Chapter One: Haunted, Helped, Dreaming

“And how does it taste?”

Harry kept his gaze resolutely on the pear, to keep his face from burning. When he wasn’t thinking about how food tasted to him, he thought, it felt much more natural. He could enjoy sweetness, saltiness, and bitterness without pause. But now Vera was encouraging him to overcome the training his mother had given him to resist and even be uncomfortable with things that felt good, and, well, it included things like this.

Harry bit into the pear, and nodded. The fruit was incredibly cold and sweet, as was almost all the fruit in the Sanctuary. “Good,” he said.

“How good?”

“I don’t know,” Harry snapped before he could stop himself. “I don’t have a lot of experience measuring this, you know.”

He tried to apologize after that, but Vera waved off the words and leaned back in her chair, looking pleased. She was a small, round woman with quiet brown eyes that saw too much. Harry usually felt more comfortable with her than he did now. He had never yet seen Vera lose her temper for more than a moment, though, no matter what he did.

They were sitting in the usual room where he came to speak with Vera, a high place with open windows which the light and the wind were free to wander through. Vera sat with her back to the light, outlining her in a thick gold-white halo. Harry had to squint to watch her nod. “It is good that you no longer put such a guard on your tongue and think about what you say before you say it,” she told him. “You are becoming less conscious and more spontaneous.”

“And that’s a good thing?” Harry raised his eyebrows. His magic brewed and buzzed around him when he did it, and he calmed it with a touch. The time spent in the Sanctuary was about lowering barriers he didn’t even know he had, seemingly, and some of those had included barriers on his magic. Harry still wasn’t sure how he felt about that. “I do have to keep an eye on how I use my power, whether or not I’m respecting the free choices of my allies, what I do with Draco—“

Vera chuckled, interrupting him. “And if your whole life is a stiff dance,” she said, “then you will lose yourself to it in the end. Many different paces, walk and waltz and pavane, are better for living.”

Harry nodded, and then glared at the pear in his hand again. Most of what Vera said seemed obvious. Hell, most of what Draco and Snape said seemed obvious. But until they said it, formed it in words and presented it to him, he seemed unable to think of those points for himself.

He wished ferociously for a moment that he was normal, and looked up to find Vera staring at him.

“Do you wish to stop for today, Harry?” Vera’s voice was perfectly understanding, perfectly gentle—the kind of tone that usually just goaded Harry into trying harder. “I understand that you still think of the taste of food as a small thing, and indeed, I have seen you enjoying it on your own. There are other things we could talk about, regarding this kind of training.”

All of which would make me blush, Harry thought, and none of which I’m comfortable talking about with you. He shook his head and laid the pear on a table. “Can we talk about something else altogether?” he asked.

“Oh course,” said Vera. She hesitated, one of the few times Harry had seen her do so. That put him on edge even before she said,
“The deepest wound in your soul at the moment concerns the twelve children you had to kill out of mercy. You have not yet spoken about it, and you have been here for a week. Will you talk with me about that?”

Harry steeled himself. “Yes, I will,” he said. *Every step on this path is an uphill one, isn’t it? But he was sick of just covering up the wounds and hoping nothing ripped them wide open before time had a chance to soften the memory of how he’d earned them. He was part of a war, and a prophecy, and a political alliance, and that meant there would always be something to rip open the wounds before they healed. He’d come here of his own free will, he reminded himself for the thousandth time, and he was going to heal, and fuck everything that got in his way.*

Including himself.

Vera blinked at his agreement, but then leaned back, sheening her face with the sunlight again. “Good,” she said. “I understand that you still feel you could have done something else. What else could you have done?”

Harry closed his eyes. “I don’t know.”

*That* truly bothered him, far more than Vera’s insistence on concentrating on the taste of food or having him sit in warm baths so that he could endure pleasant feelings without squirming. He had revived the memory in his dreams and while wandering the terraces and rooms of the Sanctuary. The main factor that had doomed him while Voldemort held a dozen Hogwarts students under a Life-Web, able to torture or kill them at will, and challenged Harry to come down and surrender his life to save them, was, Harry had thought, time. He had known the students before him were suffering, and the students behind him had been suffering, too. If he had had more time, he could have done something, found some other solution than stopping those children’s hearts with a spell before Voldemort could notice.

But no other solution would occur to him, except yielding himself, and that would have lost them the war, at least according to people whom Harry trusted. And Harry piled more worry on top of that. What if there was something simple and obvious he was missing, something anyone else would have done, and he kept ignoring the option because that would mean blaming himself? He just didn’t want to be guilty, in that case. He *had* to keep track of what he did, what self-justifications he made to himself. Part of it was the *vates* path he trod, trying to respect the free will of everyone in existence, but an even larger part of it was his own fear of ending up like Dumbledore and Voldemort. Let him once excuse his own guilt, and what else would he excuse, what sacrifices would he say were necessary, what corruption would he let into his soul? He *had* to distrust himself.

“Harry?”

Harry blinked his eyes open in startlement. Vera had leaned forward and put one hand on his knee.

“Your thoughts coil on each other like serpents,” she said, “and this guilt is twined with so many others in your soul that I cannot see it clearly. Will you explain it in words for me?”

Haltingly, Harry licked his lips, tried to dismiss thoughts of sounding stupid or guilty or self-obsessed, and said, “I—ma’am—“

“Call me Vera, Harry.” She smiled, and if Harry had ever met one of his grandmothers, he assumed she would have looked like this. “You retreat into formality when you’re upset. I would rather that you be as honest with me as possible.”

Harry inclined his head, and then had to reflect that that was a formal movement, too, not just a nod. He swallowed and said, “I thought, once I had time and peace, that I would know exactly what I should have done instead of the mercy killing.” Vera nodded encouragingly when he paused, and Harry plunged forward. “But I still can’t see anything else I could have done. What am I ignoring? Am I so afraid of facing up to my crime that I’m unconsciously exonerating myself? And what does it mean if I am? Is the British wizarding world going to have to face another Dark Lord before I’m done, because I’m sliding down the path to self-justification and I don’t even realize it?”

Vera observed him in intense silence for a moment. Harry waited, his nerves humming. His right hand smoothed over and over the scarred stump of his left wrist.

And *that* was a problem, too. He had decided that, perhaps, it was worthwhile researching the Dark curses Bellatrix had used to keep him from getting another hand. Maybe. But his newborn conviction had provoked a too-pleased reaction from Draco, as well as questions about why Harry wasn’t sure, and Harry had had to shrug and shake his head.

He hated being uncertain. It was the thing he missed the most about the days when he’d just been able to exist under his training and think of his brother as the center of his universe. Everything was *so simple*. There were so many things Harry knew how to do, and if something unexpected did happen, like his Sorting into Slytherin, then he had other vows and promises and certainties
to fall back on.

Now, half the time, it seemed he stood on the edge of a abyss and looked down into it, and every choice he made could have devastating consequences for other people, and he didn’t know which would be less devastating, to leap or stand.

“You have not blamed the war,” said Vera.

Harry blinked. Usually, he was better about tracing the course of the Seer’s thoughts, but he had missed the connection she made this time. “What?”

“You have not said that you had no other choice to do this, because it was war.” Vera curled so that her legs were beneath her in the chair, her head bobbing up and down like a wren’s pecking at seed. Her eyes never moved from Harry’s face.

Harry blinked again. “Of course not. Why would I? Other people manage to get through wars without mercy-killing a dozen children.” He shuddered a bit, shaken by his own deep bitterness, and the grief underneath, like black water beneath a layer of ice. Now that he’d started on this, though, he couldn’t seem to stop. “Even Dumbledore didn’t have to do that. The worst he did was set children free who’d been crucified and suffering for days. And he was forced into that. It was Voldemort’s doing.”

“And this was not?” Vera tilted her head to fix him with one bright, bird-like eye.

