?”

“That I wanted you to stay safe,” said Arabella. “That was always the only content of what I said to you, Blaise, every time we used the communication spell. I certainly did not intend for you to do something like this.” The distaste in her voice was plain.

“But I was frightened,” Blaise whispered, dipping his head. “That was all.”

“A rather elaborate plan for someone who is frightened,” Snape drawled. Harry looked at him warily. McGonagall hadn’t allowed Snape to sit in on the meeting with Aurora and Philip yesterday because, as she had told Harry bluntly, she was afraid Snape would kill them. Now, at least, his guardian was keeping his hand from his wand. “You stole ingredients for the Draught of Living Death from my Potions stores. You used Dark Arts spells to cover your tracks. You used glamours to disguise the fact that it was Harry, and not merely a bundle of blankets, you carried. How did you plan to get through the wards?”

“I know a few spells to chew holes in wards, sir,” said one of the older boys. Harry thought it was Tipperary. His blue eyes were wide and terrified. “I would have repaired them, though! I promise! I didn’t want anything to happen to other people in Slytherin.”

“And you did not think that the Dark Lord might choose that moment to strike?” Snape’s voice grew lower. “That to get Harry through the wards, you would expose others to danger?”

“I—I—I—“ Tipperary tried to find more words, and then seemed to give it up as a bad job. He lowered his eyes to the floor and shook his head.

The other one, Findarin, spoke up more heartily. “We did think the Dark Lord would let us live, sir,” he told Snape. “We’re all purebloods, and we can all use Dark magic.”

“Were you willing to take the Mark?” Snape asked.
Findarin’s swallow was loud in the silence. Harry wondered what his answer would be.

“I was,” he whispered at last.

Snape sneered. “I see that I have managed to teach you nothing in the seven years that you have been a student in my House, Mr. Findarin,” he said, mouth curling. “You were willing to be tortured, to crouch at the feet of a madman, merely to secure a little peace that would be ripped away from you the moment he decided he was tired of you. And did you know that the Dark Lord only accepts those who come to him willingly, not to save their own hides? Strange. In his own way, the Dark Lord is honorable.” Snape’s mouth twisted further, and Harry thought his eyes no longer saw Findarin, Tipperary, or Blaise, but someone else, whose mistake had been much more permanent. “He despises traitors.”

“We—weren’t thinking,” said Findarin, gulping, and Harry was relieved to see that that sound brought Snape’s eyes back from wherever they were looking.

“I would not dignify what occupied your head in that moment with even the name of not thinking, Mr. Findarin,” he snapped.

Harry narrowed his eyes. Snape really does need the Sanctuary just as much as Draco and I do. I wonder what he thinks he’ll do to avoid the Seers peering at his soul? Wear a glamour all the time? I don’t think there’s one strong enough to fool them.

“We really didn’t think,” Blaise spoke up then. Harry thought he was seeing this particular turn of his conversation as his best chance to get out of this trap. “We didn’t think. We were frightened. We acted like children. We would probably have got Harry to the doors of the entrance hall, and then not been able to open the wards and had to go back.” He laughed, a touch of desperation lingering behind the sound. Harry could see his hands opening and closing, though he had thought he had them hidden behind his back from everyone but his mother; it was obvious from the way his shoulders were moving. “I’m sorry for it. Can we go home now?”

“Why, Blaise?” Harry asked quietly. “Why you? Why were you the one to break?”

Blaise trembled for a moment, and then turned violently on him. Harry studied him in silence in the moment before he began to speak. Blaise’s face was almost gray, as if the fear lingered for him even now that Voldemort had been wounded and forced to withdraw.

“But I never asked to share a House with the Boy-Who-Lived!” Blaise spat. “It was all right when you were just a powerful wizard, Harry, and when you had the Dark Lord’s enmity for that, and Dumbledore’s. And then your brother revealed you were actually the Boy-Who-Lived. You’re the Dark Lord’s main target. He’s not ever going to stop coming for you, because he hates you. And anyone who stands beside you is going to suffer the same fate as your brother’s friends would have, if he were the real Boy-Who-Lived.” He wrapped his arms around himself. “I didn’t ask for that,” he whispered. “I didn’t want to be in the same House as you, the same room as you. I was going to be seen as your friend whether I was or not. And then my mother joined you because the Dark Lord angered her—not because she really approved of you or your cause, just because he stole her books—and I realized that I didn’t have a choice. But at least I was still free to hold some distance from you in school. Slytherins act for themselves and their own interests.

“And then you were the Boy-Who-Lived.” Blaise’s breath hitched, and he closed his eyes. “He wasn’t going to care who we were, what we wanted, unless I could prove to him once and for all that I really didn’t hold any loyalty to you by giving you up. I just—I didn’t want to take the Mark. I didn’t want to be hurt. I just wanted to go on living, and I wouldn’t be able to do that if you were right there. I wanted to go to France. I told my mother that.” He opened his eyes and gave Arabella a pleading, expectant look.

Harry didn’t follow his glance. He just kept on looking at Blaise, and wondered if he had ever known him at all. 

I think I did, he thought. But the good things in him were crushed by his fear. Just like Lily, come to that. Just like James. Just like Dumbledore, and Sirius.

Harry tasted bitterness for a moment. He hated crushed, wasted, wrecked lives, and he seemed to be surrounded by them.

He turned to Arabella then. She was sitting very straight, her hands clasped together.

“I understand if you no longer want me as part of your alliance,” she told Harry. “But I do not think my son should be punished with death or Squib-hood. He did a stupid thing, a very stupid thing that I never encouraged him in, and he is a child, still.” She gave Blaise a look that made him drop his eyes. “But he was plunged into the middle of a war against the Dark Lord that he never chose or asked for, and he did have good reason to think the Dark Lord would target him above others. I think he should be allowed to go to France, the way he wanted.” She stared at Harry.
“Would you go with him?” Harry asked her.

Arabella nodded. “I will not put him in Beauxbatons,” she said. “It is obvious he is unsuited for a school environment.”

Blaise flinched. Arabella ignored him. “I would arrange to hire a private tutor, and play some part in his teaching myself.”

“How can I be sure that you would not tell anyone about the secrets you have learned as part of the alliance?” Harry asked her.

Arabella didn’t bat an eyelash. “Put the Babbling Curse on us as well. Bind us with an Unbreakable Vow. Make us swear on a dragon’s bone under Veritaserum. The method you use to make sure of our faith does not matter to me. What matters to me is that my son’s behavior has proven to me that he is conclusively still a child, when I wished to have an adult heir.”

Blaise’s flinch went bone-deep this time, and still Arabella ignored him. “I must spend some time seeing to my family, vates. When, if ever, I think him fit to play a part in adult activities, then we will come and rejoin your alliance.”

Harry studied her for a long time. He had not hoped for a solution like this. He had thought Blaise’s mother would insist on his returning to Hogwarts next year and even staying in the same room as Draco and Harry, and Harry did not think he could have allowed that; he would never have felt safe again.

But this…

“I’ll choose the Babbling Curse,” he said. “It’s the least restrictive.”

Arabella slowly inclined her head. Only the extreme stiffness in her neck as she moved revealed how relieved she was, Harry thought. “Thank you, vates.”

Someone behind him made a noise of protest. Harry turned and followed it straight to Millicent. “He’ll be out of the school,” he told her. “He won’t endanger you again. He won’t be able to endanger us indirectly, either. It’s for the best, Millicent. He’s still a child.”

Millicent understood that. Perhaps she understood better than he did, Harry thought, since she was also a Dark pureblood heir, and one expected to act like an adult from a very young age. The disgrace would be worse for Blaise than many other punishments. “Very well,” she muttered.

“And if I say that I find this unacceptable?” That was Lucius, his voice light as frost. “If I say that I think someone who tried to kill the joined partner of a Malfoy heir deserves a worse punishment?”

Harry turned around and gave Lucius a smile as light as his voice. “I would say that you may wish to amend your wording, sir,” he said, “lest your own punishment land a bit too close to home.”

Lucius’s face paled, though only for a moment. He was remembering Tom Riddle’s diary, Harry knew, and what part he had played in hurting and weakening the joined partner of a Malfoy heir for most of a year. Satisfied that he got the point, Harry looked again around the circle, searching for other objections.

There were none. Harry nodded to Arabella. “Then you may go to France, Mrs. Zabini.” He cast the Babbling Curse on both her and Blaise, and anchored it firmly to the notion of speaking about the alliance to anyone outside it. “I hope that you’ll return with an adult heir.”

“So do I,” said Arabella. She rose and held out her hand, and Blaise at once scurried over to take her wrist. “Come, Blaise.”

“I hope you recover your courage,” Harry told him. Blaise kept his head down and didn’t look at him. Harry could see a faint tremble racing up his spine.

When the door had shut behind the Zabinis, Harry faced Findarin and Tipperary again. “You aren’t my friends. But I can’t shield you from what the law says should happen to you in a case like this, either, because you aren’t underage.”

“Indeed,” said McGonagall. “They will be recorded as expelled from Hogwarts, not merely leaving, and their wands will be broken.”

Findarin’s face went pale, and Tipperary looked as if he would have liked to cry. Instead, he just nodded.

And, like that, it was done. Harry was glad. He wanted to go back to the hospital wing, and not only to see how Draco was doing.

First, of course, he had to wait and watch as their wands were broken. Both boys screamed when that happened. Harry winced, but kept his eyes straight ahead, knowing Lucius and Adalrico were both watching him.

When that was done, then finally, finally, he could go. He got to the door before Snape caught up with him and put a hand
on his shoulder.
“A moment, Harry,” he said. “I brewed Draco’s latest potion before I came here. I will go with you.”

So then he had to wait while Snape talked with McGonagall. Something about the Potions schedule for next year; Harry supposed that was only reasonable, since Snape would be gone most of the summer in the Sanctuary with them. Then they were on their way down the moving staircase. Harry pushed his face against the stone wall and let it scrape lightly on his cheeks to keep him awake, as well as hide his expression.

“Harry.”

Harry tensed. “Sir,” he acknowledged, without turning around.

“May I ask what finally decided you on going to the Sanctuary?” Snape’s voice was distant, respectful.

Harry sighed. “Because I can’t do this anymore,” he said. He turned around and folded his arms over his chest. “I want to think about other things than the fate of the world, and the fate of werewolves, and the fate of the Ministry and the laws. I—every time I’ve tried to retreat, before, the world’s always there, and it shoves itself in. And I’m not doing it good service like this, either, when every decision I make feels like it tears out a part of my soul. I’ll do it better by resting for a while in a place where the outside world’s not permitted to intrude.” He lifted his shoulders and felt his mouth curve into a smile not far from a sneer. “You’re always telling me to be a little selfish. I suppose I finally decided to listen.”

Snape’s hand closed over his shoulder, and he pulled Harry near him. Harry tensed himself to struggle, but the grasp didn’t demand anything of him, and a moment later, it began to move, gently stroking over his neck and hair.

Harry tried to make himself relax. But now that justice, if one wanted to call it that, was dispensed, the list of things he had to do had reappeared in his head again, circling his thoughts like moons around a planet.

With a groan, he realized that he wouldn’t be able to go and see Draco after all. He had to write to the MacFusty wizards, who owned the Hebridean Black sanctuary, and ask if they would watch out for Acies in her dragon form.

He tried to turn towards the dungeons when they came out of the moving staircase, and Snape’s hand restrained him. Harry glanced up at him and shook his head. “I’m sorry. Something I have to do.”

Snape said nothing. He just turned towards the hospital wing, tugging Harry along with him. It was not a hard clasp. Harry could have broken out of it if he truly wanted to.

He didn’t truly want to.

He trailed behind Snape, and tried to tell himself that going to see Draco wasn’t self-indulgent. After all, Draco needed Snape’s potion, and he needed Harry and Snape to check his mind again and make sure the damage was healing properly.

Draco was watching the doorway when they came in. His face lit with a wide smile the moment he saw Harry, and Harry told himself again it wasn’t what he’d come to the hospital wing for.

But some of his weariness did leave him at the sight.

Harry blinked his eyes open, muzzily. His sight remained blurry until he could retrieve his glasses, which had been lying on a low table not far from him.

He remembered sitting in a chair and talking to Draco. Someone must have moved him to this hospital bed when he fell asleep. From the look of the sky through the windows, it was deep night, and that had been hours ago.

Harry heard a soft flutter of wings and a hoot, and he reached up to find a tiny barn owl struggling to land on his shoulder. He shifted around so she could, then retrieved the letter she carried. It bore his name, both his first and the last name he’d shed, in unfamiliar handwriting.

He looked at the signature first when he opened it. It was from the Addlingtonons, one of the families of the children he’d killed.

Then he looked at the top of the letter, and found that it contained nothing but insults, beginning with “you murderer.”

Harry took a deep breath. He should read through it and witness what they said about him, in their anger and justified grief. Of course he should.

Instead, he crumpled up the letter, dropped the ball beside the bed—Snape or Draco could read it over later, if they wanted to, to insure there was nothing important there—and shook his head at the owl. “No reply,” he muttered.
The owl stared at him for a long moment before she took wing again. Harry leaned back against the pillow and closed his eyes.

He was so tired. He hurt already.

He owed other people things. But there was no reason to torture himself. To do that would be to become the martyr Snape had warned him against becoming.

Maybe that’s the point where people take advantage of me, and I’ve found it at last, Harry thought hazily, as his mind clouded over again, and he fell asleep with his glasses on.

Interlude: The Liberator’s First Letter

June 25th, 1996

Dear Minister Scrimgeour:

I hope you will excuse me writing to you like this, under a false name—almost a title, in fact—and without offering a way for you to owl me back. However, I fear for my life if my family finds out I’m writing you. My fear is no longer enough to hold me silent, but I cannot risk your owl.

My family has strong connections to the Order of the Phoenix, which I understand you’re still trying to track down. I know only a few names myself, but I can suggest you look at:

-Auror Hector Dalyrimple.

-Madam Malkin, who runs the robe shop of the same name in Diagon Alley.

-The reporter Gina de Rousseau, at the Daily Prophet.

Not all are deep in Order politics. Madam Malkin, I think, only permits her shop to be used as a gathering place for Order contacts. But all are bound in some way to the evolving web that once used Albus Dumbledore as its anchor and now uses another—a more formidable enemy, because his reputation is not widely known.

Tell me, Minister, have you ever heard of Falco Parkinson?

But you cannot owl me, and I cannot ask you to trust me at all until you have learned whether this information is good. Therefore, I will close this letter for now.

Please do not make an attempt to find out who I am. My father wants little to do with the wizarding world, and my mother, though she is more tolerant than my father, lets him have control over my life. I have reached the age of twenty without ever having left the house more than about once a month.

It is not only my own freedom I am fighting for, Minister, but that is a part of it.

The Liberator.

Chapter Ninety-Seven: The Third Greatest Is Loyalty

Rufus drummed his fingers on the desk and stared at the two letters that had come yesterday. To one, of course, he’d sent a reply at once, naming a time for today that he hoped would work. To the other, no reply was possible.

Who is the Liberator? Rufus picked up the parchment and smoothed it down again. He had used some of the more common charms to identify handwriting, and none of the Wizengamot members, nor someone else high-ranking in the Ministry, had written this. Rufus, of course, was not prepared to simply accept that the writer was what he sounded like—a young wizard living in a family with ties to the Order of the Phoenix—but he had assigned a few Aurors to look in on Madam Malkin’s when they had time, and Tonks to observe Gina de Rousseau. Tonks might struggle to keep her feet at times, but she was, for obvious reasons, the best Auror in the Department at passing unnoticed.

“Sir?”

Rufus looked up. That was Wilmot, who’d been on guard outside his door. “Yes, Edmund?” Rufus made his voice as calm and welcoming as possible. Wilmot had been jumpy lately. Of course, he did seem to have a strong reaction to the moves that Rufus had made with the Wolfsbane, and they were drawing closer to the full moon again. Whatever troubles the man had in his past involving werewolves, the mood in the Ministry would only accent, not help him overcome.