Harry hissed under his breath and shuffled one foot back and forth. “I—well, it was Voldemort who set the Life-Web, obviously.”

“And?” Vera prompted, voice low.

“But it was me who made the decision,” said Harry. “It’s not as though Voldemort told me that I had to kill those children myself or he would torture them. He promised that they would live if I went down to him.”

“Did you trust him?”

“Of course not,” said Harry, mind calling up images of Snape lying with his right leg unwound into pieces on the floor of the Chamber of Secrets, of helpless Muggles lured into the water by sirens, of Voldemort, still looking like a deformed child, biting a piece of flesh out of his chest for the resurrection ritual. “But that didn’t matter, did it? I wasn’t backed into a corner. I still didn’t make the choice he gave me.”

He stopped, with those words ringing in his ears, and blinked.

“Yes,” said Vera softly. “And that, I believe, is the difference between you and Dumbledore, Harry, and certainly between you and You-Know-Who. If you were already seeking some way to free yourself from guilt, by saying it was entirely the war’s fault and people make horrible decisions in war, or by claiming that it was Voldemort who forced you into that precise choice, I would worry more. But you acknowledge your own role in the decision. You acknowledge that you do not believe Voldemort would have freed them, or that your giving your own life up to him would have made the slightest bit of difference. You chose a path he did not dictate. And you know it. That is a strength, Harry, not a weakness.”

Harry blinked some more. He could feel a weight on his shoulders and his heart easing, a bit. He just wasn’t sure if he believed in it yet. “Oh,” he said softly.

“Now,” said Vera, “perhaps you will, someday, think of another path you could have taken. And you will preserve that path into the future, and if you ever find yourself in such a situation again—“

“Which I will, knowing Voldemort,” Harry muttered. He’d cut a hole in the Dark Lord’s magical core, so he constantly lost his power whenever he tried to use it, but Harry expected Voldemort to find some way to get around that eventually. At least it had won him a summer.

Vera continued undaunted. “Then you will know what to do.” She clasped her hands and beamed at Harry. “And I think that’s enough for today. You look as if someone’s hit you on the head with a rock.” She chuckled. “Go find your Malfoy. I think Nina is done with him for the day, as well.”

Harry nodded, murmured, “Thank you,” and left the room. Just outside the door was a broad, shallow stone step filled with sunlight. Argutus was basking there, fully six feet of shimmering, mirror-colored snake. Harry shaded his eyes against the reflection of the sun from his scales and shook his head.
“I can smell your doubt.” Argutus’s voice was bright, and his tongue flickered out as he lifted his head to look at Harry. “What is it this time? Can you not believe how beautiful I am, or how lucky you are that I chose you to be my friend, instead of someone else?”

“Neither,” said Harry in Parseltongue, stooping to offer his left arm to Argutus. The Omen snake wound up his arm, around his shoulders, neck, and waist, and stopped when his head was tucked into the crook of Harry’s collarbone. Harry stroked his scales as he walked up towards the small house where Draco usually stayed. “Sometimes, I am stunned that you’re here with me at all, or that I’m here. I wake up and expect to find myself in Hogwarts, or a dungeon where Voldemort keeps his prisoners, and that the Sanctuary is a dream.”

“If we were in dungeons,” Argutus disagreed, “I would have found a way out by now, reflecting hidden doors in my scales.” His body writhed and shifted, nearly blinding Harry for a moment. Harry stumbled on the next step down and reoriented himself to which direction was blue sky and which sprawling roofs of every conceivable color and design.

“I’m sure you would have,” he said. “Just don’t try to demonstrate it to me while we’re walking.”


“We didn’t grow legs,” Harry said patiently, as he rounded a corner and jogged into the cool darkness of the antechamber to Draco’s room. “You lost them.”

A startled pause, and Argutus said, “That’s not what the room says.”

“What room?” Harry knocked on Draco’s door, and Nina, Draco’s Seer, opened it a moment later, giving him a delighted smile. “Draco was just about to send me to fetch you, Harry,” she said. “If you’ll come in?”

Harry nodded, and listened to Argutus’s reply as he shifted past the slender woman. “There is a room that speaks of snake magic, which must still exist somewhere in the world, or there would not be a room that talks about it. It says that snakes were the original creatures in the world. Everyone else comes from us. You grew legs, and you grew skins that you never shed. Why?”

“Ask your room, as I’m sure I don’t know,” Harry muttered, and then looked up at Draco. He was startled to find him out of bed, and dressed in formal wizarding robes for the first time since he’d possessed Voldemort during the final battle.

“Draco?” he asked tentatively.

Draco had not expected to hear such concern in Harry’s voice, and some of his pride melted into annoyance.

“Harry?” he echoed the same way, his eyes wide and his mouth round, and saw Nina smile over Harry’s shoulder as she shut the door behind her. Draco resisted the urge to smile in return, since Harry would think it was at him. Nina was learning him well in the last few days, especially since Draco could talk to her about Harry as he could no one else, and she would know Draco wanted to be alone with his boyfriend.

Harry frowned. “You were wounded badly,” he said, tugging his hand through his hair. “And I didn’t know how much progress you’d made in healing the taint.” They hadn’t seen each other at all yesterday; Draco had slept after an exhausting talk with Nina the day before, and Harry had apparently spent most of the time wandering the gardens with Vera, or sitting in a warm bath and attempting to adjust to the sensation.

“I no longer need to lie in a bed,” said Draco. “And there’s something we need to talk about, Harry.”

Harry tilted his head. “Really.”

The word wasn’t the most inviting invitation ever extended, but Draco forged ahead. The Sanctuary’s air tended to wear away at emotional barriers. That was part of the reason Harry’s irritation and worry crackled just under the surface, and part of the reason Draco was surer of getting an honest answer when he asked his questions. “Yes. You froze when Voldemort threatened me in the Midsummer battle. You couldn’t do anything about the sirens, even though you managed to kill those children he held under the Life-Web when his Death Eaters were killing other students—and I don’t really think the sirens were less dangerous than the Death Eaters. I want to know what was so different about me.”
“You just want me to gratify your vanity,” Harry replied, relaxing. “And that’s easy enough. I love you, Draco, and you are more important to me than most other people. Even masses of people.” He rolled his eyes. “Happy?”

“Not at all,” said Draco. He had thought this might happen. Harry was misunderstanding the point of his question. “What happens if someone else threatens me in battle like that?”

_Ah-ha. He sees it now._ Harry had tensed. Then he whirled away and went to look out Draco’s window. Draco wondered if he had noticed yet that every mural and tapestry on the walls portrayed a wizard with white-blond hair achieving some triumph or receiving some honor. The Seers had chosen well when they gave Draco this room. Harry, of course, tended not to appreciate art until someone ordered him to appreciate it.

Draco didn’t think he had any idea how beautiful he looked, either, staring down at the waterfall that cascaded away next to Draco’s house, his green eyes narrowed against the sunlight, his arms folded and his back tense enough to break a wall.

“Then I’ll freeze again, I suppose.”

Draco shook his head and moved closer to Harry’s back. “Not good enough, Harry. You’re going to be a leader most of the time, if only because you’ll be the most powerful wizard in almost any battle. And we can’t afford to have our most powerful wizard freeze because Karkaroff grabs me—”

“Karkaroff is dead.”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Or Walden Macnair—”

“He’s dead, too.” Harry glanced back at him over his shoulder. “You told me you possessed him and forced him to lead some of the other Death Eaters into a trap yourself.”

Draco snarled. “Or Voldemort, Harry. If he grabs me, you can’t freeze. And no, I am not going to stay behind while you go into battle,” he added, when he saw Harry opening his mouth to suggest something.

Harry blinked. “I would never ask you to, Draco.”

“Oh.” Draco had to admit that he might have let his own freed emotions get the better of him there. “Sorry.”