“The room you designated as the Apparition location for the vates just twinged its wards, sir.”
Rufus nodded. “Thank you, Edmund.”

Wilmot lingered another moment. “There are two people with him, sir.”

Rufus smiled. Soothing nervous Aurors was one of his areas of expertise. “I would be surprised if he had come alone,” he said. “You may go to escort them up yourself, Wilmot. The notice-me-not glamours the room placed on them should pass muster with most of the Department, though.” The room he’d described in his return letter to Harry, where he’d dropped the Ministry anti-Apparition wards in order to give him a chance to enter unnoticed, was a small interrogation room in the middle of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

“And you’re sure that you’ll be safe, sir?” Wilmot gazed at him, anxious lines curling around his blue eyes.

Rufus didn’t look at the far right corner of his office, but only because of practice. Percy Weasley sat there under a powerful glamour, ready to fire some of the spells he was picking up in Training if anyone unexpected came through the door. “I will, Wilmot. There’s Edges at one end of the hall and Grant at the other. I’ll survive.”

Wilmot jerked out a nod, and then turned and left. Rufus heard a snort from Percy’s corner. The young man didn’t seem to trust the older—but then, he was passing through the stage of the Training in which new Aurors were instructed not to trust anyone. Rufus had spent a month in absolute paranoia. Of course, his instruction had been Alastor. It was one of the many reasons Rufus mourned losing Moody to Harry. No one could put the alertness and constant vigilance in a young recruit’s head like Mad-Eye Moody.

“That will do, Weasley,” said Rufus. The glamour would fool the sight of almost anyone but Rufus himself, but it covered sounds less well. So Percy had to put up with folding his arms, leaning back, and sulking. Rufus returned his gaze to the door again.

He wondered what he would say to Harry. He wondered if the young man—he wouldn’t be a boy after the _Daily Prophet_’s reports on some of the happenings at Hogwarts—understood what he was walking into now, how the world had changed while he endured a siege and a battle and a mercy-killing.

A week ago, Rufus might have been too cautious to meet with Harry, even if he had been able to leave Hogwarts then. The world had exploded. The _Daily Prophet_ was equally full of reports that painted the students as innocent victims of a monstrous tyrant and ones that hinted that if Harry had been properly managed and the Boy-Who-Lived moved to a safe place while there was still time, then this wouldn’t have happened. The British wizarding world was a cauldron of hysteria and panic that could overflow at any moment. Rufus considered it a true miracle that no parents had gone to the battlefield and tried to break through the Dark Lord’s Death Eaters to rescue their children.

And then had come the battle that destroyed, so far as the press was concerned, every single Death Eater on the field. And Voldemort had vanished entirely from sight since then. And the majority of the children had come through alive, and some of them were all too eager to talk about how the great Harry had saved them all—or might have hurt them, but had instead saved them all.

So a new current had joined the brewing cauldron, and it was all moving so fast now that Rufus didn’t think his enemies knew what to do any more than he did. The main difference was that most of them weren’t used to surviving chaos in Slytherin House and in the Auror Office, and he was. He would balance better than they did, and react faster.

And it meant that there was an enormous explosion of goodwill building up for Harry, right alongside the enormous explosion of ill-will. Rufus intended to make him aware of that weapon, if he didn’t know it yet.

“Someone here, sir,” Percy said, a moment before the wards on Rufus’s door twinged to let him know that Wilmot was here with their guests.

Rufus gave Percy an approving glance, which caused Percy to blush and duck his head. Young Weasley’s special talent was outguessing wards, knowing a moment before they did what they were going to sense and say. His instructors had been excited enough by it that Rufus had had three separate reports about Percy’s skill on his desk before the end of the day on which he’d first displayed it.

“Come in,” Rufus called, before even the first knock could sound.

Wilmot opened the door and came first, of course, because he wouldn’t want one of the visitors shooting a curse at the Minister. Rufus wasn’t sure his caution wasn’t justified. The figure walking on one side of Harry, he saw as the wards on his office removed the notice-me-not glamour, was Severus Snape. On the other came Peter Pettigrew, the innocent man Rufus’s own Department had imprisoned in Azkaban, the result of Dumbledore’s concerted, and successful, attempt to fool them all.

Rufus was torn between the urge to apologize every time he saw Pettigrew and the urge to interrogate him again until he
admitted the Aurors had been right all along and that they hadn’t been blinded by the emotion of the night the Dark Lord fell. He stood to nod to both of them, and extend his hand to Harry.

“Harry,” he murmured.

Harry nodded to him and leaned forward to clasp his wrist. He was pale, the circles under his eyes so pronounced that Rufus didn’t think the glasses would distract anyone’s attention from them, but he looked balanced and calm—determined to make it through, really. His magic hummed around him with a strength that made Rufus felt clear-headed and eased just being in his presence. That was a weapon, too, though Rufus was not sure if Harry would see it as such.

“Thank you for making time to see me today, Minister,” Harry said formally, and sat down in one of the three chairs Rufus had had Wilmot bring in earlier. He’d guessed three visitors, though his only true basis for that had been the fact that Harry had come with Severus Snape and Remus Lupin the last time he arrived. Rufus congratulated himself on his foresight. “I wasn’t sure if you would. I know that the Wizengamot has largely tied your hands on the werewolf issue.”

“They’ve tied my hands,” Rufus agreed, and then waved his wand beneath his desk. Wards closed around the room, making what was said inside inaudible even to the ears of Edges and Grant, the Aurors waiting in the hall. It was a dangerous precaution; at least once a Minister had been assassinated behind such soundproof wards. But Rufus needed to make sure that no Wizengamot spy, or ordinary citizen doing what he thought was the best thing for the Ministry he served, could hear this and pass it on. “Or they think they have. Your Midsummer battle upset the political balance of absolutely everyone, Harry.”

Harry tensed, but lifted his eyebrows politely. “Oh?” Beside him, his guardian put his hand on his wand. Rufus gave him a sharp glare, and Snape lifted his hand, though he was scowling.

The man needs more lessons in how to be a Slytherin, at least when his son is in the room, Rufus thought, and turned back to Harry.

“Yes,” he said. “Our world is more intensely interested in you than they have ever been, Harry.”

Harry frowned. “Because I’m the Boy-Who-Lived?” Rufus nodded his approval. The boy was at least testing out the limitations and basis of his new power, rather than believing the first person who told him it existed.

“Not only because of that,” he said. “Because you fought your first great battle against You-Know-Who and survived, Harry. You did more than survive. You drove him from the battlefield. Is it true that all his Death Eaters are dead?”

Harry shook his head. “Indigena Yaxley managed to get away, and there are a few who were never confirmed dead. It’s hard to tell though, sir, since so many of them were recruited in other countries.”

Rufus smiled. Headmistress McGonagall had informed him of the way Voldemort tended to recruit Death Eaters in some of those other countries. He was looking forward to using the information she’d owled him. “And how many Death Eaters would you say were on the battlefield, Harry?”

Harry’s headshake this time was slower. “Over five hundred, sir, but once again, exact numbers are hard to come by.”

“Over five hundred will do,” said Rufus. “It’s the number the Daily Prophet’s been reporting, as a matter of fact. Over five hundred Death Eaters, Harry, and only a few of them might have survived.” He leaned forward. “And Voldemort?”

“Wounded,” said Harry quietly. “I cut a hole in his magical core. Whenever he tries to use his power, it will slip away from him, and the same thing will happen to any magic he absorbs.”

Rufus laughed. Harry frowned at him. “I don’t understand, sir,” he said. “You’re speaking as if I have a chance at winning supporters. There must be people who hate me for what I did at the siege.” He was pale, but he held Rufus’s eyes. “Philip Willoughby and Aurora Whitestag have already contacted you, I suppose?”

“They have,” said Rufus. “Frankly, Willoughby’s case will only convince zealots. Whitestag is more of a problem, because she sounds rational, but there are ways to combat even that, Harry. Do you want me to tell you what they are?”

Harry nodded. His eyes were still wide, blinking occasionally. Rufus stifled the urge to laugh again. He really doesn’t know what I’m getting at. I should explain it now, before it gets him further confused.

“You’ve saved lives as well as taken them,” said Rufus quietly. “You made sure that Hogwarts came through the battle intact.”

“There were also the wards, and Headmistress McGonagall, and Auror Moody—” Harry began, his face vaguely alarmed.

“That will matter only to the detail-obsessed,” said Rufus. “You must understand, Harry, that while there will be people who look at your mistakes and hate you for them, there are others who accept you so thoroughly as the Boy-Who-Lived that you are their hero. And now they have something to venerate you for other than the destruction of Voldemort as a baby, or even
turning back the storm on Midwinter, which not many of them know the details of. There’s a new mythology growing around you already, Harry.”

Harry sighed. “Minister, I’ve been through this before. When the Prophet was calling me the Young Hero last year, it didn’t prevent them from printing stories that called me an abuse victim and weak for it, or Argus Veritaserum’s articles that said I wasn’t being true to my ideals.”

“This groundswell is stronger,” said Rufus. “You think, or only believe, that the other one must be the strongest, Harry. That would have something to do with the guilt you’re carrying?”

Harry gave a slashing nod. Snape turned around and stared at him in concern. Work on him this summer, then, Rufus thought, hoping the other man would hear his thoughts.

“Remind him that just because he has done evil does not mean he has done no good—and that becomes especially true if we assume that it is good and evil in the eyes of other people.”

“There are supporters who will come to your side,” said Rufus, “vindicated for their faith in you, thrilled to the depths of their beings by what you have done in this battle, and rejoicing in their freedom when they hear about You-Know-Who’s wound.”

Harry’s face grew impossibly more distressed. “And they’ll be following me, sir, for all the wrong reasons,” he said. “I don’t want to be branded a hero because I’m also branded a killer.”

Rufus shook his head. “Whatever else, whoever else, you want them to follow, Harry, your best bet of getting them to follow that ideal or that person is to use the power you have. They’ll listen to you because you’re the Boy-Who-Lived, first, and because you won this battle—rather resoundingly. And as for admiration of killing…” Rufus turned his hands upward.

“Our society is wounded and sick at the core, perhaps. But once again, to heal that you need to approach it from the inside out, unless you want to use your magic to force others to act better.”

Harry’s face had actually changed on his last words, so that he looked something like thoughtful. He glanced up at Rufus and nodded when his speech was done. “I—thank you, Minister,” he said. “You’ve given me something to think about.” He leaned forward. “I’m afraid I won’t be able to put your advice into motion right away, though. I’m planning to leave for the summer.”

“And go where?” Rufus asked.

Harry exchanged a look with Snape and then with Pettigrew. Snape shook his head. Pettigrew nodded.

Harry moved his hand in a quick, sweeping gesture that created a box of white light around himself, Snape, Pettigrew, and the Minister. That shut Wilmot and even Percy out; Rufus was certain Harry had noticed Percy from the moment he walked in. Inside the box, Harry leaned closer.

“I have a sanctuary to retreat to for the summer, sir,” he said. “I deliberately made Voldemort’s defeat as crushing as possible so that I wouldn’t have to rush back the moment he stirred and try to prevent a raid or confront him. Of course, I didn’t anticipate how—boiling—the wizarding world would be because of things like my mercy killing.” He paused a moment. “We’re going to tell other people that I’ve been removed from Hogwarts so that I can train how to kill Voldemort, and that should satisfy Whitestag and her cronies for a time. I’ll be in a place where I can’t quickly receive owls, though, so I won’t be able to keep up with what changes here myself.”

Rufus blinked for a moment. Then he said, “And what will you do at the sanctuary, Harry?” He could not imagine that there was anything Harry would consider more important than his duty to the wizarding world, or, at least, his duty to the magical creature part of it.

Harry gave him a small, fragile smile. “Heal, sir,” he murmured. “I haven’t healed the wounds from my parents’ abuse completely yet, though I’ve tried. But here—there are simply too many things happening, too many causes that need my help. I’m going away for two months of rest so that, by the time I return, I can be all the stronger for handling them.”

Rufus stared at him. For a long moment, the words he wanted wouldn’t emerge from his throat. Then he said, “You haven’t healed?”

Harry shook his head. “I haven’t had time, sir. Really, no need to look so surprised.” He chuckled. “I would be surprised if you have the time to attend weekly sessions with a Mind-Healer in St. Mungo’s, either.”

“I have made the time when I needed it,” said Rufus, “in the wake of the Capto Horrifer, for instance. Many other Ministry employees did the same thing, Mr.—Harry.” He studied the young man in front of him again. Yes, many things made sense now. What was absolutely astonishing was that he had managed to walk into the office under his own power, in Rufus’s opinion.
Harry blinked and hitched up a shoulder. “Then I suppose it’s time, Minister,” he said. “I didn’t know the wizarding world and the shifts in opinion were quite that violent, though. I did want to tell you I would be out of reach.” He sat back in his chair and took a deep breath. “Can I count on you to manage the brewing cauldron for me while I’m gone, and try to keep it from spilling over?”

“I would prefer to manage it for you,” said Rufus bluntly. In the name of Merlin, I would have ordered him to take a rest, as I can do with my Aurors, if I thought it would do any good. “I know how to use the power of your name better than you do, Harry, and it seems that I am also more willing to do so.”

Abruptly, Harry frowned. “But I shouldn’t make you do something I would be unwilling to do myself—” he began.

“Harry,” Snape hissed, leaning closer to his ward. Rufus watched in interest as Harry turned and looked up at him, his attention shifting from polite and focused to utterly intent. So this is what he looks like when he trusts someone enough to really listen to him. “You need to be protected, as much as possible, from the shrill invective the press will hurl at you. The Minister is offering to do it. When someone offers to do something like that for you, the proper course is to thank them.”

Harry opened his mouth in what looked like the beginning of an argument.

“And you have promised by blood and breath and bone to go with Draco to the Sanctuary tomorrow,” Snape finished.

Harry shut his mouth. For a long moment, he chewed his lower lip instead, and then he nodded firmly and turned back to the Minister.

“I thank you for the offer, sir,” he said. “It has to be done, and I won’t be here to do it.” For a moment, he looked wistful.

Rufus knew that look all too well. Some of his more work-addicted Aurors had worn it at times. Harry was trying to think of some way around the oath, or, at least, of how he wished there was a way around the oath.

“All of that is true,” said Rufus, before Harry could really manage to change his mind. “We’ll begin with the Boy-Who-Lived proving himself again, with the announcement of Voldemort’s real condition, and with the deception that you’ve gone away to train. All of that will provide a good weapon, and answer to those who think that you must do more. I would like to see what ‘more’ they mean, after the Midsummer battle.”

Harry blinked as if waking from a dream, and then nodded slowly. “I am also trying to bring the werewolf problem to a resting place, Minister,” he said. “I’ve informed Loki that I’ll side with the Ministry if he bites more people, and with him if that’s the reason the Ministry is hunting his pack. And of course I can always side with werewolves who are not part of his pack. For as much chaos as they’ve caused, Loki’s group is small, I know.”

“I would not be so sure of that,” said Rufus. “We’ve heard of Loki for years from rogue werewolves. I thought him a myth, but if you’ve met him in the flesh—”

“And received a letter from him.” Harry nodded. “And, yes, it’s always possible that he commands more people than I know about, but he does not speak for all the werewolves in Britain. Even if he did, then I would work for equal rights, and then make sure that werewolves were tried for biting the unwilling, or for murder if they killed their victims. They can’t live both inside and outside our society, Minister, protected by our laws when they want to be and then doing things that are only legal by their own. Sooner or later, they’ll have to make compromises.”

Rufus found himself smiling. When Harry was animated, he was a sight to see. And this shine in his eyes was probably what made people ignore the dark circles under them, and so this was a double-edged weapon. Rufus reminded himself to see clearly. Husbanded, Harry’s fire might burn for a long time, and accomplish the reforms that he so wanted to see accomplished. But it could burn out too easily.