Harry nodded and turned, putting his back to the window and slouching so that his shoulders brushed the stone. Draco hid his delight. There was a point in his life when Harry would never have shown even this degree of relaxation. His gaze on Draco was pensive as he stroked his snake’s head. “It’s all right. I might feel better if you’d stay safe, but you wouldn’t. And it’s your choice to fight. And I have to admit,” Harry went on, a faint smile appearing on his lips for the first time, “I like the idea of us fighting side by side like comrades, instead of a soldier out on the lines and a healer waiting behind them. I still stand by what I said after your possession of Voldemort. You were _magnificent_ in that battle, Draco.”

His gaze was deep and warm, and Draco wished he could bask in it without saying something to snap the mood. “Thank you,” he murmured. “But what about if someone does threaten me, Harry? Can you learn to live with it, to do something besides freeze?”

Silence, and Harry took his hand away from Argutus and clenched it into a fist. Then he sighed.

“I’m a leader,” he said, “and that’s not going to change. And you’ll be fighting beside me, and that’s not going to change, either. I’ll _have_ to learn to live with it, won’t I?”

Draco felt a burst of affection and pride and—he didn’t know what other emotions were in there, just that they were there. He put out his hand, and Harry stepped across the room to clasp it. “Together, then,” he said.

“In all things,” said Harry, and held his eyes, and if he might still flinch away from him when he felt too good, his face showed nothing but sincerity now.

Draco grinned at him, and then Harry asked, “How did Nina help you remove Voldemort’s taint on your mind?” and they were past the first obstacle that Draco had felt lying between them.

There were others, of course. He wondered, even as he talked about Nina telling him clearly what impulses she saw in Draco that were not his own, and what parts of his soul looked like his own to her and which weren’t, if Harry was keeping count of the time. They’d been in the Sanctuary a week, and it was the early part of July. Harry’s birthday was coming up at the end of the month,
and so was the second ritual of the thirteen in their three-year courting dance.

Draco fully intended to not only have Harry thinking of him and him alone on that night, which had happened on Walpurgis, but to have Harry share in more pleasure than he had managed then.

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Snape smoothly conjured wooden targets and just as smoothly used his wandless magic to destroy them. He hadn’t had any trouble using it since they arrived in the Sanctuary. The air, the atmosphere, the very light here ate away his defenses and made his emotions boil to the surface.

Two wooden, human-shaped targets appeared. The next moment, both exploded into splinters, and his magic curved around the room, a fanged beast on a leash.

He had dreamed last night. The Seers were leaving him alone, as he had demanded, but, as they had promised, dreams came hunting him in their place. Snape had relived, again, the day that he finished brewing a potion that would allow him to see his own soul, and drank it.

Bang, bang, and two more targets were no more. Snape paced to the other side of the room and conjured up a stone basin. It burst apart when he glanced at it. Snape felt a shard sting his cheek, and a small flow of blood appear. A tongue of his magic licked the wound in the next instant, and it flickered and vanished.

He had seen what he was. He had seen the knots there, the bitternesses, the absolute and utter tangles of resentment and hatred and envy. It was that sight that had ultimately driven him to join the Death Eaters. What better place for someone with a soul that looked like that? He knew he could never find sanctuary in the Light, not with their golden Gryffindors, not when some of those who served the Light had tried to kill him in his sixth year at Hogwarts and had escaped expulsion only because of the Headmaster’s favor. His later confirmation that Dumbledore felt guilty, in part, because Sirius Black had endured childhood abuse that Dumbledore had been unable to rescue him from did not change Snape’s mind. Horrible things happened in other people’s lives all the time. But those were attended to. His were ignored. It was the way of the world. He was ugly, inside and out, and the ugly were neglected for the beautiful and the charming. Snape had sometimes wondered how many of Lucius Malfoy’s victories were due to innate talent, and how many to the combination of his last name and his white-blond hair.

Another pair of targets started to form, but they didn’t get more then a few limbs intact before his magic chewed out their hearts. Snape could not cast Dark Arts spells in the Sanctuary—they simply would not work, the peaceful air suppressing them before that could happen—but he could and did use his magic for pure and simple violence that worked against inanimate objects. He paced the room, and then he stopped and leaned his forehead against the wall and closed his eyes.

He knew the cause of his latest outbursts. The dreams that had appeared to him so far were in chronological order. They tried to show him his memories from a different angle. Snape did not know that he could accept the vision of his soul as anything other than what it had been, what he had decided it was at seventeen. But he knew one thing. He knew what was coming next.

The three days at his mother’s bedside, as Eileen Prince slowly died, as she told him truths that had scored his soul forever, that had killed the last moments when he might have referred to himself by his first name. Those three days had destroyed the last sanctuary he had. When he had buried his mother, he had gone, dry-eyed and bloody-minded, to Lucius, and Lucius had brought him, without pause, to the Dark Lord, and Snape had sold his soul to Voldemort for a Mark on his arm.

Before those three days, he had clung to the idea, pathetic and misplaced though it was, that part of him was worth something. His father was a Muggle, a rough and shallow and poor man. But his mother was a pureblood witch, of a line once powerful and even rich. Snape had thought of himself as half-pureblood—reared out of their society, knowing almost nothing of their rituals and their dances, forever a stranger in that much, but at least connected to them by blood. A halfblood Prince, if he could be nothing else.

And then his mother had told him what he truly was.

And Snape had gone out to cause pain to others. Why shouldn’t he? Pain was the way of the world.

He did not want to face those memories again. He would rather hate than fear. He would rather brood on what he had become than remember how he had changed into what he was.

He did not want to remember—he rarely did, consciously—another way in which he and Harry were alike. Tobias Snape had left
his own scars on Snape’s soul, as James Potter had on Harry’s. But the scars from both their mothers ran far, far deeper.

And both Lily Potter and Eileen Prince had believed they were doing the best things for their sons, in the end.

Snape conjured a stone pillar this time. It split down the center, and the pieces went spinning into corners, bouncing off each other with a series of sharp cracks, growing smaller and smaller each time they did so. Snape imagined each one as Sirius Black’s skull.

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Harry opened his eyes slowly. He had not had much trouble sleeping since he came to the Sanctuary, and he wondered if only the odd dream—something about a book sparkling as he opened it, with a title that included the word *Medicamenta*—was to blame for his wakefulness now.

Someone laughed.

Harry sat up abruptly, because he knew that laughter, but it was too late. The bird sitting on the end of his bed, lizard-tailed, claw-winged, red-eyed, tooth-beaked, with feathers that shimmered like an oil slick, had already flown at him and raked its talons down his left arm from his shoulder to his stump. Harry hissed at the pain, and watched as the wounds froze over before any blood could fall, just like every other wound he’d received from the bird.

He raised his head to glare as the bird danced gleefully over the end of his bed. “What do you want?” he hissed.

*You will not know until it is too late.* The words seemed to appear in his mind as if he’d always known them. *I am preparing you. Marking you. Warning you. Binding you.* The bird screeched, a more unpleasant sound than its laugh. *We are all bound, you and he and I, and we cannot escape. But I can arrange the bond to my liking.*

“If you would tell me what you are talking about—”

*You could still do nothing. It is not a binding about which things can be done.* The bird flew at him, and, as always, Harry ducked. Again came the laughter, and then it faded above him.

Harry was left to sit and shake in place, until the steady ache from his arm reminded him that he should do something to heal the wound. He placed his hand on the scratches and closed his eyes, concentrating. Nothing happened, and Harry cursed, voice trembling still.

From what he could tell, the bird was a creation of pure magic, and its vicious temper reminded Harry of his own magic just after it had escaped from the phoenix web, growing to sentience under intense pressure. His magic had been uninterested in anything except punishing his parents for confining it, even though, by then, Harry had not wanted to hurt them. That this creature was interested in hurting Harry…

*Did I hurt the wizard that it belongs to? Is he imprisoned somewhere, and the only way he can reach me is this? But the bird’s been appearing for months. I don’t know who it could be.*

Harry took a deep breath, and sighed. It would mean explanations he didn’t like, but he would have to go to Vera and show her the wounds, since his own magic couldn’t heal them. They stung like blazes as he slid out of bed, and he tried not to move his arm too much.

He did pause on his way out of the room. He had thought he heard a faint scream, as of someone in pain. But it didn’t sound again, and so Harry made his way slowly down the terrace steps, wincing as every last one jolted his arm.

He frowned as the bird’s laughter repeated itself in the distance.

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**Intermission: Fever Dream**

The world around him was dark, and close, and hot. The world outside breathed light rain, the coolness of early summer in this part of Yorkshire. But inside, with the fire blazing, and the windows shut, and the deep, sweet scent of sickness in the air, it could have been summer in a jungle.

Summer in a fever.
Severus waved his wand, and the fire flared higher. He gagged. From the bed came a rattling cough. Severus turned and looked towards it, thinking for a moment that his mother would fall asleep again.

A twinge hit his left arm. He rubbed it. There was a black symbol flickering there, smoke and fire, and then it faded. A snake and skull? Severus thought so.

And why not? he thought, as he moved to sit on the small collection of pillows not far from his mother’s bed. *I have thought of that often enough, in the last few days, and the atmosphere in here will affect me. But—there may be no need for that, even now.*

Lucius had promised him that Severus could be a part of the Dark Lord’s inner circle if he desired to be so. But Lucius promised many things, and if there was anything Severus had learned while he was at Hogwarts, it was wariness of promises made with a bright voice, or shining eyes—or, for that matter, half-lidded eyes in which wormwood cunning lingered. Lucius’s promises could wait.

His mother was dying. It was important that Severus be here, that he see what happened when she did. He folded his arms on top of his legs and breathed in the sickness and the smoke. His head felt heavy. His thoughts drifted.

“Severus.”

Severus turned. For a moment, the woman struggling to sit up in the bed—he knew better than to go to her and assist her—made him want to shake with shock. *You’re dead, you’re dead,* he wanted to say, but he knew she wasn’t. She was dying. And why did thinking of himself by his first name seem strange?

The half-formed thoughts swirled and vanished like the smoke as he watched his mother lean against her pillows. Eileen Prince had never been beautiful, and what little liveliness remained in her face had drained away and vanished soon after she married Tobias Snape. Or so Severus imagined; he only knew what his mother used to look like at all from the three old photographs she had shown him. She had long since gone sour-faced by the time he was born.

“Do you remember what we spoke of yesterday?” she asked him, and then paused to let out a rattling cough. Blue stars of light flared and flashed and vanished around her crabbed hands and her liver-spotted throat. Severus forced himself to watch those without emotion. His mother had Pandora’s sickness, which opened the box of her own magic and turned it on her, depriving her of any skill with a wand and accelerating the aging. Her weakness had been exacerbated, doubtless, by the smoke and pollution of the Muggle town she lived in. But it really did not matter what she was dying of. She was, and they could not have sought help from St. Mungo’s even if his mother in her pride would have consented to it. They had no money for the Healers.

“The way of the world,” Severus said, which was an answer to both his own thoughts and his mother’s question. He saw his mother’s eyes flash with anger, and he bowed his head. He knew what came next. He mouthed the words along with her.

“Forget that accent, Severus. Shed it. I understand that being among the relics of your childhood brings it back, but you must learn to shed it, or you will never gain any respect.” His mother spoke slowly, carefully, precisely. She spoke like the proper pureblood witch she’d been raised to be. Severus’s voice, when he didn’t watch it, imitated the Yorkshire accent of his Muggle father. He had struggled, with his mother’s help, to overcome that defect, but he still slipped into it when he was—

Well. Here. The house at Spinner’s End, the home of his childhood, the small and slovenly hovel where magic had taken root, in his mother and himself, and grown strange and twisted, into a plant like belladonna if it was a plant at all.

His mother was trying to help him. Severus understood that. And mingled beneath his gratitude, twined with it, were helpless resentment of the world, that trying to sound different was necessary at all, and helpless resentment of her, that she had never tried to spare him from the harsh truths of the world as other mothers did. She had let him know what he looked like, what his chances were, with his mixed blood, in the wider wizarding world, and how his peers would regard him. He had gone to Hogwarts already knowing what he would find there, though nothing could have prepared him for the sheer malice of Sirius Black and James Potter. And so he had his mother to thank that he had not gotten—no, *got*—hurt more yet, but he also had her to hate for never having any illusions of a comfortable, safe, tame world to lose.

She had taught him to see with clear eyes. Hatred was more common than love. Behind all the grand illusions were common, petty secrets that others would kill to keep because of their pettiness. Honey and flattery were the sweetest poisons, and should never be swallowed.

“I understand,” he whispered.
“Good.” Eileen stopped and had to close her eyes for a moment. Severus lifted his head to study her. Her breath wheezed in and out of her lungs. A white star danced on her lips, then burst apart in a shower of sparks, and her coughing eased. By that, he knew it would not be long. Pandora’s sickness, like the woman for which it was named, let hope free from the box last of all.

“I want you to understand one thing more,” Eileen continued. “You have no claim to being pureblood, Severus.”

Severus did not know how long it was before he whispered, “What?” His heart seemed to hang motionless in his chest, like a slug plunged into a jar of Salting Solution. His memories danced through his head—memories of his mother telling him that his father could not understand him because he was magic, and because he came from a much nobler, older, purer line than anything a Muggle could dream of; teaching him to write his name as Prince, and not Snape; telling him legends of dark purebloods and implying that he had a place among them. She had taught him to consider himself as pureblood in spirit. They would always scorn him, but he could honor them, and that meant the tie between them was never truly lost.

“You have no claim to being pureblood,” Eileen repeated, slowly, in that manner that said she knew he was stupid sometimes, but there was no excuse for that. It was the voice she had used until Severus finally managed to go cold. “You’re halfblood, and half-Muggle at that. That’s as good as being a Mudblood to most of the wizards who matter.” She let out another loud wheeze, and fell back against her pillows.

Severus blinked into the close, hot darkness. “I—you said that I—”

His mother cut him off with an impatient sigh. “And what did you think that was, Severus? The last gift a mother could give her child, of course. If I had taught you what you really were from the beginning, you would never grown a backbone and some pride in yourself, and your magic would not have manifested.” She gave one of her older smiles. “And your father would never have realized how pointless it was to try and control you.” She focused on him again. “I thought that once you reached Hogwarts, were Sorted into Slytherin, and listened to some of your Housemates, you would lose the illusions on your own. But you did not. I saw what you wrote in my old Potions book, Severus.”

Severus bowed his head. The Half-Blood Prince. He’d called himself that. It was an appeal to the one thing about himself that he could be proud of, other than his skills in Dark Arts and Potions. All those things came from his mother.

And now—

“And I—“

“It is time for you to lose the last of your illusions,” his mother cut in mercilessly. But is it merciless to pull out the weeds, so that the herbs survive? Severus thought, his eyes wide and focused on the fire. “You are not a child any longer. You should have stopped being a child long since. You are not pureblood, Severus, not a Prince. Neither are you a filthy Mudblood wallowing away in the sty, not even aware of what more there is to aspire to. I taught you to look upward at least, thank Merlin. You are an ugly, wizened, tough survivor. No one will ever care for you for yourself. If they pretend to do so, it is only another illusion, because who can love someone who only possesses useful skills, and not beauty or blood-right? But they might pretend to love you and lure you into a trap because of it, out of hatred. You have seen that. You must fight for a place, and never stop fighting. You must never yield. You must never think of yourself as a Prince, because then you would go easy on yourself, and begin to believe that you deserve things you cannot have.” She leaned forward. “You will have nothing but what you fight for, Severus, and you deserve nothing if you cannot hold on to it. Do you understand me?”