“Understood, Harry,” Rufus murmured. “And you will get no argument from me.” He hesitated a moment, but he could not see Pettigrew and Snape spreading this any more than he could Wilmot, and Harry deserved to know. “I have arranged for confiscated Potions ingredients to be turned over to a cousin of mine,” he told Harry. “I love to brew, but is more interested in pure creation than credit or money; the moment he is done working on one potion, he moves on to the next. He has always wanted to brew Wolfsbane, and it’s complex enough to keep him happy for a time. I’ve been distributing Wolfsbane to those registered werewolves too poor to afford it—on the quiet, of course, since the Wizengamot would have a fit if they knew.”

The shine in Harry’s eyes became so bright that Rufus found a trace of the impulse to follow quivering in his body. This was the leader Harry’s allies had found, then, if only for a glimpse, the young man who would risk everything he had for someone else, whose greatest freedom was free will, who offered gratitude and admiration freely but couldn’t see why others offered it to him. This man was looking as Rufus as if he’d just announced that the Ministry was repealing all the anti-werewolf laws, and Rufus had to fight to keep from simply grinning and basking in that gaze.
And this is why he’s so dangerous, he thought, to temper himself. I can’t let my own admiration for him and all he’s survived blind me to the fact that he might not always want what’s best for the Ministry. In the case of the werewolves, that’s certainly true. I can’t do things for his approval. I can’t take him as my own leader.

“Thank you, Minister,” said Harry quietly. “This means more to me than you can know. I know you don’t—like werewolves.” He picked his way among the words as if he thought he would step on a bladed one.

“I don’t like ’em,” Rufus said, “because almost all the ones I see are rogues who’ve bitten or killed someone, and only a few are horrified about it. But I think I am coming to see that not all werewolves are the same. Not even all Death Eaters are the same.” He pointedly didn’t look at Snape and Pettigrew, because that would have been too easy. “And I can help ’em—the ones who did register, the ones who try to obey our laws and are treated like shit because of it.”

Another thoughtful look came across Harry’s face. “You know,” he murmured, “there might be some people I could introduce you to, Minister, when I come back.”

“When you come back, Harry,” said Pettigrew firmly. And either he had more of a hold over Harry or his semi-argument with Snape had taught him better, because he lowered his eyes and nodded sheepishly.

“That’s true,” he said, and looked up at Rufus, extending his hand again. “Thank you, for everything.”

“You’re more than welcome.” Rufus clasped his hand again, and looked into his eyes, and made himself see the shine and the dark circles and the danger that lurked there—danger all the greater because Harry would never know for certain who was following him for his ideals and who for his person. “Good luck in your healing, Harry.”

Harry nodded once, and then dismissed the ward that had protected the latter part of their conversation. Wilmot left with him and his guards to escort them back to the Apparition point.

Rufus sat back down and reflected for a moment. Then he felt a dangerous grin widening across his face.

That conversation gave me ideas. He nodded at Percy. “Fetch me the records of Amelia Bones’s employment,” he commanded.

Percy blinked and frowned even as he bent to fetch them. “Sir?”

“I want to find out how long it’s been since she’s taken a mandated rest period,” said Rufus, and exchanged a shark-like smile of delight with Percy.

Harry had noticed it before, but now he was sure of it. Wilmot was nervous, enough that he could hardly bear to walk down the corridor beside them. Harry could see it in his slightly widened eyes, of course, the way any human wizard would display it, but also in the way he showed his teeth when someone called suddenly from behind an Auror desk. Remus had shown the same signals when he felt upset enough.

“What’s the matter?” Harry asked at last, using another small ward so that only he and Wilmot could hear what the man would say.

Wilmot bent down and whispered, “I have some reason to suspect that Loki is visiting the Ministry today.”

Harry knew his back had stiffened, but he forced himself to keep walking. “You have some reason?” he asked at last.

“I was once more in contact with the London packs than I am now,” Wilmot murmured. “I gave that up a few years ago, when Loki started to have more dominance than I was comfortable with, but I still passed along word of laws that affected us, and other possible problems, the moment I learned of them. And now Loki, under the impression that that makes me loyal, told me that he might find his way into the Ministry a few days before the full moon.”

“He intends to bite a target here?” Harry demanded, feeling his magic twine and tighten around him. He caught a glimpse of Snape trying to break through his ward, but he was too angry to care.

“He does,” Wilmot said. “Or at least he hinted that, and I am intelligent enough to translate the hints, I think.”

Harry restrained the impulse to pick up one of the Auror desks and throw it. “Who?”

“The Minister.”

Harry nearly stopped walking and demanded to know why Wilmot hadn’t told Scrimgeour, but he understood in another moment. A threat to the Minister’s life would result in questioning under Veritaserum. Wilmot would explain, willingly or unwillingly, how he got the information. And the knowledge that he was a werewolf himself would result in his being
sacked, left unable to know anything about future assassination attempts on the Minister.

“Do you know where he might have come in?” Harry breathed.

“Unfortunately, no,” said Wilmot. “He can use that damn pack magic to vanish, you know. He’ll be especially careful since
this is just a scouting mission. And I think—”

Harry caught a blurred glimpse of pale hair as something appeared off to the side and moved at him. It was Loki, Harry
knew, and he was coming with strength and speed that Harry didn’t think he could match, in those few moments of numb
surprise.

Wilmot moved at the exact same moment. He seized Loki’s arms and whirled, slamming him into the wall and holding him
there. Harry heard gasps from the Aurors around them, and dismissed the ward that had concealed his and Wilmot’s
conversation. He looked at Peter.

“Stall them,” he insisted. “Tell them that this is just a grieving parent who wants justice for what was done to his children at
Hogwarts.”

“But what about—” said Peter.

“No time,” said Harry, and then shifted nearer to Loki and Wilmot. Snape was coming behind him, his steps slow as death.
Harry reached back and gripped his wrist once, asking, pleading, for him to hold on to his hatred and not fling a spell. It was
especially important since they were in the Ministry and a Dark Arts curse would bring the Department of Magical Law
Enforcement down on them like a pack of rabid wolves.

*What an appropriate metaphor,* Harry thought. Then Snape squeezed back, and Harry was free to move over to the little
scene against the wall, while Peter explained matters to the Aurors and made excuses for the sudden presence of the Boy-
Who-Lived in a calm, carrying voice.

Loki was staring at Wilmot with his teeth bared. This close to the full moon, Harry thought, he looked feral. His teeth were
slightly longer, and his pale hair wild. And perhaps it was just the effect of shock at Wilmot’s betrayal, or not being in
control of the situation as he had been when he confronted Harry by the lake, but he looked far more vulnerable, too.

Wilmot had his teeth against Loki’s throat, lightly scraping it as he spoke. Harry had to use magic to sharpen his ears so that
he could hear.

“—gave my loyalty to someone else, Loki. I won’t allow you to hurt him.”

“How would you justify killing me?” Loki whispered. “Now, here?”

“I don’t have to justify killing you,” Wilmot said. “I have to justify manhandling you, and that’s all. You would have to
justify lunging at the Boy-Who-Lived in a calm, carrying voice.”

Loki stared at Wilmot, the amber of his eyes growing deeper. Wilmot laughed, a sound that trailed off in a growl.

“Do not try that charisma shit on me, Loki.” He snapped his teeth again, this time taking a flap of skin and worrying it
between them, to make his point. Harry could feel Snape breathing hard behind him, and reached back to grip his wrist
again. “I am not a member of your pack.”

“I did not come alone,” Loki said, already more relaxed, moving back into the calm, dominant persona Harry remembered
of him. “Members of my pack are scattered throughout this room. They could bite. And the bite of a werewolf even in
human form can have—unpredictable effects.”

Wilmot smiled, and Loki let out a little gasp of pain. “They won’t move while you’re in danger, Loki,” he said.

“They will go from here if you put me in Tullianum,” Loki countered, his head tilting back as though he were inviting
Wilmot to tear his throat open, “and bite as many others as they can on the full moon. They’ll run without Wolfsbane.” His
eyes shifted sideways to Harry. “And he won’t be here to stop it from happening.”

“Will you refrain from biting those victims if we let you go?” Harry asked. Behind him, he could hear Snape sucking in a
deep breath and then saying nothing. He was grateful. His mind was swarming with the consequences of this, if Wilmot *did*
arrest Loki. Loki would not only betray Wilmot’s position in the Aurors—there was nothing to stop him—but his pack
would go mad, and for all Harry knew it would begin a rebellion or a full-out war, instead of a biting of chosen victims.

“You will have my word,” said Loki. “We have chosen the Minister for this moon cycle.” He was speaking more and more
shallowly as Wilmot’s teeth pressed closer into the skin of his throat. “Or we had, until I saw you. I thought you might
appreciate being adopted fully into our pack, *vates.*”
Harry ignored that, and turned to Wilmot. “Can we trust him if he gives his word?”

“We can,” said Wilmot, “since his pack is here. An alpha lives or dies by his sworn word.” He was trembling with frustration, staring hard at Loki. “I wish there was more we could do,” he said. “There must be.” Loki winced as Wilmot’s teeth made a faint stream of blood trickle down his neck. Harry heard a chorus of phantom growls, and could almost feel the pack pressing closer.

And Harry knew what more could be done.

He stepped forward, and let his magic flap and flash around him, breaking free from its confines. Loki stared at him at once. There was something deep within those amber eyes that was more wizard than werewolf, Harry thought, even on the days of the full moon, and he knew the other man recognized the strength of his magic.

“This is what you are up against,” said Harry softly. “This is what you have pushed me into.” He stared steadily at Loki. “I will have a promise from you now. You will swear that your pack, including you, will make no attacks on chosen victims for the next two months, until September’s full moon.” That was for as long as he would be in the Sanctuary, and as much as Harry thought he could reasonably ask for without triggering either the pack’s protective instincts or Loki’s independent spirit, to the point that he would insist on dying as a sacrifice just to avoid giving that promise.

“And if not?” Loki asked.

“Then I will drain your magic now,” said Harry. He felt his mind shifting again, moving into that crystal-clear place he had been when he killed Dumbledore. “I know how to behead a pack. Your power base will snap and scatter.”

“It will mean open war,” Loki said.

“So does this,” Harry hissed at him, dropping almost into Parseltongue. “You consider me bound, Loki. And it is true that my oath to the werewolves and my vates commitments bind me from simply killing you the moment you make trouble, or trying to constrain you never to bite anyone again, even in self-defense. I have to try to leave your free will free, and your people have suffered enough that I do not want to take a strong leader who could better their lives from them. But when you push me into a corner, I will strike back.” He was shaking, he could feel himself shaking, but his magic was also getting ready. A black snake appeared, winding around his neck, and hissed at Loki on its own. “I have to leave, I am bound to that, and I have to protect the free will of both the werewolves and the Ministry; I am bound to that. But if it is the only way to keep both oaths, I will accept the utter destruction of one pack. You have proven impenetrable to reason so far, Loki. Can you learn it?”

Loki kept looking at him as if seeing him for the first time. Then, finally, he said, “You—you are trying.”

He can learn. Perhaps. But Harry remembered the werewolves with their teeth on Draco’s and Snape’s and Moody’s throats, and held himself wary. “I am trying,” he said. “And I must leave tomorrow, and I do not want to leave the wizarding world in chaos. Understand. I am the most powerful friend you have at the moment, since you have worked so hard to alienate the Wizengamot, and panic is brewing in the rest of the wizarding world. I will not be here. That means that, yes, you might get away with biting innocent victims. On the other hand, the Ministry might hunt your pack to death in the meantime. I won’t be here to prevent that, either. I tried to explain this in the letter. I see little evidence that the words even cracked the wax in your ears.”

Loki said, “I will swear, on my word as alpha, that neither I nor anyone else in my pack will bite except in self-defense until September’s full moon.”

Harry nodded sharply and stepped back. The arrogance was already returning to Loki’s voice. He knew he could not push.

Loki could, though. He turned to Wilmot with a lazy smile as the Auror lifted his head and murmured, “The Minister might receive an anonymous owl, you know, a few days in the future, telling him about a certain werewolf in his staff.”

“And then they would question me with Veritaserum, to determine how I avoided detection for so long,” Wilmot said, his voice also casual. “And I would tell them everything I knew, of course, including the location of a certain London pack. And all the weaknesses I knew in that pack. Tell me, Loki, does Gudrun still have a bad left leg?”

Loki began a bubbling snarl in his throat. Harry let the black snake rear up and hiss again, while the air around him grew cold enough to make their breath steam. Loki glanced at him and cut the snarl off.

“A truce,” he said. “For now.” His eyes were locked on Harry, shining brilliantly. “Vates,” he said.

Wilmot backed away and said, “That is enough. You have a right to your anger and your grief, and since you didn’t actually succeed in assaulting Harry, then I suppose he won’t want to press charges.” Harry shook his head in relief; Wilmot must have heard the story Peter was telling. “But you must leave the Ministry now. I will escort you out, personally.” He gripped
Loki’s elbow. Loki went tamely, muttering. The other Aurors sat down behind their desks, and, Harry assumed, the rest of the pack followed their leader.

Harry closed his eyes. He felt sick and shaky, even as the snake around his throat dissipated into mist and flowed back into him. He was caught between two conflicting and equally strong impulses. One was the impulse to flee to the Sanctuary right now, before anything else could happen.

The other was to stay here and make sure that nothing else like this could happen, that people kept talking instead of fighting.

Snape’s hand closed on his shoulder and steered him firmly the few remaining steps towards their Apparition room, the expression on his face likely preventing the Aurors from clustering around either to insult him or thank him. Harry sighed and shook his head as he walked. He couldn’t stay. The oath he’d sworn would start choking him if he tried.

He had to wonder, though, if even the Sanctuary would be able to keep him from thinking about the werewolf problem.


Harry sighed and sat back against the wall as he picked at his breakfast. The letter from the MacFusty clan had finally arrived, and they’d reassured Harry that they’d seen Acies settling on a barren rock in the middle of the Hebrides, probably drawn by the presence of their Hebridean Black dragons, and going to sleep. It was the starvation sleep, as one of the handlers called it; she would be ravenous when she woke, but it was likely she wouldn’t wake for a good two or three months. The MacFusty wizards had been Dragon-Keepers for so long that they retained some records that were—or purported to be—about the British Red-Gold. Harry trusted them to keep an eye on her, at least.

He glanced at his breakfast and picked at it again. It still looked as unappetizing as it ever had. He supposed he could have waited until someone else woke up so that they could provide the conversation to season the food, at least, but he hadn’t wanted to. He hadn’t slept last night, so it had seemed easy to go to the kitchens, ask for the necessary components to make a sandwich from the house elves, and then retreat up to the top of the North Tower.

Waiting for the MacFusty letter had been only part of the reason for his insomnia. There was also the anxiety about leaving the wizarding world for so long, now that he was on the verge of doing so.

Can I justify abandoning everything I have to do?

Harry picked up the Daily Prophet lying beside him and gave it a good shake out. The wind promptly tried to tear it from his hand. Harry snorted and leaned his back on the stones of the Tower, turning so that he could read the headlines in the fall of early sunlight. A few days past Midsummer, the days had started to shorten, but not by much as yet.

YOU-KNOW-WHO WOUNDED

The headline led off a front-page story by Rita Skeeter. Harry was happy she had got to write it, at least. He skimmed through the story, noting with a faint smile that Skeeter declared as true and proven things that most other reporters hedged around with words like “alleged.” Either she was just that confident, or Scrimgeour had contacted her as the chosen message-bearer. Or perhaps she had been a beetle inside his ward yesterday afternoon, but Harry doubted that. Scrimgeour’s wards had been tight enough to identify an Animagus.

Five hundred Death Eaters dead...You-Know-Who wounded and unable to command the field...Boy-Who-Lived to undergo training during this summer...

Harry wondered for a moment if he should contact the Minister and make sure he’d told Skeeter these details, then shook his head. He’ll see the article, and if he thinks she needs a talking-to, he’ll be the one to give it.