The whole house seemed to be swaying from side to side. Severus felt that he had never noticed before how small it was, how dark, how close. And he had never felt more the sallowness of his own skin, the lankness of his own hair, the fact that he did not have a face like any pureblood wizard’s he had ever seen, self-confident and beautiful and assured of its own place.

“I said, do you understand me, Severus?”

“I understand,” said Severus. And he did. He looked up at her, and felt the twined gratitude and resentment and hatred and love and clarity stand up in him like a quintaped. “I understand, Eileen.”

Eileen watched him for a long moment. Severus stared back at her. He felt as if he were seeing her for the first time. Cross and sullen she might be, but she was pureblood. The blood flowed in her veins and made her shine. She had a place.

It was no wonder it had taken her so long to get through to him. He was a halfblood, and inherently deficient of understanding. But he would have to hide that and gain understanding, wield his intelligence like the double-edged sword it was, in order to make sure that no one pureblood ever found out his weakness and used it against him.
And everyone would. Now, he grasped that. Now, he understood.

“Good,” Eileen said then, and leaned back on her pillows, closing her eyes. “Bury me, Severus.”

Severus lowered his head and stared at his hands. The sound of his first name already rang wrong in his ears. It denied what he was. It was an ancient, noble name, and he did not deserve that.

Nor did he deserve his mother’s name.

He wondered if he could reconcile himself to his father’s name, and all that came with it. And then he knew that he would have to. It was the only way to remind himself, at all times, of what he was, and yet give himself the strength and the goad to struggle for a place in the only society worth being a part of, that of pureblood wizards.

He closed his eyes and breathed in sickness and smoke, and thought of himself as Snape. He let the wounds on his soul bleed, knowing they would scar eventually, and he would be stronger for the scars.

Eileen had dipped him in the River Styx, just as Achilles’ mother had in the old stories, but, like Thetis, she had only done it so that he would survive. And Snape planned to have no heel to make him vulnerable to his enemies.


Not ever again.

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**Chapter Two: Demonstrations In a Hollow Room**

Harry wished he had a lynx form outside of dreams. He thought it would be a useful skill if he could flatten his ears. And, at the moment, he wanted to do something that would show his extreme irritation and displeasure and worry and reluctance.

You could turn around and leave this room alone. No one would have to know. Only Vera knew you might seek this room out, and you didn’t say you would do it today. It’s your choice.

And Harry might even have believed that, if not for the stubbornness that had grown in him over the last week and a half. He no longer believed that there was any value in some parts of his training—especially the parts that disobliged him in simple things on a daily basis—and that had led him to look critically at other decisions he’d made. Were they the best choices? Or had he merely made them because of a lack of time and a pressing need to do something else, and then let the bad choices solidify into habit?

He had seen how people became slaves of habit, slaves of prejudice. He never wanted to be one.

And that had led him to spend the last few days, as he recovered from the slashes down his left arm and told Vera, Draco, and Snape everything he could remember about the bird, analyzing two of his choices. One he had eventually decided wasn’t the best choice, but it also wasn’t something he could change right away. He would need McGonagall’s help, and Snape’s, and the help of the Black libraries and the Hogwarts library. That had to wait until he left the Sanctuary.

The other didn’t—not when Vera had already told him about one of the rooms that could help him.

Harry stood now outside that room, and stared at the door, and gnawed his lip. His hand traced the ending of his wrist, the severed stump, over and over and over again.

Chattering voices of different opinions clamored in his head.

You did decide that your choice was hasty and badly made.

It’s silly, and unimportant, and you should be learning as much as you can about useful weapons in the war while you’re still here and have access to knowledge that doesn’t exist outside the Sanctuary.

Most of what you think is silly and unimportant has turned out not to be so. And nothing can get in the way of your healing. You didn’t let Loki make you stay in the wizarding world. Are you going to let your own preconceptions hold you back from doing something that you know you should do?
Those were two good arguments for going forward, against only one for staying where he was. Harry took a deep breath and tugged open the door to the room.

Vera had described the Sanctuary as a shrine to the present. The rooms set aside to hold and contain the presence of magic corresponded to types of magic that actually existed in the world, somewhere. The moment a kind of magic ceased to exist, because its last practitioner died or because the knowledge or ingredients that were necessary for it were lost, then the room would vanish. The Sanctuary looked to the future, not the past.

Harry stepped into a large room, perhaps round, perhaps square. From the outside, it was rectangular, but Harry already knew that the insides of these rooms perhaps didn’t correspond to their outsides. In any case, it was difficult to make out the shape because of the mirrors that crowded the walls. Some mirrors had round frames, some sharply pointed edges, some star-shaped protrusions that overlapped with the other mirrors and made it difficult to be sure of what was real. Harry waved, and a thousand thousand Harry-shaped images waved back. Some had slightly different faces, some slightly different eyes, some slightly different bodies.

The images reflected more than once—when mirrors were set opposite from one another so that a long series of possible Harrys stretched away—looked very different.

Harry stood there in silence for a long moment. So far, the mirrors worked as Vera had told him they did. They showed images of what could be, all the possible ways that Harry could be different, marching corridors of side-realities. They could not be used as doors to those realities; if that magic had ever existed, Vera had told him, it was lost, and the Sanctuary wouldn’t demonstrate it. But they could show transitions between the real Harry and a possible one, the various shades, for example, through which his eyes might pass on the way from green to blue.

And that meant—

That meant—

Harry took a deep breath and lifted his left wrist.

A ripple ran through the mirrors, a shudder so intense that for a moment Harry feared they would break. Vera had warned him about this, though. So long as he kept his left wrist low and at his side, out of range of the glass, it might be anything; the possibility was undefined. When he forced the mirrors to reflect it, then each image had to become what it would be in that other reality.

And it worked. Harry saw himself, in the nearest, oval mirror, with a left wrist that ended in scar tissue. When he turned his head, he saw left hands, left hooks, images of himself with an intact left hand and a missing right one, and, more than once, a wing or a flipper on that limb. He blinked, then forced himself to look away from those strange, beguiling images and to one of the ones with a left hand.

*And on a diagonal to the oval mirror that reflects me as I really am.* Vera had told him about that, too. “True” images, ones that would actually lead him from what he was to what he wanted to become, were more often found on the slant.

It took him several minutes to sort out a pattern. Then he looked at the series of transitional images that separated him from the final product, and shivered, and looked away again. Out of the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of madly swinging heads, so he shut his eyes to avoid them.

There were ten images between himself and the Harry with a left hand who still looked almost exactly like him.

*Only ten.*

Harry made himself look again. Each of the first three images had a smaller shimmer of Dark magic above his left wrist. The fourth one had a star of Dark magic there—probably, Harry thought, the last curse to burst, or the deepest one, which would take more effort to break than the others. The fifth one simply had an ordinary, scarred wrist. The sixth and the seventh one had shadowy images of left hands, and the eighth and ninth possessed hands that they held gingerly. The tenth image looked completely comfortable with both his hands, and caught Harry’s eye with a solemn expression that, Harry imagined, did not look completely terrified.

It might be the same expression on his face right now.

He controlled the impulse to just walk out of the room. Instead, he studied the really important images, the ones that detailed the curses, so that he knew what he could expect them to look like at each stage of the breaking. Argutus could help, of course, by reflecting the hidden spells in his scales. Harry would just as soon not set out to break one and then have it warp in a different
direction, though. And knowing Bellatrix and her insanity, he couldn’t say that wouldn’t happen.

Then he turned and paced quickly to the door, lowering his eyes so that the dizzying army moving with him partially faded from his sight.

*Only ten steps, and I can have my hand again.*

He shut the door of the room and leaned against it. A light, misty rain fell in the Sanctuary this morning. Harry could hear birds calling that he hadn’t heard before, energetic cries that seemed to praise the rain and the coolness and even the gray of the skies as part of a good life.

He had examined his reasons for not trying to regrow his hand, and decided they weren’t good ones. He would look weak? There were many other ways that he might look weak to his allies, including the kind of emotional breakdown he’d experienced over the dead children during the siege, and he was working to heal those wounds. He didn’t have time? He had time if he made it. He didn’t want to make it seem as if that was something he cared about, when many, many other things mattered more?

Well, that last was still true. But Harry hadn’t been able to say *why* he felt that way. Why should regrowing his hand be less important to him than making sure that Ignifer, for example, won free of the infertility curse her father had placed on her?

He didn’t have a good answer for that. His gaping terror of being selfish wasn’t a good answer. And he had to be more selfish, to stop himself before he broke down as he nearly had before he came to the Sanctuary, or they would lose the war.

So here he was. He would try to break the curses and regrow his hand.

He shook his head and moved quickly, sharply away from the room. He wanted to go watch Draco eliminate some of the taint on his soul with Nina’s encouragement, or help Snape brew a potion. He wanted to listen to Argutus ramble on about his own beauty, which he was more concerned with suddenly, or listen to the soft hisses of the Many snake as she conversed in half-understood fragments. He wanted to do anything that didn’t focus on himself.

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Draco smiled when Harry slipped into his room behind Nina, but didn’t take his eyes from her face. Likewise, Nina nodded a welcome to Harry, but the words she spoke next, soft and soothing, were to Draco.

“I can see your soul as a jeweled construct, with emerald and opalescent wheels.”

“Of course it’s jeweled,” said Draco, and had the delight of seeing Nina smile back at him. Harry raised his eyebrows in confusion. Of course he would. He tended to respond too seriously to Draco’s arrogance, while Nina treated it for what it was, one more game to play or waltz to dance. Draco had often done the same thing with Narcissa when he first began his lessons in pureblood etiquette, and had always enjoyed them more than his father’s more formal efforts to drill him in the same things.

“It would be,” Nina murmured. “Nothing less than the best for a Malfoy.” She squinted thoughtfully off to the side, as if she were looking at his left shoulder. Draco hated it when she did that. It reminded him even more forcefully that she could see things he couldn’t. That was annoying enough when it happened with Harry, and Harry was at least stronger, magically, than he was. Draco wondered, not for the first time, what he would see if he possessed Nina.

“Coils are wound among the wheels,” Nina continued. “Springs. Clockwork. All of them are dark, the same shade of gray. I can tell you what I think they are, and you can tell me which one doesn’t belong.”

Draco nodded. They had done this before. He had to admit, it was interesting to learn all sorts of things about himself that he would never have suspected before. He saw Harry lean forward, and took the opportunity to set his shoulders back and lift his chin, determined to make both Harry and Nina proud of him.

Nina narrowed her eyes now as if squinting against the sun, and said, “One is the impulse to prove yourself regardless of what you might have to do in the process.” She smiled again, her expression growing brighter. “I think I should know that that one is your own.”

Draco inclined his head, his own eyes and cheeks blazing with his amusement. Harry shifted again, briefly catching his attention. Draco caught a glimpse of a very intriguing emotion in his eyes, but he couldn’t take the time to study it, because Nina was droning on.
“One is the impulse to grow without restraint, to have so much magical power that nothing can stop or check it.” Nina lost her smile first, and then the playful tone to her voice. “Could that one be a legacy of your encounter with Voldemort?”

“I—possibly.” Draco could remember times when he had felt the impulse for himself, though. At one time, little had mattered to him but matching Harry in magical strength. He had called on an ancestor to give him that power, with what seemed, in hindsight, perilously little research and horrendous impatience. But, on the other hand, he thought he had subdued that idea. Voldemort would not have.

Nina nodded, and went on. “Then there is the impulse to cause pain to others.” She didn’t say anything else this time.

Draco squirmed in place, his cheeks flushing. “What kind of pain?” he asked. “Can you tell?”

“There are many different roots to it.” The Seer folded her hands almost primly in front of her, as if to say, whatever she had seen in her own soul when she looked at it, this had not been there. “It might be pure sadism at some points along the coil. It might be the simple desire to irritate someone with a hex who’s irritated you with a hex. It might be a wish that someone would go away and stop bothering you or your Harry.”

Draco nodded. Well, he should have expected that. He would have been more horrified and ashamed if he had a simple soul, one where he could pick the right answer every time Nina had a question. “I don’t think the sadism is mine,” he said. “I do want revenge, and I do think my Harry should take it more often than he does—” another shift in his peripheral vision “—but I don’t take that much pleasure in watching someone else suffer. I take much more satisfaction in knowing that they’ll never hurt me again.”

“Very well, then,” said Nina, and eased backward on the rug she’d spread to sit on. “So, you are ready?”

“I am,” said Draco.

He braced himself as Nina brought forth a small mirror she’d pulled from one of the Sanctuary’s rooms; Merlin knew which one, since Draco so far hadn’t had much time to go exploring. The mirror had two halves, one that bulged outward and one that rippled backward into the frame. Nina tilted it so that both halves reflected his face and pulled her wand from a pocket of her robe.

“Vitrum reapse,” she whispered, and gestured.

Draco’s face rippled as if someone had thrown a stone in a pool of water. Draco reached forward with his own magic, his own mind, at the same moment, grasping at his thoughts, pulling them and tugging, using the image in the mirror as a stabilizing point. This was reality, this was truth, and he would make himself into the Draco Malfoy whose image he saw in the mirror.

It would have been impossible if he hadn’t had the possession gift. But part of learning to possess others had been learning an exquisite consciousness of himself—where his thoughts ended and another’s began, primarily. He always needed to be able to tell what was him in another person’s mind, so that he didn’t accidentally sabotage his own plans. The only reason he couldn’t heal himself of Voldemort’s taint was that the slime had gone so deep into his soul. He had to look intently at one point of his own mind before he could see the incongruities.

Nina had pointed him to the right one this time, he thought. He found a twisting, alien bit of presence in the part of his thoughts devoted to pain and revenge, and he carved it out of himself with relish. As always, he directed it down the path of his thoughts towards his mouth. He had to expel Voldemort from his body somehow, and though, strictly speaking, he could have imagined the dark taint as a mist that would float away and leave him alone, it was easier this way, to think of it as mingled bile and poison he spat out.

He opened his eyes as his mouth moved, and saw a splatter of saliva blossom on the mirror. A moment later, it turned black, and he saw the quivering, caught worm of Voldemort’s presence. He nodded and sat back, beaming at Nina, who beamed in turn and cleansed the mirror with another wave of her wand. Draco imagined he could hear the worm screaming as it burned.

“That delight in pain is all my own,” he thought.

“I think it’s time that we stopped for today,” said Nina softly, rising to her feet. Draco wondered if she was stopping solely for his sake, or for Harry’s, or perhaps for her own. “You’ve yanked out three tendrils, and it’s harder and harder for me even to see a place where others might be hiding. I think you’re almost healed, Draco.”

Draco inclined his head, accepting the glad news—the more glad because he knew the Seers wouldn’t chase him out of the Sanctuary just because he had healed. He could still stay here until the end of the summer, and he could focus more on Harry once
his own mind was cleansed.

“Just don’t forget what my soul looks like,” he told Nina as she made her way to the door. “You won’t ever see something that beautiful again, and it should remain to brighten your life when I’m gone.”

Nina rolled her eyes and shut the door. That confirmed Draco’s belief that she’d stopped the soul-seeing for her sake. Unless she was deeply tired, she always came up with a witty retort of some kind.