He folded the paper, half with his hand and half with magic, and set it aside. As he did, he saw a shiver of movement from the Tower stairs. His hand turned over automatically, gathering magic.

"I am not welcome to sit with you?" Every tone in Argutus’s voice was wounded.

Harry laughed in spite of his mood and held his left wrist out. Argutus flowed over and coiled his neck around it at once, flicking his tongue out in a contented motion. “Snakes don’t sit,” Harry murmured, leaning back so that the Omen snake’s scales could feel the sunlight.

“Excuses,” said Argutus, even though the Parseltongue word he’d used to mean “sit” translated more like “coil in a relaxed posture.” “I think that you have spent too much time alone today.”

Harry opened his eyes with a frown at that. “It’s only six-something, Argutus.” He could have cast a Tempus charm, but he
was enjoying the drape of the snake around him too much to make an effort to move. Argutus had grown large enough and long enough to lap over his shoulders and arms and curl the tip of his tail around his waist. “I haven’t been alone that long. Besides, no one else is awake.”

“You were awake all night.”

Harry remembered, then, that Argutus had taken to the convention of days starting at midnight with extraordinary enthusiasm. He thought humans were very clever to have figured out a point in the dark when a new day could begin. Harry had found him a few times during the siege studying clocks.

“That’s true,” he said, and let himself yawn widely, since his right arm was pinned by Argutus’s shifting coils anyway. A year old now, Argutus was close to full-grown if not already there. “But I’ll rest tonight, Argutus. We’re going to the Sanctuary. That means that we can rest as long as we like for two months, and no one will be nagging us to get out of bed.”

It was what he imagined the Sanctuary to be like, at any rate. Since all he really knew of the place came from Vera’s vague descriptions and his one venture into Peter’s mind to remove the phoenix web, Harry didn’t know if the Sanctuary was all white beds, or if that was only one room of it, or even only a representation, without any anchor in reality.

“You need to rest some more. And you need to not be alone.” Argutus sounded as bright and determined about the matter as Millicent had—

Or, no, the comparison was not quite right. Reluctantly, Harry let himself turn to thoughts he’d been avoiding. Argutus sounded a lot like Pansy, when one got right down to it.

“I’ll have the time to rest when we get to the Sanctuary,” he argued, standing. “And I don’t think the Seers will leave me alone.”

“Neither will I.” Argutus adjusted himself so that his head still rested on Harry’s left wrist, but his tail was wrapped more securely over his waist, and the majority of his body covered Harry’s chest and shoulders like some mirrored shirt. Harry could feel his delicate strength, which would suddenly become massive strength if Argutus should ever decide he wanted to crush something. “I have a surprise for you.”

He said nothing more than that, even as Harry made his way down the stairs towards the hospital wing, and finally he had to ask, “What is it?”

“If I told you, it wouldn’t be a surprise.”

Harry was startled into a laugh before he thought about it. That was a distinctly English phrase, which he had translated once for Argutus. He hadn’t thought the Omen snake would remember it.

“Why are you surprised now?” Argutus asked, his tongue flickering out. “Now is not the time for surprises. Now is the time for farewells.”

“You don’t know how accurate you are,” Harry whispered, a heavy weight settling in his chest again. Not only did he not want to say farewell to some of the people he would bid it to—most notably his brother—but he couldn’t shake the feeling that some of them would be gone when he returned to the wider wizarding world. Without him here to protect them, could they survive?

“Now is not the time for sorrow, either,” said Argutus sternly, as they passed through Trelawney’s empty classroom and towards the ladder to climb down. “Now is the time for glad smiles and hugs and perhaps sausages, if there happen to be any lying around.”

It comforted Harry sometimes to remember that, clever or not, Argutus was still a snake, and had his priorities absolutely clear.

“Would it have made a difference if I offered to come to the Sanctuary with you?”

Harry pulled back from hugging Connor and stared at him. “What?”

Connor’s eyes were quiet and thoughtful as he watched Harry—a look that Harry had come to dread, though it was an improvement over the snotty blankness he had used in third year. It usually meant he was about to say something perceptive and discomforting. He had looked like that the whole time he spoke at their parents’ trial, in Harry’s opinion.

“If I’d said I’d go to the Sanctuary with you,” Connor clarified. “Would you still have been as reluctant to go as you are now, Harry?”
“I’m not reluctant to go—”

“Harry, your hand is twitching.” Connor snorted. “That means you’re lying.”

Harry looked down at his hand. “I’ve never noticed that,” he muttered. “And neither have Draco or Snape.”

“They’re more used to watching your face.” Connor shrugged. “Anyway. I want an answer. If I’d offered to go to the Sanctuary, or said that I wanted to heal there and asked you to come with me, would you still look as if it’s tearing the heart out of your chest to go?”

“It would be tearing the heart out of my chest to stay behind,” Harry tried to counter, “given that Draco is going, and—”

“I’m not going to say anything like ‘he’s my heart.’ That’s too ridiculous. —And he’s the only one who can make me see sense when I’m being stubborn. Even Snape doesn’t help as much as he does.”

Connor nodded. “But you still don’t want to go. And I’m asking you if it would have made a difference if I were the one asking you to go, and not Draco.”

“What are you, a terrier?” Harry muttered.

“Growl, growl,” Connor said.

Harry sighed and flexed his fingers. But, in the end, he owed his brother the truth.

“I would still be reluctant,” he said. “I would probably be more reluctant, because I trust you to take care of yourself now, unless it’s something like healing after a battle.” He met Connor’s eyes directly. “That’s why I’m glad that Peter’s going with you to Lux Aeterna this summer, and not just so that you can learn to like each other better. I’m worried about that sword.”

“It’s Light,” Connor said, his face changing.

“And what have we learned about Light objects and wizards who use them without questioning them?” Harry asked in his best professor’s tone.

Connor shook his head. “So you’ve got over your dependence on me, then? You wouldn’t want to go to the Sanctuary automatically, the moment I asked you to, just because you wouldn’t want me to heal without your overseeing every step?”

That had been why Harry was reluctant to start this subject in the first place. He still loved Connor, he always would, but Draco had taken a place of importance to him that no one else had. Harry had known that since he’d frozen while Voldemort’s dragon held Draco and threatened him. He might have been able to think if it was anyone else. He had been able to think of a plan while Snape was Voldemort’s prisoner, after all. But hold Draco hostage, and his mind turned to slow-grinding ice.

“Yes, that’s true,” said Harry at last. “I’m sorry, Connor—”

He lost his breath, and the chance to speak the rest of that sentence, when Connor’s arms wrapped around him and he squeezyed. “Don’t be,” Connor whispered in his ear. “I’m glad, Harry. I’m so glad. I don’t think I could bear it, now that I know the truth about our childhood, if something in you had been broken and would never recover. I love you, and I want you to be able to have a life apart from me.”

Harry smiled faintly and hugged back, when he could get his arms into a proper position. “That’s not a problem any longer. But I do hope that you’ll always be a part of my life, Connor.”

Connor laughed and stepped away from him. “I think I will, now that I’ve learned to tolerate both a Malfoy being your joined partner and a greasy git being your guardian.”

“Are you quite done, Harry?”

Harry blinked when he realized Snape was standing in the doorway of the Gryffindor common room, the Fat Lady’s muffled protests coming from one side of him. He had a rigid look on his face, as if he were struggling to keep from taking points from Gryffindor even though it was the summer and there were no points to take.

Connor refused to look intimidated. “Professor Snape, sir,” he said, with a cheerful little nod. “Come here to escort Harry to his next farewell, just in case slime monsters jump out from around a corner and eat him on the way?”

“Slime monsters,” said Snape, in a tone that combined viciousness and boredom both at once. “That is the kind of creature a limited Gryffindor brain would conceive.”

Connor said nothing for a moment. Harry looked back anxiously at him, wondering if he would have to soothe genuine anger. He didn’t understand it when he realized that Connor’s face was stretched in a wide and almost Slytherin smile.
“Why, Professor Snape,” said Connor innocently, “I thought you might have learned some admiration for Gryffindor brains. You’ve trained me in dueling for almost eight months, after all.” Snape snorted as if that meant nothing. And it probably didn’t, Harry knew. Snape tended to judge all his students by the most competent of them, which meant that unless Connor surpassed Harry in dueling, Snape would probably never respect him. “And then there was my plan to compel the Death Eaters on the flying horses to smash the sirens’ tank,” Connor continued innocently. “I thought you had some admiration for that.”

Absolute silence from Snape’s end of the room this time. Harry stared at him, at the surprise written clearly, if momentarily, on his face, and then had to fight the helpless urge to snicker.

He didn’t know. Oh, he really didn’t know.

Snape recovered in a moment. “That was Harry’s doing, and not yours,” he said coolly. “If you are quite finished insulting my intelligence, Mr. Potter, then—”

“Why should I be? You’ve never finished insulting mine. And it’s quite strange, at least to me, that you think I would stand here in front of Harry and lie about that. My brother’s not the person he once was, Professor. He would certainly protest if I tried to take credit for something he’d done. Instead, as I remember, he was rather concerned about Voldemort holding his boyfriend at the time.” Connor moved forward a step, eyes wide and grin now the supposedly helpless and naïve Gryffindor one. “You should worry about insulting him, Professor, by suggesting that he’d let me take credit for that, and that he was less than perfectly concerned about Draco.”

Snape said nothing. After scrutinizing him for a moment, Harry realized it was because he had nothing to say.

He turned and gasped Connor’s wrist. Connor cocked an eyebrow without taking his gaze from Snape. “Shhh, Harry,” he whispered. “I want to enjoy the moment. It’s not like it’ll happen often.”

“I congratulate you on achieving something I’ve never done for this long,” said Harry formally. “In the contest to make Professor Snape act as if the Kneazle had his tongue, Gryffindor House wins.”

Connor laughed, and that seemed, at last, to snap Snape’s stillness. He looked at Harry, and one glance was enough. Harry gave Connor one more quick hug, and then fell into line behind Snape. He supposed he couldn’t blame Snape entirely for wanting to escort him. His lack of sleep last night and his solitary trip to the Tower this morning had not inspired confidence that he might actually go to the Sanctuary, at least in Snape and Draco, oath aside.

Connor waved to him as they departed through the portrait. Harry waved back, and let his last vestiges of worry for his brother melt away. Connor looked entirely comfortable, standing there amidst the red and gold, and if shadows still haunted his eyes from the battle, they would fade.

He and Snape moved halfway down the corridor before Snape said, in an experimental voice, “I suppose you will not tell me this was a joke.”

“I know better than to prank you, sir,” said Harry.

Snape glared at him for a moment with the reference to the Marauders, but there was no heat behind it. “But he really did not—“

“Yes. He did.”

“He could not have—“

“Yes. He did.”

Snape fell silent again. Harry could feel him thinking, though, and so he supposed, regretfully, that he couldn’t enter that particular silence in the contest to make it seem as if the Kneazle had Snape’s tongue. Connor was still the winner there.

“I’ll be leaving for two months,” Harry repeated as patiently as he could, and held out his hand to Thomas Rhangnara again. “That’s why I won’t be here to help you research.” He studied the man for a moment. His dark hair was crowded with cobwebs, and now and then he swiped at the dust on his cheek as if he knew it was there but didn’t know what to do with it. “Have you been home to visit your family at all?” Harry added, mind suddenly filled with horrible visions of Pricilla Burke and her children never knowing if Thomas had survived the battle because he was lost permanently in the Hogwarts library.

For the first time, he coaxed an expression other than wide-eyed dreaminess out of Thomas. “Of course I have,” he said indignantly. “And I have been able to go back and forth. The Headmistress has said that I may investigate the library as I like. She’ll leave it open for me during the summer.”
Harry shook his head in amusement. “And do you remember what I just told you about my going away for the summer?” he prompted gently. Behind him, Snape shifted, but kept his mouth shut. Harry had been reluctantly impressed with his self-control over the past few days, from the confrontation with Belville until now.

“I wish you could stay,” said Thomas. “You can provide us with information about centaur magic that we still don’t have.”

“The centaurs in the Forbidden Forest are friendlier to wizards, now that their web is broken,” Harry offered. “You may be able to learn something from them, as long as you ask carefully.”

Thomas came close to looking deliriously happy. “Thank you,” he said. “I will ask them. And I will be polite about it.” He probably would, Harry thought. Most people, even centaurs who weren’t used to the norms of wizarding society, would know that Thomas couldn’t possibly mean any offense. He simply wasn’t used to asking for things the way other people were.

“And I know that you have to go,” Thomas continued, “but I wish you could be here to see gootokom released.”

Harry frowned. “What?”

“Gootokom.” Thomas caught his expression of incomprehension then. “Sorry,” he said. “It’s an acronym, one that we’ve created a pronunciation for when we’re talking about it.”

“How’s we?” Harry asked, and heard Snape shift again.


Harry blinked a few times. Then he said, “But if you don’t understand centaur magic, then how can it be every kind of magic?”

“That’s one thing we’ve wondered about,” Thomas admitted, a tiny frown wrinkling his brows. “The magical creatures we’ve managed to study so far fit within the parameters, but we know precious little about so many others. And there are all the dead and extinct species that might possess magic like nothing we’ve ever seen and which our theory can’t account for. So some members of our group think that we should change the name to the Grand Unified Theory of Every Kind of Wizarding Magic. Of course, other members of our group argue that if some magical creatures’ powers behave in accordance with our theory, than every one will, and so we can get away with the name. I don’t tend to think like that, myself. One example is unicorn knots. They—”

“Rhangnara,” Snape said then, his voice on the edge of a growl. Harry could understand the next words, even if Thomas didn’t. "Do not get Harry so fascinated that he will not want to go to the Sanctuary."

Thomas blinked, and then nodded. “The theory is ready to be published in a preliminary form,” he told Harry, voice full of excitement. “I’ve been working on this for years, but that’s nothing compared to some of the decades that people have spent on this. You ought to know what some of the wizards in France with connections to the Veela Council have gone through; they’ve got information on veela magic for us, but only with years of wheedling.”

“So you’ll publish it,” said Harry, happy to hear about something that didn’t concern war and death and politics, for once. “And you think that I should be here to read it?”

Thomas looked straight at him, and Harry saw the haze in his eyes clear. He was reminded, then, that just because Thomas often went on dreamy flights and tangents of fancy didn’t mean he couldn’t think.

“I do wish you could be here, yes,” said Thomas. “This theory is going to strike a blow at the very notion of pureblooded wizards, Harry.”

Harry thought for a moment, and then blinked as he realized what the likely reason was. “Magic doesn’t follow bloodline,” he whispered.

Thomas shook his head. “It doesn’t, not all the time. It interacts with bloodline, but it’s nothing as simple as pureblooded wizards having magical children and the magic declining if those children marry Muggles or Squibs or Muggleborns—which was what most of the purebloods all over Europe believed for centuries. The occurrence of Squibs in their own family lines should have taught them better,” Thomas added in a mutter. “It’s wilder and more random than that. Pureblood is a cultural distinction. It has none of the physical merit that most of the pureblood wizards try to make it have.”

Harry supposed he should find this appalling. The chaos that such a theory would cause once it got out and about was hard to contemplate. Harry knew that, while many European wizarding communities did not have purebloods completely dominating them, they had a sizable proportion of them, and fights over “blood purity” were sometimes more vicious than
in Britain. Thomas and his group of research wizards were innocently proposing to overturn a good many of the beliefs that anchored politics and behavior in the British wizarding world and elsewhere.

And they anchor prejudice and pride, too.

Harry couldn’t help himself; the people who detested him for it could blame it on his halfblood status, if they liked. He gave a smile of vicious delight at the thought of the people who had humiliated him at Draco’s festival forced to eat their own words, or turning red with rage at the thought of Muggleborns being children of magic even as they were.

Then he thought of what Lucius’s face would look like when he found out. Oh, he wished that someone he trusted could be there to snap a photograph of it.