Draco went at once to the couch Harry had taken a seat on, capturing him with a kiss and an arm around his shoulders before he could stand. Harry blinked, dazed, and then his face broke into a bright grin. “Draco!” he exclaimed. “You’re moving faster than you were yesterday?”

“Yes, bloody finally,” Draco groused as he sat down. “I still don’t think bed-rest was the cure for me once my headaches ended.” He caught Harry’s chin and tilted his face towards him. Harry bore it, looking patient. Draco frowned. That unfamiliar emotion he’d thought Harry had expressed earlier was gone, and only entirely familiar affection and exasperation looked back at him.

_Well, perhaps talking about Nina will bring it back._ “The way she helps me is wonderful, isn’t it?” he asked casually.

_Ah, there it is._ The emotion traveled through Harry’s eyes like a comet across the night sky, and then he was nodding and agreeing, but Draco sat close enough to him to see what it had been.

“Harry,” he said, and he tried to keep the delighted purr out of his voice, but he couldn’t, he really couldn’t. “Are you jealous?”

Harry blinked, then said, “Honestly, Draco, of course not. I don’t believe that you’d ever sleep with her. Besides,” he added, standing and slipping out of Draco’s arms, “for all I know, you don’t even like girls that way.”

“Oh, I don’t mind them,” said Draco, leaning back on the couch and watching Harry’s tense shoulders. _He shouldn’t hide from this. We’re supposed to be letting down our barriers and showing our emotions anyway._ “You’re the one I like, Harry. But you wouldn’t get jealous over bed-sharing, anyway, when we haven’t even shared one. You’re jealous because she can See part of me that you can’t, aren’t you?”

“I am _not_ jealous.”

Draco laughed at him. “Liar.”

Harry glared at him over his shoulder. “I am _not,_” he said. “You need her help to heal, Draco. It would be unworthy, not to mention _stupid_, for me to get jealous over that.” He frowned and trailed his hand over the edge of Draco’s bed.

“Well, jealousy often doesn’t have a rational basis,” said Draco comfortably. He patted the couch next to him again. “Why are you on the other side of the room? Come sit next to me.”

“I don’t want to.”

_And now he’s pouting! This is wonderful._ Draco would have thought it worth coming to the Sanctuary, and coaxing a reluctant Harry to come with him and away from a war-torn wizarding world, for the sake of this alone. “Yes, you do,” he said. “Or you did a moment ago. But now you think that you shouldn’t be jealous, and you’re—what? Punishing yourself by denying your urge to seek out my company?”

He saw Harry stop moving. Then he turned around and glared at Draco again. “If I didn’t know that Seeing can’t be taught,” Harry said, “I would say that you’d been taking lessons from Nina. Or Vera, perhaps, since she’s my Seer.”

“You still don’t like someone seeing you that well,” said Draco, and shook his head. He couldn’t name the emotion that welled up in him. He decided to call it protective, because that made a good name. “Get used to it, Harry. I intend to know all of you before I’m done.”

“I’ll change,” said Harry, his voice soft. Draco wondered if he even realized what he was saying as he examined Draco intently. “I’ll change, and then you won’t know me anymore. And the same thing will happen to you, and to Snape—” Harry checked himself. “Well, I think it’ll happen to Snape. Maybe not. I’ve never seen someone so determined not to change.”

“I’ll read you anew, then,” said Draco, and stood. He walked slowly across the room to Harry, who stood watching him come. Draco clasped his wrist and rubbed gently at his forehead, over the scar that marked Harry as the real recipient of Voldemort’s
Killing Curse. “What is it, Harry? Do you really think that I’ll wake up someday and just decide to give up on you?”

“No,” said Harry.

“Then what?”

Harry sighed. “I still understand why someone would want to see you and love you better than I understand why someone would want to see and love me.” He tugged at Draco’s grasp on his hand, then forced himself to stand still even before Draco could ask for it, and shook his head. “And that’s the truth,” he said, sounding half-unnerved. “No matter how stupid it sounds, there it is.”

Draco curved one arm around Harry’s shoulders and tugged him forward until his head rested on his shoulder. “Is that the reason you haven’t wanted me attending your sessions with Vera where you work on removing your mother’s training against pleasure?” he murmured into his ear.

“Partially,” Harry said, his voice going dry. “The other part is that the training often involves hot baths, and I don’t think you could control your impulse to stare at me sitting naked in the water. And that would be rather distracting.”

Draco’s mouth went dry, and then he realized that Harry had made a joke, and what kind of joke it was. He laughed, and it felt like the most genuine laughter he’d ever given. He hugged Harry hard enough that Harry both lost his balance and his breath, and did it until Harry pounded feebly at him with one arm to let him go.

Then he said into Harry’s ear, “Most of the world would give everything to be standing where I am now, Harry, if they only knew you. And I’ll say that until you believe it. If you change, I’ll say it again.”

Harry tensed for a moment, as if thinking of a further objection, and then relaxed. “Thank you,” he whispered.

Draco held him, and smiled, and decided that it could do no harm to not tell Harry what idea this conversation had just spawned in his mind. Harry needed some surprises and excitement in his life, after all, since they were currently in the middle of a peaceful haven where he received none.

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“Can I help you, sir?”

Harry saw Snape’s back tense from across the room. He’d been standing in front of a cauldron bubbling with a thick purple liquid, and stirring as if it were the only thing that existed. Now he shifted as if to conceal its presence from Harry, even before he smoothly turned on his heel.

“Oh, course, Harry,” he said. “I’ll need the mandrake roots boiled first, before they’re cut. If you will?” He nodded to a table on the other side of the room that contained a cauldron full of water, a glass bowl to shield the fire, and a pile of dried mandrakes.

Harry nodded back and crossed over to the roots, gathering them, squeezing them to remove most of the juice—as one should always do before boiling mandrakes—and using his magic to create a fire in the glass bowl. He kept sneaking glances at Snape’s back as he dropped the crushed roots into the cauldron, though. He couldn’t help it. Snape showed an uneasy awareness divided between him and the potion. It took a lot to disturb him like that.

“Are you all right, sir?” he ventured at last.

Snape’s hand tightened on his wand, and then he slid it into his pocket and turned around. “Dreams,” he said.

Harry blinked. “What?” He crushed the latest mandrake root so hard that stinking juice ran out over his fist. He winced.

“I am healing through dreams,” said Snape, voice flat. “I refused to allow the Seers to help me. The Sanctuary sends dreams in that case, images that dig up the buried emotions and memories and make me reflect on them from a different perspective.” He laughed. It sounded like something breaking. “Or that is what is supposed to happen. In the last nightmare, I lost myself so completely to memory and bitterness that I never knew it was a dream until I awoke.” His hand rose and began to caress the sleeve that hid the Dark Mark, almost absently. “And that is less than helpful when healing,” he said.

His voice was clinical and dry on the last words. Almost, Harry thought. It shook on the last one.

That alone made Harry more concerned for Snape than he had ever been.
“Please, sir,” he said quietly. He put the mandrake root he was handling down completely and faced Snape, but didn’t try to move closer to him. From the way he was staring off into the distance, and the soft, constant buzz in the air around him, Harry knew Snape’s wandless magic would try to open his belly or his throat if he got close now. And Snape had enough emotion to carry, that was plain, without adding guilt to the mix. “I think you should talk to the Seers. If Joseph is—too much like Sirius—“ he didn’t think the man was, personally, and it was just Snape’s blind hatred and bias talking, but Snape had fastened on an insistence that yes, he was “—I’m sure there are other Seers who would talk to you.”

Snape abruptly blinked, and the buzz in the air died down. Harry hardly had time to draw a breath of relief before Snape was shaking his head.

“What, sir?” Harry asked.