“In fact,” Thomas was babbling on, “one interesting thing we’ve found is that halfblood wizards are sometimes among the most powerful.” He gave a nod to Harry, and then to Snape. “Not always, of course; there are lots of other factors that could interfere and make them less powerful. And those factors vary depending on the type of magic they receive, and the magic in the vicinity, and whether one parent is Muggleborn or Muggle or Squib or Muggleborn with Squib ancestors or…all kinds of things. But the strident effort to keep from interbreeding with Muggleborn wizards and witches is ridiculous.” Thomas scowled. “I love my culture as much as the next wizard, and if I’d found evidence that proclaimed the bigots were right after all, I’d have to accept that. But I didn’t, and they shouldn’t try to argue against what we keep finding—not just in Britain, but all over the world. They just shouldn’t argue against it. Otherwise, they’ll be stupid.” That was, obviously, his ultimate interest.

Harry had to ask one question, despite Snape’s impatient shuffle from foot to foot. “And what is it that makes Muggleborns appear and some Squibs appear in pureblood lines? Can you summarize it for me quickly?”

“At core, at bottom?” Thomas smiled. “Well, that’s something we still disagree a bit about, because there are a few of us arguing that the choice is completely random. I don’t think it is. I think, and most of them are coming to agree with me, that it comes from free will. The magic chooses who it wants to wield it. Interacting with bloodline and place and a dozen other factors, of course. Or maybe more than a dozen. Petrovitch did identify thirteen, but I don’t know if I can take—”

“That is enough,” said Snape firmly. “Harry, Vera wants us to leave at noon. And you must still say farewell to others.”

“That’s true,” said Harry, reluctantly. He nodded to Thomas. “I’m sorry. You can send me an owl detailing the matter if you like, though it will take a few weeks to reach me with all the shadows around the Seers’ Sanctuary.”

“I would like that,” said Thomas. His face glowed gently. “This is one reason I’ve been so interested in your work, vates. If I’m right, then free will is the most basic component of magic, and all magic is a great deal more sentient than we ever gave it credit for. And your work as vates respects that more than a Lord who merely orders his magic, and the minds and free wills of others, around.”

Harry caught his breath for a moment. Some of the gloom that had gripped him as he worried about what would happen to the wizarding world while he was gone dissipated. “Thank you, Thomas,” he whispered.

“No problem at all.” Thomas gazed at him with a fond smile. “I do rather like you, Harry, and your approach to magic has won my admiration.”

Harry smiled at him and took his leave, with Snape’s hand on his shoulder. His mind was buzzing with new ideas, though, especially given that he’d spent part of the three days before he’d promised Draco he would go to the Sanctuary draining Black artifacts of magic and giving the power to the newly-made Squibs. He had to chuckle.

“What?” Snape demanded. Harry wondered if he’d been rattled at the thought of pureblood prejudices being wrong, or something else.

“I was thinking of what would happen if I absorbed magic from something else, or an enemy, like Belville’s magic,” said Harry, and waited.

“And?” Snape insisted, after a moment.

“And then gave the magic to a Muggle,” Harry finished innocently. “Many people get nervous because I can take their magic away, but what about making wizards? I can see why it hasn’t been done often, if at all. First you’d need to be an absorbere, and then you’d need to sacrifice the magic, which most people are reluctant to do. Dumbledore certainly never envisioned me doing it, and Voldemort never would. But what would happen if I did?”

“Save the revolution for after the Sanctuary,” Snape said gruffly. “Besides, the magic would likely drain away from them at once.”

“Perhaps I could create a magical core—“
“Rhangnara will make you as awful as himself, before he is done,” Snape muttered, and dragged Harry firmly down the hallway, while Harry busied himself in picturing Lucius’s response to that.

Hawthorn had never felt so ashamed in her life as she watched Harry hold both her hands in his and stare at her. “And you’ll be all right this summer?” he asked. “You won’t be alone?”

“Delilah and Claudia will stay with me,” said Hawthorn softly. “Do not worry about it, Harry. I leaned on you too much in the first days after the siege, and for that, I am ashamed. I can only plead the blindness and madness of grief.”

Harry blinked at her. “I don’t know what you mean,” he said. “I was offering solace and comfort to anyone who needed it, and you needed it more than most, Mrs. Parkinson. Your husband your daughter, both gone.” He drew in a breath like fishhooks. “You had a right to mourn.”

Hawthorn tried to think of what she could say to get her meaning across and not have Harry reject it at once. Then she shook her head and pulled him into an embrace. Harry went along with it, though he lay stiffly against her and took a long moment to hug her back. He was still startled whenever someone did this to him, Hawthorn thought, still a bit wary.

“I will mourn,” she said softly. “But I won’t mourn them forever, Harry. It’s why I wouldn’t have made a good necromancer. I’m not ready to sacrifice life, to give up closeness to the living world as both Pansy and Dragonsbane did. I want to retreat for a short time, even as you will, and then I am ready to embrace it.” She thought of the pain in her Dark Mark she had feared was infected, which had stopped the morning of the battle. She now thought it must have been the moment when Harry wounded Voldemort so badly that he was forced to go into hiding, though she had been involved in her grief and hadn’t noticed. A quick check with Snape, Lucius, Adalrico, and Pettigrew had revealed that their pain had stopped as well. Whatever the Dark Lord had been trying to do with their Marks, it hadn’t worked.

“That is brave of you,” said Harry.

“What you did was braver.” Hawthorn crouched down in front of him so that he wouldn’t have to strain his neck to look up at her. “To continue the struggle even though you had people asking things of you they would have no right to ask, grief or not. Harry, one thing I hope you learn in the Sanctuary is how to know when people are taking advantage of you, and how to refuse them.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Everybody says that,” he said.

“Everybody has a point.” Hawthorn kissed his forehead, on the scar, and resisted the temptation to lick it. Such gestures were for the pack. “I will see you, well and healed, in the autumn.”

Harry nodded, and stepped away from her, turning to look at Snape. Snape nodded, and guided him towards the hospital wing.

Hawthorn stood straight, watching them go, and then went towards her own room. She would stay in Hogwarts a few more days. She would take Wolfsbane on the nights of the full moon and run in the Forbidden Forest with Delilah and Claudia beside her. Then she could begin to think about healing.

On my own, this time, she thought as she shut her door behind her. I was tottering, but that was no reason to lean on the first shoulder that was offered, without thinking to look and see if that person needed support of his own.

Learn, Harry. Heal. Return to us stronger. That is for our sake, and the sake of the alliance, and your own. I want to see what you will become when you are healed.

Harry wrapped his arms around himself and tried to control his shivering. He thought he had everything he needed. His trunk was beside him, full of his school supplies, his clothes, his alliance gifts, and his Christmas gifts, as well as some books from the Black library, shrunken to fit. Argutus coiled lazily around his body, and the Many snake was wrapped around his neck. He’d said farewell to everyone he could think of, including Connor twice, when he’d shown up to the hospital wing and hugged Harry as if he’d sworn an oath of his own to do it for at least twenty minutes.

He was not cold. With the sun beaming down on the North Tower, where they waited for the carriage that would convey them to the Sanctuary, Harry could not be cold. And Argutus would have complained if he were.

He was shivering because he did not know if he could do this, after all, because the thought of going into a place like the Sanctuary and willingly letting other people see him hurt like mad.
Harry turned around. Draco, who’d said a private goodbye to Lucius and Narcissa this morning, was there, floating on an enchanted hospital bed. He watched Harry with sharp eyes, and Harry forced himself to incline his head.

“It’s all right,” Draco said softly. “I wouldn’t ever take you to a place that would hurt you more than it would heal you, and I wouldn’t ask you to go to a place like that for my sake, either. I truly believe it will be all right.”

Harry walked over to him and leaned on his shoulder, letting Draco put an arm around his neck and hold him close. At least Draco would be there, he thought. He would have someone he trusted and loved, and someone who needed him, so that Harry could tend to Draco if his own healing became too much.

“Harry.”

He turned. Vera had mounted the stairs, with a shrunken trunk of her own in her hand, and behind her was Snape, with his trunk and Draco’s. Snape’s scowl was as present as ever.

“It will be all right,” Vera said, echoing Draco’s words, which Harry supposed she must have heard. “We understand that the moments before healing can be just as terrifying as the moments of enduring the abuse. We know that. But you need this so badly.”

Harry inclined his head in a shallow nod, and worked to keep himself from hyperventilating. He concentrated on Vera as she stood with her head back, studying the sky for a moment, and then smiled and pointed.

Harry turned, and saw a small white shape moving rapidly through the air towards them. Harry strained to see some sign of winged horses pulling it and couldn’t manage. The carriage was white, carved of some material that radiated rainbow colors like mother-of-pearl, and looked just large enough and round enough for four to travel comfortably. It had no wheels. When Harry truly squinted, he thought he could see some sign of a golden rope running across the sky, on which it slid, but the rope faded away without trace when he looked for it again.

The carriage stopped with a gentle bump against the Tower, and Vera nodded to them as she opened the door. “Draco should enter first,” she said, “to find a safe resting place and insure he is not jostled.”

Snape floated Draco inside, and then entered himself. That left Vera, holding the door, and Harry, standing at a distance from the carriage and feeling the greatest surge of reluctance he’d felt since he first dreamed the plan to go to the Sanctuary up.

“Harry,” said Vera again, and stretched out her free hand. “They will be well without you for two months.”

“You can’t know that,” Harry said. “You can’t See the future.”

“No, we can’t.” Vera’s face was infuriatingly serene. “But it is time, Harry, that they learned not to depend solely on you. The Lady Wolf knows it. Your Malfoy’s parents know it. Your Headmistress knows it. The others will learn. You are vates, and Boy-Who-Lived, and many other things, but you cannot be the answer to every problem, the bandage to every wound.” Her voice softened, as if she understood how much Harry hated hearing the words spoken aloud. “Especially when you have wounds of your own.”

Harry closed his eyes. He would hurt if he stayed in the wizarding world, but at least he would feel that he was doing his duty.

Blood and bone and breath. You swore.

Sometimes there is a higher duty.

Slowly, he stepped forward, climbed into the carriage, and took the seat beside Draco, not looking Vera in the eye. He felt Draco’s arm stretch around his shoulders again and tug him tightly against him. Argutus gave a crooning hiss.

“I can show you your surprise soon,” he said. “Do not be sad. Now is not a time for sorrow.”

Harry felt the carriage bobble as Vera climbed in, and then the door shut. They rose and skimmed, faster and more smoothly than would have been possible on a broomstick, towards a direction Harry thought was the east and south. He kept his head buried in Draco’s shoulder, and did not look up, and tried to ignore his terror.

Chapter Ninety-Nine: Sanctuary

Harry woke slowly. He opened his eyes and saw cloth, then realized the pain in his neck had accelerated to the point of
waking him up. He must have spent hours with his head buried in Draco’s shoulder.

He sat back, rubbing at his neck, and Draco stirred and murmured, then shifted sideways and leaned against the carriage door. Harry glanced over his head. He could barely see anything, a combination of smudged glasses and the night that seemed to have fallen outside.

“We are in the shadows.”

Harry jumped. Vera, who sat across from him, watched his every motion like a cat watching a mousehole—no, not quite that blatantly, Harry thought. But it was unnerving. He turned back to the shadows, squinting. He couldn’t see a sign of light, not even the stars or the nearly full moon. “I didn’t realize they looked like this,” he said softly.

“Yes,” Vera said. “We made a bargain with one of the dead magical species long ago, cousins of the Dementors. We could not use illusions, even to shield the Sanctuary and help us preserve our sanity, but they could. In return for their shielding us, we saw a way for them to die at last.”

Harry looked at her in wonder. “How long ago was that? Do you know what they were?”

Vera shook her head. ‘The records call them shadow-weavers, or shadowborn, and why not? But we have never been able to make that match with any history of magical creatures and wizards. Perhaps they were not even cousins of the Dementors, as the legend claims. We see the present most clearly, Harry, and recording the past is of assistance to us only in understanding our patients. I suspect those ancient Seers, once the shadow-weavers had done what they promised and left the world, did not care enough to retain the name.”

Harry turned back to the windows one more time without answering. Her gaze had been piercing when she said that they understood and kept their patients’ pasts recorded, and he couldn’t blame her for that. But he didn’t have to stare into her face in some sort of silent communication.

He flinched when he realized that he could see something in the shadows this time. It was the bird with claws on its wings, teeth in its beak, and the lizard tail. It kept pace with the carriage, though Harry knew, if the vehicle had maintained its smooth, easy speed, that could not be easy. It turned its head towards the window and shrieked. Harry heard the shriek as mocking laughter. He wondered what would happen if it tried to enter and wound him, and if even a Seer could notice it. But the bird swerved off a moment later, and buried itself in the shadows with a flit of its tail.

“Harry?”

Harry realized he was shaking, his right hand clamped over the stump of his left wrist. He began counting to Mermish in his mind to make himself relax. When he thought he wouldn’t shriek or plead for help, he gave Vera a fragile nod. “I’m well. I just saw something out the window that startled me.”

Vera gazed at him in silence for a moment. “No one can see anything in the shadows,” she said softly. “Nothing that is really there, at least. Hallucinations are, of course, excepted, and so are illusions.”

Harry bowed his head and shrugged. “I suppose I’m just lucky, then,” he said lightly.

He wasn’t sure how much of his thoughts Vera could read. Sometimes she seemed able to discern the exact shape of what he was thinking; sometimes she seemed to refrain from that by courtesy; and sometimes she seemed to know his thoughts only as they related to his soul-wounds. She knew what he felt about his parents, but not the exact words in which he expressed those feelings.

“The strongest sensation about you right now is your terror,” said Vera, her voice like running water. “I cannot determine exactly what causes this particular terror unless you tell me. Will you tell me, please, Harry?”

Harry shook his head and glanced over at Snape and Draco, unable to believe they hadn’t commented so far. But Draco was asleep, and Snape had his eyes closed, an expression of intense concentration on his face that Harry recognized. He was reinforcing his Occlumency barriers, no doubt hoping that if he built them thick and high enough, the Seers couldn’t read him. He wouldn’t notice anything about the outside world until he was done, which might not be for hours.

“You cannot hide behind them.” Vera’s voice was gentle and pitiless. “There will be Seers at the Sanctuary who help all three of you separately, Harry. And though your Malfoy and the Bitter One do indeed carry scars of their own that will need time and healing, that does not mean you will spend every hour tending to them.”

“Draco needs me,” said Harry stiffly. “And Snape will be horribly uncomfortable if I’m not there. He only agreed to come because of me.”

“That is true,” said Vera. “I did not say that every hour would be spent not tending to them, either. But you must learn to relax and give yourself over to healing, to take time for yourself and not only for others.”
Harry shut his eyes and did his best to ignore her. He wished he could vanish as deeply into his own mind as Snape could, but here his training hindered him. Lily had shown him how to be so alert to the world that he couldn’t forsake it unless danger to Connor was involved. Harry had expanded that to include “danger to someone else,” but it did mean that he heard every small shift from Vera, every nuance of Draco’s breathing, every time Snape let out a subconscious murmur as he worked on the barriers.

“I thought you knew this.” Vera’s voice was flavored with disappointment now. “Why agree to come to the Sanctuary at all, Harry, if you did not want healing for your soul?”

“I don’t know how to do what you want me to do,” Harry whispered.

“And what is that, Harry?”

“How to just—” Harry shook his head. “I thought this would be wonderful because I could leave thoughts of the outside world behind. But thoughts of the outside world are coming with me.” His mind traced the arc of the bird’s dive past the carriage windows. "Even the parts of the outside world that I don’t understand. They’re here. I’ll scramble to keep from focusing on myself. That’s what I always do. If you insist that I can’t talk to Draco and Snape all the time, I’ll still worry about the werewolves, and the Ministry, and my reputation, and the war with Voldemort, and all the other problems I thought I came here to escape. I wanted this to be a holiday, but I don’t think it can be. I’ll make it not be so. I’m sorry.”

Vera didn’t reply for a long moment. Then she said, “Harry, you do not understand the nature of the Sanctuary. There is a reason that we can do things for the soul-stricken there that we can do nowhere else. It uses place magic, much like the Room of Requirement or the Ancient Vale.”

“Ancient Vale?” Harry echoed blankly, finally opening his eyes.

“The place you call Woodhouse.” Vera leaned over to him and patted his hand. “You think you will sabotage your own healing because you don’t know what the Sanctuary is like yet. In a short time, you will.”

Harry grunted noncommittally and looked out the windows again. The shadows still rushed past, featureless, and only the slight swing and creak of the carriage around them said they were moving at all. He could understand why owls took so long to reach the Sanctuary unless the Seers specifically opened the paths for them. It would be easy to get lost here.

The Sanctuary did seem to not be of a piece with the world around it. Harry didn’t think that was going to matter, though. He could feel worries building to a head in him already.

Will Loki really keep his bargain? Wilmot said he must if he swore his word in front of his pack, but do we know his pack was there? Perhaps he was bluffing.

What am I going to do if it turns out that more people blame me for the murder of those children than will work to exonerate me? I would have to stand trial, according to my own principles, but that will put my fight for everything and everyone else behind. Can I stand a sacrifice to Willoughby’s grief and hatred, or the grief and hatred of other parents?

And I am swearing myself often to oaths lately. Is that compatible with being a vates? It reassures others, but should that be my primary concern?

The worries rushed and washed over him, and Harry sighed. He really had wanted this to be different, but he didn’t see how it could. At least he was with Draco and Snape, and he knew Voldemort was extremely unlikely to attack while he was gone.

He might, though. What if he heals the wound in his magical core right away?

Harry shifted unhappily. Vera’s gaze felt like a pin, holding him to the soft dragon-hide of the seat while he struggled to get away.
exactly what happened.

The jolt woke Draco, and Snape, if he had not come out of his trance before and avoided showing it so that he wouldn’t have to deal with Vera, returned from his meditation. He scowled instinctively. Harry found himself hoping that would stay the same. Snape needed help from the Sanctuary, of course, but if they changed him out of all recognition and against his will, could this be said to be a good place?

“Welcome.”

Harry looked in surprise at Vera. Lines of tension that had carved her face had relaxed, and as she stood and opened the door, Harry felt that he had never seen her smile before.

“This is the Seers’ Sanctuary,” she said in a solemn voice as she ushered Snape out the door first, then Harry, and waved her wand to help float Draco. “More than that, it is a place of honor and homage, and a shrine to the present.”

Harry thought it had the sound of a ritual welcome, and then he stepped out of the carriage and into such a strength of magic that he gasped. Suddenly, the need to speak ritual words on arriving at a place like this seemed much less strange.

He stared around. The walls on either side of them appeared to be made of golden brick, or white stone; they shimmered so much it was hard to be sure of both color and material. Tilting his head back, Harry could see a golden spiral hanging in midair, which straightened when it approached the walls. That was the path their carriage had taken, he thought. It faded as it climbed higher, until it became the transparent wire he had found so hard to see when the carriage came to rest on the North Tower.

“Do those paths run all over Britain?” he asked Vera.

Vera gave him a considering glance. “All over the world,” she said, and then gently grasped Harry’s shoulder and turned him around.

Harry saw the Sanctuary then, a dense mass of pillars and roofs and windows and balconies and gardens, flowing into and overlapping each other. He blinked. Some of them looked ash-blackened, some red, some white, some gold, some the pallid blue of shadows on winter snow. They appeared to fall away from them, down a slope, but Harry didn’t know if that was reality or an illusion created by the immense number of roofs that ended one above another. He shook his head. “I thought it would be all white and gold,” he said.

Vera laughed softly, and the air picked up the sound and made it echo more than it should have. Most wizards had given up on place magic long ago; wands were portable, and that was important for a society that had to travel often from one place to another to work, visit relatives, conduct politics, and entertain itself. But the great advantage of place magic was its echo effect. A community of wizards located long enough in one place, all of them doing magic, would build up that magic, and the weight of the past would seep into the present and the future, cradling them and making new spells more powerful than they might otherwise have been—which in turn amplified and rebounded into and resonated with the place magic already there. Harry could feel the heaviness of the air, a heaviness that made it seem as if it were always summer in the Sanctuary, and knew that things would indeed be as different here as Vera had promised him. He shivered and wrapped his arms around his body.

“We are a shrine to the present,” said Vera firmly. She pointed over Harry’s shoulder to one of the red roofs, which seemed, as far as Harry could tell, to belong to a temple-like house whose doors were all open. “That room, for example, enshrines a magic that none of us have ever seen before, and which we don’t know how to practice. We have dared to speculate that it comes from Albania, but we don’t know that. When it dies out, that room will vanish. There are rooms here for every kind of magic practiced in the world, Light and Dark.”

“Why?” Harry whispered.

“At first, it came from Seers bringing dangerous artifacts here to keep them from the hands of those who would misuse them,” said Vera, guiding him down a series of steps from their landing. Snape followed, floating Draco; Harry could hear them conversing in low voices, but when he tried to listen, it was Vera’s that claimed his attention. “So many accumulated, and so much wizard magic went on in the meantime, that rooms of their own started forming spontaneously. And, of course, Seers went out into the world and brought back memories of what they had seen, and some were actual practitioners of arts other than Seeing, or possessed other gifts. More and more rooms came into being. But they always vanish when the last remnant of that art or that species dies out. We do not linger in the past. We see souls as they are, and work towards what they will be.”

“It’s not only that, though, is it?” Harry lunged for the same sense of alarm he’d felt on seeing the bird outside the carriage windows. The fear felt distant, though, like a dream. And it wasn’t compulsion, or a muffling of his thoughts, the way that Connor had described the Potter sword as doing to him so that he could kill. It was, instead, as if someone had spoken
steringly to him and reminded him that the bird was not here right now and he should concentrate on what actually lay in front of him. “There’s something more here than just gathering magic. That’s not the Sanctuary’s purpose.”

Vera nodded with a faint smile. “Looking into souls teaches us all compassion sooner or later, Harry.” She guided him gently around a broken place in one of the steps, where fallen leaves from—somewhere—danced in an eddy, caught by a whirl of wind. “The Seers who start out unimpressed or hateful do not retain that edge, even if it takes them years to lose it. We notice too much, and while there are some people in the world, like Albus Dumbledore, who may be twisted beyond all redemption or repair, there are many more who only appear that way.” She cast a speaking glance over her shoulder at Snape. “So our purpose becomes healing, challenging of wounds, going forward. And that purpose interacts with the valley. Violence is not permissible here. None of the truly dangerous and Dark artifacts can function. They are still enshrined, still honored, because they exist, and their existence deserves notice. But they are neglected if their only purpose is to hurt.”

“What happened to Remus?” Harry asked. “Did he still transform?”

“Yes,” said Vera softly. “The werewolf curse is a curse, Harry, rather than a soul-wound. But he did not need Wolfsbane when he did so. When he transformed, the Sanctuary simply forbade him to hurt anyone. He learned how to run and enjoy his strength, instead.”

Harry blinked. “Do you eat meat at all?”

Vera laughed. “No, unless it dies naturally. Or, if we have a guest who requires it, it must be brought in from outside the Sanctuary. Understand, Harry, we do not insist that everyone who comes here change at once to suit us. It is simply easier not to have violent thoughts, or to kill. One’s thoughts settle into the groove already traced here.”

“It sounds to me as if the past does influence you,” Harry muttered, as they reached the bottom of the stairs. The view of the Sanctuary had changed, now, but it was still so varied and so distinct that Harry found it hard to locate one point that he wanted to stare at more than others. He did study the house they seemed to be approaching, which was a five-pointed purple roof set upon pillars open to the world. Wind whisked in and out between them with a sweeping sound. Harry could see more of the small eddies at play in between the pillars. He recognized, after a moment, that they weren’t normal winds at all, but magic—magic doing just what it wanted, playing because that was what it wanted to do.

Vera laughed again. “Oh, it does, if you consider having the same purpose for centuries to be focusing on the past. But, once again, Harry, we do not retain the past and brood on it.” She smiled at him. “The Sanctuary does not like that, either, and though it will not force our guests out of those thoughts as readily as it will out of thoughts of violence, it will continually remind you of what is around you, so that it is extremely hard to get lost in your own mind.” Another glance towards Snape, whom Harry was beginning to feel sorry for. “That is why you should not worry that you will be unable to forget the outside world. The valley will help, patiently wearing away at you until you think about what is in front of you, not behind.”

Harry swallowed. “I’ve tried that,” he said, as they reached the side of the pillared house. He could see several people waiting for them, one tall one clad in white robes and several shorter ones in dark. The tall one appeared to be a man; he wasn’t sure about the gender of the others. “I tried to forgive my parents last year and move forward, and it didn’t work.”

“That’s because you did not truly forgive them,” said Vera, “only said that matters would be different when you had not faced every nuance of the abuse. The Sanctuary will put the past in front of you, Harry, because that is the way the magic deals with it, and blend the past with the present so that you can reach your future.”

Harry closed his eyes. He truly understood for the first time what he was getting into, and his resignation, the idea that he would have to think about his other problems because he had no choice, was gone. Instead, he broke into another fit of shivering as the terror returned full force.

Vera’s hand brushed his shoulder. “I will be the one working with you,” she murmured. “Do not fear, Harry. Yes, it is hard, but the Sanctuary does not propose to shut you up in a room with the nightmares of your past and let you scream alone. It looks to what is and what will be, and it takes the road through fear towards the morning.” Harry could hear her smile.

The other Seers came forward to greet them, then, with no more than a few sharp glances. Harry thought he might know part of the purpose for their long, slow approach; the Seers would need time to absorb their glimpses of new souls without getting overwhelmed. Vera had hidden when she and Peter first met with him at Hogwarts, to think about what she Saw.

Harry became aware, as the tall man approached, that the Many snake had not uncoiled from his throat to hiss since they entered the Sanctuary. Argutus, who had dropped off his body sometime on the stairs to slither off into the undergrowth, had expressed no fear, either. The message of the very air was peace, Harry thought, as he stretched out his hand to grip the man’s.

The Seer nodded to him. His hair was very dark, his eyes a pallid yellow that spoke of a Light pureblood background. “My name is Joseph,” he said. He studied Snape and Draco for a moment, and then smiled. Harry thought the smile reminded
him of some of Connor’s, when he had planned a strategy that would be sure to catch the Snitch this time. “You are Harry, and Draco Malfoy, and Severus Snape. Yes, Vera has told us something about you. And I look forward to working with you, sir.” He inclined his head to Snape.

Harry glanced back in time to see Snape narrow his eyes. “I did not come here to be healed,” he said, voice missing a small bit of its normal snap. “I came here because my son needs to heal.”

Harry swallowed the lump in his throat that those words produced, and turned back to Joseph. This really might be as good as watching a Quidditch game, he saw, when Joseph refused to back off, or even look intimidated. “You did not come here to heal,” said Joseph, “but that is what will happen.”

Snape made a snarling sound.

Joseph smiled at him.

“My name is Nina,” said another Seer, one of the ones in the darker robes. She stepped forward around Joseph and gave Harry one look from brown eyes filled with compassion, then turned to Draco. “I would like to work with you, Mr. Malfoy, unless you have any objections.”

Draco looked a bit better than he had before they entered the carriage, and even on his dignity, though Harry didn’t know how he managed that while reclining on a bed of air. He nodded. “That will be acceptable,” he said.

“You were on the move for hours, Vera,” said Joseph. “Would you like to come inside and eat?”

“Yes, please, Joseph,” said Vera, and Harry heard weariness in her voice for the first time. “It’s been months and months in a mirror-world.”

Harry glanced at her a few times as they walked between the pillars into a cool, dark room filled with tables. One of them was set with goblets of water, and plates of bread and cheese and fruit that made Harry’s mouth water. “Why did you stay so long at Hogwarts, if it hurt so much?” he asked, as he bit into a pear and had to close his eyes at the juice. “I thought you would go back to the Sanctuary in just a few months, especially since I didn’t talk to you that often.”

Vera took a long drink of water before she replied. Light danced on the silver of her cup—more magic playing, Harry thought, and varying the gleams like an artist. “I was determined not to return until you were ready to come with me,” she said softly. “Your soul’s been ripped open and apart too many times, Harry. This time, I mean the healing to be final.”

Harry bowed his head so that she wouldn’t see the tears that were suddenly, and ferociously, and inexplicably, prickling at his eyes.

Damned Sanctuary getting to me, he thought, and swiped at his face.

Draco frowned at Harry’s back. *What’s the matter with him? He hasn’t talked to me since we arrived. Is he hurt? Is he ignoring me? Does he think that just because we’ll be speaking to separate Seers it’s appropriate that we not talk any more?*

Fuck that. Draco was going to talk to Harry all he wanted, and he hoped that by the time the next ritual of their joining arrived, just a bit more than a month away, Harry would have overcome enough of his training to want more than a kiss.

He started to reach into his robe pocket for his wand and direct himself to float over to Harry, but Nina interrupted him. She was a short woman who appeared to drift about rather than walk, and who had nevertheless managed to fetch Draco the cup of water and the plate of bread and cheese he asked for before he realized she had moved. “Do you prefer Mr. Malfoy or Draco?” she asked him.

Draco snorted. “It would be stupid to stand on ceremony when you can see my soul,” he said in a drawl. “Draco will do.”

He glanced again over at Harry, who was still talking to Vera, and stifled a surge of irritation. *Perhaps she can tell me what the matter with him is. Is it a rule that guests must talk only to the Seers and not to each other?*

Nina blinked, then smiled. “Of course not, or you and Mr. Snape would have been stopped on the way down the stairs.”

“I’d call him Professor Snape,” Draco warned her. “He’s very prickly about his titles.”

“I can See that,” said Nina. “And I am glad not to be working with him. Now, what prompted you to ask that question?”

“Harry isn’t talking to me,” Draco fought down the urge to whine. He already might look pathetic, floating around like an invalid and bearing gaping wounds in his soul that would be as visible to these people as if they were wounds on his body. “I want to know why.”

“The Sanctuary blends the present with the past,” said Nina. “It does that so that most of our guests cannot hide from
themselves. I only had time to truly understand about half of what I saw in Harry’s soul, but I would imagine that he is caught up in such a whirlwind, such a change, that it is all he can think about at the moment. I’m sure he doesn’t mean to ignore you.”

Her last words rang with confidence, not a soothing tone, and Draco was satisfied. Of course, they could tell if he does mean to ignore me. “I’m not thinking about the past yet, though,” he pointed out.

“Give it a bit more time,” said Nina. “For everyone, it is different. I have seen traumatic memories overwhelm our guests, and people who simply stared off into space and smiled at the images there. For you, it seems to be appearing in the form of old uncertainties. Or are Malfoys usually so insistent that their boyfriends talk to them, their first time in a strange place?”

Her smile was sly.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” said Draco, striving to sound like his father. “We are dancing out a ritual that will take three years, and will make us joined partners by the time it’s done.”

Nina’s smile widened, and Draco realized that of course she must have been able to See that, and had enjoyed teasing him. “You’re going to be like this, aren’t you?” he accused her.

“Probably,” Nina agreed. “When I first looked into my own soul, I saw my sense of humor wound through everything. It seemed wiser to use it than to ignore it.” She cocked her head at Draco. “And wiser, I think, to leave Harry alone for the first few hours he’s here. He’ll talk to you tomorrow, I’m sure, and every day thereafter. But you both need some time apart.”

It suddenly hit Draco that, along with making sure Voldemort’s taint didn’t infect him, or as part of that, he would have Nina practically hanging on his every word.

That could be flattering, he thought, and smiled at her. “Will you listen to anything I want to talk about?”

Nina smiled. “Of course.”

“Even if it involves Harry and bedding him?” That was the one thing Draco wished he did have someone to talk to about. But of course Snape and his parents were not candidates, and Harry wasn’t at the point yet where he did much more than blush and look uncomfortable.

“Of course,” Nina repeated. “But expect me to want to talk about you, as well.” She examined him as though he had food on his robes. “Your soul’s interesting.”

Draco smiled. There’s a compliment I’m never going to get from anyone else—except perhaps Harry, when he feels ready to give compliments. I think I can be happy here.

Snape knew now that Occlumency barriers were not sufficient to prevent one of these Seers from Seeing whatever he liked. He was not dealing well with the discovery.

Joseph had not yet attempted to speak to him beyond his first greeting. He stood near the table, sipping water from a goblet of his own, and eyed Snape with an expression that reminded Snape far, far too much of Sirius Black just before he played a prank. Snape held himself straight, and refused every offer of food or drink with a glare of such rage that the Seers had given up even looking at him. Vera was talking to Harry, and the woman she had introduced as Nina to Draco. Snape supposed he should be grateful that the man supposed to “speak” with him had not approached him so far.

Inevitably, of course, Joseph did. Snape readied himself, touching one vial of a potion in his pocket that could be absorbed through the skin and would render the person it touched instantly immobile. The man’s sleeves were wide and open, at least, unless that was a glamour—but Snape thought he would have sensed it if it were. His wand was securely fastened to his belt, inside a holster, and it would take him a moment to pull it out. He walked as though he had nothing ready for a joke strapped to his legs, and he held his hands where Snape could see them.

Of course, he can read my mind, or at least my soul, if what Harry says is true. Snape stared at him. So he would know that I am expecting a prank, and he would not play one now.

Joseph’s smile slipped off his face. Snape felt a brief pang of bitter pleasure at that minor victory. He halted a few feet away and studied Snape seriously, then shook his head.

“Sometimes, guests coming to the Sanctuary do prefer to go through healing on their own,” Joseph said. Now he looked like Scrimgeour. Snape would not let that fool him. Once a prank-player, always a prank-player. He had always been the victim of bullies like this one, children of a charmed life, who thought that not only was Snape their rightful prey but nothing they
did to him really mattered. “But I do not think you are right for that,” the insufferable man went on, as if Snape did not
know exactly what he was. “You will fight every revelation that comes to you. You came out of love, but you can barely
acknowledge that love right now. You’re trying to build walls around you that won’t let any emotion through as long as
you’re here.

“The Sanctuary was created to wear down such walls.” Joseph paused for a moment, eyes very quiet, and then said in an
equally soft voice, “You’re hostile even to me, and while I can understand that, seeing the knots the world has put in your
soul, it will get you nowhere. I am not someone you’ve met before, with a stake in torturing you. I am not someone who
finds your soul as ugly as you think it is. I am someone who wants to help heal you.”

Snape hissed softly, and had the satisfaction of seeing Joseph take a step back. “I know what I am,” Snape said, keeping his
voice low so that no one else could intrude on the conversation. “I saw my own soul at seventeen, thanks to a potion. Then I
sat in a room with my mother for three days, while she died, and I learned truths that no Seer could ever show me. I will
thank you not to think that healing is what I desire or can accomplish.”

“It’s going to happen nevertheless,” said Joseph. “And you should know that I’m impervious to insult. When Vera told us
about you, we all agreed that I was the best choice to work with you.”

“I do not plan to talk with you,” said Snape flatly. “I do not plan to let you heal me, as you keep claiming. I cannot prevent
you from seeing my soul, but I am here to see to the healing of my son, and that is all.”

Joseph didn’t even react to the statement that Harry was Snape’s son. He simply nodded. “I would not expect you to change
overnight, poisonous and deep as your hatreds are,” he said. “I will sound the wells of them, and do what I can to purge you
of them.”

“Why?” Snape snarled, some of his frustration with the place breaking loose at last. “Why would you want to do this?”

Joseph smiled, and the look that made him resemble Sirius Black was there again. This time, Snape could give it more
nuances—not the look that Black had just before playing a prank, but the gleam of challenge, the glint that said he would be
a part of Snape’s life whether Snape wanted him to be or not. “You can call it aesthetics,” Joseph said. “I prefer looking at
souls at peace with themselves to souls at war. Or you could call it compassion, though I understand that counts for little in
your world. Or you could call it the thrill of the hunt, which you almost certainly will.”

He leaned forward until he was a few inches from Snape, and whispered, “The important thing you should know about me
is that I will not go away. I’ll do whatever I can to make this healing comfortable for you instead of challenging, but I do not
give up.”

Snape sneered and turned his back, striding towards Harry. It was high time that he rested. Snape knew he had slept in the
carriage, but it hadn’t been for long.

He ignored Joseph’s eyes on his back. He had other defenses beyond the Occlumency barriers, which, he could see now,
had been feeble. He had been a Death Eater, and a spy, and a teacher of some of the worst menaces to wizarding kind in
Potions. Anyone who tried to heal him would lose the battle to the reserves of pure spite he could summon.

And I will never mention my mother again. It is the air of this place. I was not prepared. But I will raise walls that cannot
be eaten by its acid.

Harry woke slowly the next morning, and lay there, staring up at the ceiling. He had slept without dreams, and certainly
without visions, unless you counted a vague dream of Draco a few minutes before he woke.

He knew his first session with Vera was today. He knew that he would go downstairs and have nothing to do but eat, talk
with Draco and Snape, and concentrate on healing himself.

He closed his eyes and sat up.

“Harry?”

Harry opened his eyes and smiled as he watched Argutus come in through the window of the room the Seers had given him.
It was fairly high above ground, or perhaps only fairly high up in the tumble of buildings that made up the Sanctuary. The
walls were white stone, and it was filled with windows that had no shutters or glass, and were simply open to the wind.
Harry could ward them with magic if he chose, of course. The bed was a vivid splash of blue in the middle of all that, and
the mirror on the wall and the pool of water, actually set into the floor, in a corner were equally intense splashes of silver.
Harry’s trunk sat at the bottom of the bed, since he hadn’t unpacked yet.
He was glad, at the moment, that the room was rough stone on the outside, too, so that Argutus could climb up and twine around him. He didn’t immediately put his head on Harry’s left wrist, this time, but wrapped around his shoulders.

“I have your surprise ready for you now,” he said.

Harry chuckled. “So soon?”

Argutus wriggled his tail in impatience. “Look.”

For a moment, Harry didn’t know where he was supposed to be looking. Then he realized that Argutus had turned so that his neck, and not just his head, rested near Harry’s left wrist. He looked, and saw his stump reflected in Argutus’s shimmering scales.

Above the stump danced a wisp of darkness. Harry whispered, “What is that?”

“The magic the child-eating woman used to prevent you from regrowing your hand,” said Argutus at once. “I could reflect runes, and it came to me that I should learn to reflect the Dark magic, so that you could see it and identify the curses. Then you can undo them, and you can have a hand again.” He turned his head and lashed his tongue gently against Harry’s cheek. “Surprise.”

Harry swallowed. He had put off researching the Dark curses Bellatrix had used because it would take too long, and anyway, he still didn’t want to admit he was weak and sometimes wanted a second hand back. But now, if he could see the curses themselves, it would be much easier to work out a way to undo them.

And he had no real excuse to avoid getting a second hand back if he could undo them.

“What’s the matter?” Argutus flicked his tongue again, this time uncertainly. “You’re crying.”

Harry swallowed again and wiped at the tears with his hand. “I—it’s a wonderful gift, Argutus, thank you,” he said.

“That doesn’t explain the crying.”

Harry tried to, but managed to say only, weakly, “I think—I think I’m going to change, now, really change, and I’m not sure if I like it.” Not even the air of the Sanctuary could soothe the tight bubble of pain and panic that soared up in his chest, or not immediately. *What am I going to become? What if I do lose some of the morals I still have, like not using force?* The hand was not really the sign of that possible loss of his moral compass, but a catalyst for it.

Harry felt as if the world were falling away from him. He buried his face in his arms, and felt Argutus coil around him, though just tight enough to comfort, not constrict his breathing. He swallowed again and again and again, and told himself that he wouldn’t sob, wouldn’t cry any further.

He had thought he would still recognize himself when this summer was done. Now, he wasn’t sure.

“Harry? Should I find the nice lady and fetch her? She does not understand me, but she could follow me.”

Harry shuddered.

Then he sat on the terror, and said, “No, Argutus. I’ll—get her. I’m supposed to go down and talk to her anyway, soon.”

“You are brave.”

“I leave that up to my brother,” Harry muttered, and sat for another moment shaking and wishing he did not have this terror, that he could either accept what was to come or cling to what he had been, and just do it *strongly* either way, damn it, not showing any weakness. One crack in himself could lead to a shattering he knew that neither he nor the wizarding world could sustain.

Then he picked himself up, winding Argutus gently around his waist so he wouldn’t dangle, and went to talk to Vera and tell her about the possibility for getting his hand back—and, doubtless, why he wasn’t sure he wanted it back.

He didn’t know if it was the bravest thing he had ever done, but it felt like it at the time.

**Chapter One Hundred: At Peace**

“But I’m not sure I want my hand back,” Harry said, when he’d shown Vera Argutus’s reflection of the Dark spells and what it meant. “I just know that now I have no excuse to avoid breaking the curses.”

They were sitting in one of the Sanctuary’s higher rooms, full of air and light. Harry could feel the throb of contained magic from the rooms next to them, and wondered tiredly for a moment what housed there. He leaned against the back of his chair,
which was crushed velvet or some material even softer, and shut his eyes.

“Why don’t you want it back?” Vera asked him.

Harry didn’t open his eyes, but he nodded. This was the reason he had come to her about it. Draco or Snape wouldn’t have asked the question in such a reasonable tone. Draco had never understood Harry’s feelings about his lost hand at all, and Snape, on edge with people able to see his soul, would have snapped. And Harry understood both those reactions, so he couldn’t even blame them.

“Because it would be a sign of admitting weakness,” said Harry, “if I cared about that to the exclusion of anything else. I do know some people who would have stopped at nothing until they’d broken all of Bellatrix’s curses and had their missing limbs back. I’m not one of them.” He opened his eyes and watched Vera for a moment. She sat in a chair with its back to one of the windows, her hands clasped in her lap, her eyes intent on his face. It made her look surrounded by light, diminished by the light, as if Harry were speaking to the sun instead of her. He could handle that.

“And because I didn’t want to devote time to it,” Harry said, even more quietly. “It was unimportant, next to so many of the other things I was doing. How could I say that I cared more about my hand than about working for the rights of werewolves, or reconciling with Snape, or studying the Dark curses that Voldemort used?” He shook his head, feeling his hair scrape lightly against the chair. “I only have so much time. I used to try to extend that time by skipping meals and sleep. Draco and Snape objected to that. But with having to do that, I’m left with a limited amount of hours, and some of that goes to schoolwork and to things I must do, and the rest of that, as much as I can spare, to the things I want to do: building the political alliance against Voldemort, especially, and vatics work. I was already faltering and dropping threads because I did not have enough hours to weave them all in. Researching my hand—that fell far, far to the bottom of the priority list. It would have benefited no one but myself.”

“You could have asked someone else to research it for you,” Vera observed quietly. She didn’t accuse, she just made the statement, and Harry found himself relaxing. He’d become used to studying someone else’s mood before he said something, especially in the last week with all the grief over the siege. There were things that someone could not bear to hear, and other things that could be said, but only at a later time. Vera seemed like a person to whom he could say almost anything. She was also a person he did not have to be strong for, and Harry appreciated that gift more than he could say.

“I suppose I also need to learn how to delegate,” said Harry, winning a faint smile from her. “But, if I had, I still would have asked someone else to research the curses Voldemort used or my allies’ pasts or proper greetings for magical species I haven’t met yet, not my hand.”

“And why not?”

Harry eyed her. “Same reason at the bottom of both weakness and not wanting to take time for it, I suppose,” he said. “It’s too personal.”

Vera nodded. “Do you wish to research these curses over the summer, Harry? I should warn you that the Sanctuary does not have extensive libraries. We do have rooms where you can venture to observe the effects of magic like this, and see what it does.”

Harry blinked. “You’d offer me a choice?”

“Of course I would,” said Vera.

Harry nodded. “I should do this. Snape asked me to at least think about it. Draco would be thrilled if I did this. Harry looked at Argutus, draped like a shimmering curtain over his shoulders. “And Argutus gave me a gift with his reflections that I shouldn’t neglect,” he murmured aloud.

“You are talking about me, but in that language. I heard my name.” Argutus poked him with his nose. “What did you say?”

Harry heard Vera make a soft noise—chuckle or sigh, he could not have said. He looked up at her, and she asked, “Is he wanting to know what you said? I know he can’t understand English.”

Harry nodded.

“Explain the situation to him. You might be surprised at his response.”

Hesitantly, Harry focused on Argutus and let his words emerge in Parseltongue. “I don’t know yet if I want my hand back, Argutus,” he said. “But I do appreciate what you did for me, and I think it would be selfish to neglect that gift.”

Argutus was quiet for a moment. Then his tail coiled up and wrapped gently around the side of Harry’s head.

“It is your gift,” Argutus said, turning to flicker his tongue along Harry’s cheek again. “You should do what’s necessary to
Harry stared at him. He wasn’t sure if he was more shocked by what Argutus had said or by hearing such sophisticated reasoning from an Omen snake.

“And what did he say?” prompted Vera.

“He said— ‘Harry began, and then saw Vera shake her head and realized he was still speaking Parseltongue. Sheepishly, he focused on her and repeated, ‘He said that the gift was mine to do what I want with. He wants me to want what I want.’

Vera’s face lit with a soft smile. “And so do I, Harry,” she said. “And so do many of the people around you, I would think, though they may override it by making commitments to your safety first, or they may drape it in metaphors about your training that make it seem as if you have no free will. But your Malfoy and the Bitter One are, perhaps, overly close to you. Do not think about what they might want, Harry. Do not think about what politeness demands of you, or politics, for once in your life.” There was an urgency in her voice he’d never heard before as she leaned forward and laid a hand on his knee. “Think about what you want, for once in your life. I will not push you. Argutus will not push you.”

“That’s why I came to talk to you about this in the first place,” Harry whispered.

“Yes, exactly.” She beamed at him. “Not to say that your Malfoy and the Bitter One would not displeased if you learned to want things just because you want them, but it is not their choice, Harry, it is yours.”

Harry cocked his head. “And you don’t think it’s selfish?” he asked. Probing at this felt like testing a loose tooth with his tongue. It hurt, but he couldn’t keep himself from picking at it.

Vera shook her head. “If you need someone to tell you it’s not selfish, Harry, I will,” she said. “It’s not. Do you think what your Malfoy wants of you in the joining ritual is selfish, simply because it will take three years and binds you to taking no other partner during that time?”

“But I don’t want any other partner, anyway,” said Harry, bewildered. “And, well, that’s Draco, and not—” He stopped.

“Not you.”

“Yes.” Harry stared down at his hand and the darkly-glowing stump. I had thought I was doing selfish things. I wounded Voldemort enough to give us this Voldemort-free summer, after all. I yelled back at Snape and Draco when they pressed me too hard. I had thought I knew what I wanted. Perhaps not completely, not yet.

Around him, chains seemed to be flying away, and the intense terror that had lurked within him since he had come to the Sanctuary began to thaw. He looked up at Vera. “You won’t recommend that I get another hand?”

Vera shook her head.

“You won’t recommend that I change in ways that I don’t want to?”

Again she shook her head. “I will point out when I think that your stated reason for a decision is not the one your soul is showing me,” she said. “That is why I am the one speaking with you, after all. I can see things you can’t. But you have been aware of the basics of what I see for a long time now, Harry. And you are no longer a child, and you are certainly very far from selfish. You are allowed to make your own decisions, to want what you want, and if you do not want another hand and you do not want a surname, both of those are your choices. And so are dozens more.”

Harry closed his eyes. The terror was even smaller now. “I—I’d like to walk for a while now, Vera,” he said. “I need time to think.”

“Good, Harry,” Vera said, a smile lightening across her face.

“Good, what?” Harry gave her a confused glance.

“Thinking about it,” said Vera, standing. “There was a time not so long ago when you would have thought about anything but that.”

Harry nodded to her, confused and bewildered and free, and wandered out of the room in a half-daze. He paused outside the door to put Argutus down, though. He wanted to be completely alone.

Snape woke in an unfamiliar bed, his wand in his hand, his head already turning towards the threat. It had been a knock on the door, carefully placed on the one patch of clear wood not protected by Snape’s wards. Snape supposed he should have known Seers would see that one patch, but he was still disappointed that this one hadn’t hit another place first and burned
“Good morning, Snape,” Joseph’s voice called cheerfully from beyond the door. “I’m here to tell you that there is refreshment waiting for you in the same room we ate in yesterday, if you’re hungry. Also, we’ve set up a potions lab for you in the room next to this one.”

“I had already chosen my lab,” Snape called back. He knew his voice was low and ugly, but he could not help it. He’d had a nightmare about Voldemort laughing as he taunted him, an imagination of what would have happened if the Dark Lord had discovered him during his days of spying. “I would have appreciated if you had left my supplies where I put them.”

“Couldn’t do that, I’m afraid,” said Joseph, voice firmer now. “That’s the roosting place of a flock of Diricawls. They need it. If you had bothered to read the plaque we’d placed on the wall, you would know that.”

Snape grunted. The truth was, he’d seen the plaque, but not wanted to take the time to read it. He resented everything about the Sanctuary, and after making sure he would know the way from his room to Harry’s room, Draco’s room, and his lab, he’d gone to sleep.

“You can try to irritate us,” said Joseph. “I know you’re good at that. But the truth is, none of us irritate easily, though there are many who will leave you politely alone. I’m not going to do that.”

Snape rose with a snap and a snarl. He strode across the room and jerked the door open. Joseph looked at him with one eyebrow raised. It did not please Snape at all that they were the same height and shared the same gestures. At least he’d been a bit taller than both Sirius Black and James Potter.

“I want you to leave me alone,” he said. “I want you to stop trying to heal me. If you force me to change against my will, then I can only conclude that you practice Dark Arts. I came here to accompany my son, not to heal.”

“So you’ve said.” Joseph’s expression was calm. “But the Sanctuary itself works on the souls of those who come here. It’s rather like plunging into a pool; you’re still going to get wet even if you only entered it so that your child wouldn’t drown. If you do want to be left completely alone, then I will leave you completely alone. But the transition is not an easy one. The way the Sanctuary reaches out to you is generally through dreams in that case. They are memories of the past, seen from another angle. They will not let you hide.”

Snape shook his head. “The comparison is not apt,” he said, wondering why the man would not simply depart. “Or it is only in a way that you do not wish it to be. I could work charms to keep myself safe from the water. I will take Dreamless Sleep Potion to keep myself safe from the dreams.”

Joseph sighed. “I suppose that might work, yes, since you’re a Potions Master,” he murmured.

“So disappointed?” Snape was delighted by the first crack he’d seen in the older man’s façade since they arrived. “You wanted to drag me kicking and screaming into your smiling world? Did you think I would be so easy to work with?”

“Frankly, no,” said Joseph. “My motivation is compassion. That is the one I told you about yesterday, that I knew you would not understand. I have seen souls marked by hatred as deep as yours is, and I know your past was not an easy one. I wish to heal you for the same reasons Vera wishes to heal Harry. But Harry’s grand reasons for not healing so far have been lack of time and lack of understanding between what is a wound and what is wholeness. Yours have to do with a large amount of self-blame. You consider yourself implicated in the ruin of your soul.”

Joseph curled his lip. “How very, very clever of you to notice.”

“Not so clever,” said Joseph. “A Seer who hadn’t observed any soul but her own yet could make that one out.” His eyes locked on Snape’s. “It has to do with why you do not think of yourself by your first name. It has to do with your mother. It has to do with the Mark you took and think, still, makes you a Death Eater in some way beyond the physical. It has to do with the hatreds that eat pieces of your life even now. One of them nearly destroyed your relationship with Harry.” Snape flinched, despite his fury, at the reminder of what going cold had done. “And the other is eating you alive now, inside and out. Werewolf fear.”

“None of this is your right to comment upon,” Snape whispered tightly.

“I can See it,” said Joseph. He was calm, and that infuriated Snape further. He could not think of the last time someone so close to him when he was in a mood like this had been calm. “If you truly do not want help in healing, then no, it’s not my right to heal you. But I think I should tell you that I understand you. Just being a bastard does not drive me away, because I understand the reasons that you are a bastard. And I can see where these hatreds are leading you. You may yet lose Harry, if you act on your hatred of lycanthropy.”

“You cannot predict the future!” Only when he finished it did Snape realize how close to a cry that had been.
“Character is destiny.” Joseph studied him intently from beneath a lock of dark hair. “But we can change our own destiny if we change our own character. I truly believe that. And so that means that this is a chance for you, Severus Snape, to change it, if you don’t want my help or the help of anyone else. But I will warn you: persisting in stubborn pride will lose you everything. Your life is tied closely to Harry’s now. Anyone could see that, too. And he is changing, willingly changing, as a result of being in the Sanctuary and working with Vera.”

“If you mean to say that he will change to someone who will not love me—“

Joseph shook his head. “I don’t think that’s possible. I do think it’s possible that he will change into someone who cannot forgive you, if you act on that hatred gnawing out a place in your heart. You acknowledge your love for him, if only to yourself. Do you truly want your fear to triumph over that, and lose everything in a mistaken moment?”

“That will not happen,” Snape said tightly.

“It already has.” Joseph’s voice was a near whisper now. “Granted, for a potion that Harry doesn’t know about yet. But how does creating a poison for werewolves do anything but feed your fear and put a weapon into your hands? What will you do if that weapon proves irresistible?”

Snape did not bother with telling the man to get out. He simply raised his wand and spoke the Severing Curse.

Nothing happened. Joseph gave him an acutely disappointed look. “The Sanctuary prevents use of Dark Arts,” he said quietly, and then turned around and left.

Snape shut the door and stood on the other side of it, eyes closed. He could control himself. He would control himself. So the air of this place was like acid, but if he had no Seer and it tried to reach out to him through dreams, he could resist it. Joseph had acknowledged as much.

He felt, as if it were a second heart in his chest, the presence of the werewolf poison in his trunk. He had not dared to leave it in his lab, just in case Harry wandered in and recognized the silvery potion for what it was.

You are already lying to him. What comes next?

He knew that, if Harry did change into someone who valued his own self-worth and his moral judgments again, then it was entirely possible he would not forgive Snape this. He understood Snape’s fear, he had said as much. But then, he understood the werewolves’ anger and frustration, and Snape had still heard him threaten to drain Loki’s magic in a steady voice. Push far enough, and Harry would strike back. And the distance one could push might grow smaller as he became more and more his own person.

How much of his tolerance have I already eaten?

Snape had lived most of his life secure, if not exactly content, in the knowledge that he had made his own mistakes. Other people had their share of blame, but the largest was his own. There were exceptions, such as the prank when Black had tried to kill him, but they were few. His own were such large mistakes that he didn’t have to try to repair them; he already knew they were irreparable. And that meant he didn’t have to be nice, or love, or to live in the sharp and confusing world that Harry kept trying to deal with. He could stay still. There was no effort involved, only the sharp, bitter, broken glass of self-knowledge and self-satisfaction.

His love for Harry had not changed that. He had retreated from being cold, but he still didn’t consider that he could let the coldness go. Why should he? He was unnecessarily bitter, and knew it. He was scarred, and knew it. He took great pleasure in existing, both bitter and scarred, long after his enemies had tried to kill and break him.

But what would happen if he did lose Harry’s forgiveness because of one of his scars?

He knew the answer. It would not be worth it.

He felt the presence of the werewolf poison like a suppurating wound, now.

He did not acknowledge most of what Joseph said, Snape told himself. He did acknowledge the truth that Harry had come here seeking healing and was probably on the way to it.

And if he changed, then Snape could not remain as he was. He wondered, now, if it was only the long delays and setbacks Harry had suffered on the road to healing that had enabled him to remain as he was so for long.

That is a terrible thought.

But accurate.

Snape had never made a practice of hiding from his own observations, either, and those who tended to flinch at his tongue
had only his scorn.

He was still not willing to speak to Joseph. These wounds were his own. And destroying the werewolf poison would be a useless gesture. He knew how to make the potion, now. He could duplicate it easily, especially considering the ingredients he’d brought.

*Not a coincidence that you brought those ingredients, is it?*

But he would not take the Dreamless Sleep Potion. He would wait for the dreams. He would change, if at all, on his own and at his own pace.

Besides, he doubted that the dreams could truly change him. Why should they? He had been through horrors that would have throttled lesser minds, and they had all been real.

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Draco stretched his hands luxuriously over his head. *Now this* was more like it. The Seers had given him a bed that rivaled his own at Malfoy Manor, and a room that had murals on the walls with white-blond wizards excelling in all sorts of battles and treaty negotiations. One even had a man Draco was sure was his ancestor becoming Minister of Magic.

“Draco?”

He looked up. Nina was poking her head around the edge of his bedroom door, and she carried a tray with covered dishes that steamed. Draco felt his mouth water. “Come in,” he said, “since you have food.”

Nina laughed and carried the tray in, balancing it gently on the edge of his table. Draco eyed it approvingly. It was made of silver, and the first dish Nina held out towards him was lightly steamed vegetables, the only kind Draco would generally consent to eat. Raw carrots and the like made him sick. He took up his fork, sipped from the glass of orange juice that stood next to his plate, and finished a few dainty bites before he asked, “Do we have a daily schedule?”

Nina shook her head and sat down in a chair next to the bed. “No. That would be counterproductive. If nothing else, the day after a shattering revelation, such as tends to happen to our guests from time to time, is not the one to insist on a brisk run or swim.” She smiled again, but Draco saw her eyes were serious, and braced himself. “Draco, if I can ask something—what’s your father like?”

Draco blinked. *She must see something of him in me, but I suppose, since he’s not here and she can’t read his soul, this is the next best thing.* “Proud,” he said. “Cold. Stern. He only loves my mother and me, and he gets vengeance on anyone who hurts us.” He smiled as he remembered what his father had told him about getting vengeance on the Death Eater’s family who had hurt his mother. “He’s a proper heir of the Malfoy line, and he’s always emphasized that for me. I managed to surprise him when I showed up early to confront him and gain his respect. He didn’t intend to confirm me as his magical heir, but he did.” Draco knew he was bragging, but Nina had said she was there to listen to him. Who else should he brag to?

“And your mother?” Nina asked.

Draco shrugged and ate another few bites before he answered. “Also proud. She would kill if anyone threatened me or Father, and she fights beside Father in battle—you wouldn’t believe how graceful they are together. But she’s more skeptical about pureblood ideas than Father. She was the one who insisted that I attend Hogwarts, and I think it’s because she wanted me to meet Muggleborns face to face and then still see if I could kill them. But she stayed married to Father even though he was a Death Eater, so she can’t resent them all *that* much. She was also the one who named me. My father wanted to name me after his father, I think. I know that she loves me. There have been times when I’m unsure about Father, but I always know with Mother. He paused, and then decided that this would be the safest place to say something he hadn’t even felt comfortable telling Harry. “I think she was happy when the Dark Lord fell, to tell you the truth,” he said in a low voice. “She knew he would probably return, but she had the peace and time to raise me. She didn’t want me to grow up in the middle of a war.”

Nina nodded.

“Why did you want to know?” Draco asked, as he spread butter on a piece of toast.

Nina scanned his face. Whatever she saw there must have reassured her, because she said, “I see echoes of them both in you, Draco. And I can see you that you admire your father and thought most of your life that you’d be just like him. But you’re far more your mother’s son.”

Draco was in the middle of eating the toast, and nearly spat out a large bite. He did manage to swallow it, though, because it wouldn’t have been dignified for a Malfoy to spit. “Excuse me,” he said, when he could speak again. “That’s a rather large
assumption to make on a day’s acquaintance.”

Nina laughed. “Draco, I think you forgot the part where I can see your soul.”

“I am a Malfoy,” Draco insisted. “I am worthy of my family’s heritage, or I wouldn’t have been confirmed as the Malfoy magical heir.”

“Why would you think that being your mother’s son made you unworthy of your Malfoy heritage?” Nina drew her knees up and placed her cheek on one of them, staring at him.

“I just—she’s a Black, that’s all,” Draco said, a little recovered now. “Of course, it’s still an honorable name and line, if you discount the insanity, but I’m not Draco Black.”

“Blood has very little to do with it,” said Nina. “We see someone’s character, Draco. As far as blood goes, you’re half Malfoy and half Black. As far as character goes, it’s almost all Black. I think your mother made as sure of that as she could. Your father sounds overwhelming, but I don’t think he won their war.”

The image of his parents warring over how to raise him was a new one on Draco. And yet, if he thought about it, he could see where Nina might take that impression. His mother had named him, his mother had insisted on sending him to Hogwarts when Lucius had wanted Durmstrang, and he had not begun training in the pureblood rituals until he was six, despite Lucius saying his father had started him on the path to being a proper Malfoy when he was much younger.

And there were other little things that—

“Sweet Merlin,” Draco breathed. “My mother’s more subtle than my father is.”

Nina chuckled. “Considerably, I would think, from your description of her. And you do have the potential to follow her.” She scrutinized Draco carefully. “Not exactly, of course, because your relationship with Harry is very different from the way Narcissa’s with Lucius’s sounds. But you do have the potential to be subtle and insistent and a great political success. It sounds like your father is feared.”

Draco nodded fervently.

“But you could be adored.”

Draco’s mind flooded with images, only a few of which involved Harry. Many were of him charming Harry’s political enemies at the Ministry, even the Minister himself, who had good reason to dislike Malfoys. Others involved him making haughty purebloods forget about Harry’s halfblood status, as he hadn’t managed to do at his own festival, a failure that still galled him. And he saw his mother’s shining face in there, too, as Narcissa returned from yet another dance done to persuade some Dark families to become Harry’s allies. He wondered, for the first time, why she had done that instead of his father, if his father really was the better politician.

The thought of being half Black, or mostly Black, suddenly didn’t sound half bad.

Especially because I’m not insane.

He looked up at Nina. “I think I’d like to be adored.” He ignored her laughter. “Can you help show me how?”

Nina inclined her head, eyes sparkling. “We can work on that.”
Carefully, he stripped the idea of all the contexts that automatically came with it: what his allies would think, what Snape and Draco would think, how it would make him look to the public if he came back from this retreat with two hands—whether Aurora Whitestag and her supporters would commend snidely on him trying to heal instead of studying how to defeat Voldemort—and how long it might take to break Bellatrix’s curses and how he couldn’t afford the time.

He put them all away in an Occlumency pool and looked at the idea of getting a second hand on his own.

_Do you want this?

_You don’t have to make any decision that you don’t want. Fuck what Snape and Draco would say. Your choice, Harry._

He waited, sending the question out into the maze of himself, wanting to see what echo would come back.

And like a wind, the answer came.

_Maybe. I don’t know yet._

Harry could feel his smile widening. He opened his eyes and watched as a parrot hurtled, squawking, from one vine to another, drenching its tail in the water on the way.

_And “maybe” is perfectly fine._

Tears stung his eyes for a moment. He leaned back on the terrace and folded his arms behind his head, staring up at the sun until afterimages danced in front of his eyes.

Wonder stirred in him, lifting its head and looking cautiously around, before it romped into him and became his major emotion.

_I can make those choices. I really can. And if Snape and Draco really love me, they’re not going to make bargains with me over it, and no one is going to push me, and whatever I decide is, finally, fine._

The birds took off a moment later because Harry was laughing, hurling the sound like a spear down into the vines and the water, to fall and be lost in the middle of cool green.

_I’m free._

End of Book 5