“I should not have told you,” said Snape, voice and face empty. “You are healing. You should think of your own soul and thoughts, not mine.” He turned, and the way he swept towards the cauldron moved the air so much Harry caught a faint whiff of the purple liquid inside. He wrinkled his nose. It smelled awful, and completely unfamiliar, which meant Snape was probably inventing something new. “I will bear the dreams alone. Thank you for your advice to talk to the Seers. It makes sense. Should the dreams overwhelm me, I will seek their assistance.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “No.”

Snape glanced at him over his shoulder, face still blank. “No, what?”

“No, I think what you’re doing is unreasonable.” Harry folded his arms and scowled at Snape. “This is the exact kind of thing you’re always warning me against doing—concealing my wounds until I have no choice but to get help because I’m drowning in my own blood. You scolded me out of it when we had to coordinate the battle at Hogwarts. I would scold you out of it now, but I think you could find an answer for every one of my taunts. So I’m just telling you that I think it’s reckless, stupid, and hypocritical of you to do this.” He paused, just long enough to let the impudence have the most impact, and added, “Sir.”

Snape’s eyes burned with something wild and dangerous. Harry had not seen this before, but he had felt it. When Snape came to rescue him from the storm his own magic had raised at the end of his second year, when his mind had been broken in shards and Snape had had to use Legilimency to help him rebuild it, his own magic had unfolded around him in response to the Dark power Harry was calling. This was the Death Eater’s edge, the man Harry thought had prepared himself to kill, and, before his crisis of conscience, had enjoyed every second of it.

“I will handle my healing on my own,” Snape snarled. “I am an adult, Harry, and fully aware of my own beliefs and choices—“

Harry snorted. “Of course you are, sir,” he said. “That would be why you carried a childish grudge forward twenty years. You still don’t see my brother for who he really is, thanks to living in the past. You still hate Sirius and compare people to him who are nothing like him. You still carry a fear of werewolves that you’ve transmuted into hatred, rather than overcome. And I think that you only struggled to overcome your hatred of my father because you knew that, otherwise, I would see what you did for me as revenge on James instead of justice for me. All of those are absolutely lovely examples of adult behavior.”

As he watched Snape’s face flush with rage, Harry had to reconsider his idea of whether he possessed enough sarcasm to taunt his guardian out of his childish obsessions.

“Get out,” Snape said, and one of the knives he’d placed beside his own cauldron whizzed across the room and buried itself to the hilt in the wood beside Harry’s head.

Harry glared at him. “Do you really think that impresses me?” he asked. “One nice thing about being a Lord-level wizard is that magical temper tantrums pale next to what I can do in battle.”

Another knife flew. Harry doubted that Snape was seeing him at the moment. He was panting, his face livid, his eyes staring into another time and place. Harry conjured a shield that bounced the knife, and cocked his head.

“Talk to Joseph, sir,” he said softly. “I don’t blame you for this, not any of this. But I’ve finally decided that healing is important, you see. That means everybody’s healing. I’m going to be just as stubborn about this as I am about the issue of forgiveness and reconciliation, or rights for magical creatures. Do you really want to be on the opposite side of an issue from me that I’m that determined about?”

“Get out.” The words were low and ugly, and this time Snape’s cauldron rose from its base, slowly revolving.
Harry rolled his eyes and did. The determination remained in his head as he walked down the steps towards his own room.

_Idiot. He taught me those lessons. And now he claims that he’ll hide and rage and scream but refuse to seek help? Idiot. No, he won’t._

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Snape knew he should apologize to Harry.

But it took him hours to work up the barriers with which to do it—to make sure that the rage lay down, tamed and still; to wrap his emotions with rocks and sink them to the bottom of the Occlumency pools; to forget the urge to snarl when he thought about Harry’s words and what they had done.

He made himself cool and composed, as he had been when he was a spy among the Dark Lord’s ranks, and went to Harry’s room.

He found Harry reading, alone, unless one counted the tiny gold-and-green cobra coiled around his throat and the silvery Omen snake dozing at his feet. Snape did not, knowing neither of them could understand English. The Many snake did lift her head when he came in and give him an unfriendly hiss. Harry hissed back, and the cobra at once wound into place again, as motionless as a metal ornament.

Harry stared at him expectantly.

Snape stared back, narrow-eyed. This wasn’t the boy he had been expecting to find. He knew Harry had not understood his outburst and what drove him to speak as he did earlier, and so he knew Harry’s words to him could not have been planned. He had expected contrition, startlement, perhaps a demand for an explanation.

Harry just waited.

Snape snarled, at both himself and Harry, and said stiffly, “I apologize. I should not have thrown objects at you, no matter how angry I was. It is inexcusable treatment when dealing with an abused child.” He inclined his head, feeling as if his neck were physically objecting to the movement.

“You shouldn’t have,” said Harry. “But you have a reason for it. The air of the Sanctuary is wearing away at you. What are you feeling? What events are you reliving in the dreams?” He leaned forward, and though his searching green eyes did not carry a Legilimens’s probing touch, they were intense enough otherwise that Snape felt unnerved.

“I do not need to tell you,” Snape said. Despite his best efforts, his voice was descending into a growl again. “Nor should I. You have your own healing to concentrate on, and receive assistance with.”

Harry uttered a dry laugh. “And because of that, you think we should simply play the roles we always have? I heal, or try to, while you herd me along and retain your own implacable, frozen stillness.” He shook his head. “It isn’t working, sir. Can’t you see that? If you had quieted the ghosts that haunt you, you would never have lost control this easily. I know how thick your walls are. I don’t think they’re simply weakening in this place, whatever the Seers may believe. I think the emotions that are rising are so powerful they can’t be dealt with any other way.”

Snape folded his arms. _So he thinks he knows me?_ He ignored the uncomfortable twinge that said Harry probably did know him, as well as anyone living could claim to. Dumbledore had known more, but he had scoured Snape’s mind for evidence of his motives when Snape came to the Light. And his mother—

_Do not think of her._

He let out a steady breath, never taking his eyes from Harry’s. _He claims he knows me, and yet he has never reached the same conclusions about me that Eileen did. That means he is ignoring evidence of my true tendencies yet._

“I will decide how best to attend to my own healing, Harry,” he said, making his voice deep and calm. “I have already chosen to suffer the dreams rather than use Dreamless Sleep. I—“

“That’s a step,” said Harry. “Progress. But not enough. Even these memories are weakening you severely, or you would never have attacked me. I think they’d still be there even if you started using the Dreamless Sleep now, sir. And when we go back into the world, I know that you won’t be able to afford the weakness, any more than you want it. And I don’t want you to be faltering.
Snape cast a wandless, nonverbal spell to remove glamours. He thought for a moment that he might have surprised Vera sitting in Harry’s place, disguised by some of the innate magic of the Sanctuary. But the spell worked, and Harry was still Harry, rolling his eyes as he felt the tingle along his skin.

“Is it really so hard?” Harry questioned, a tinge of impatience in his voice. “It’s the same logic you gave me when I wanted to dig in my heels and remain as I was. Better to be whole and strong that way, no matter how much it hurts, than ignore your own weak points.”

“I am whole!” Snape snarled, and then stopped as he saw spittle flying from his lips. He could feel rage coiling in his chest as it had not done since Harry’s second year at Hogwarts. He had once thought that only Black could affect him that way. Even in James Potter’s trial, he had been more in control. He had kept his motives in mind, and what would happen if his magic slipped its leash and slew Potter. And now…

Now, he did not know which way to turn, and all directions were confused.

“I want to help you.” Harry told him, his eyes shining earnestly. “I want to see you talk to someone if you can’t bear to take help from me. I want—”

“And it is not fair that you should be playing an adult role, shouldering adult burdens,” Snape said, in what was not quite a shout.

Harry actually snorted at him. “What the fuck does fair have to do with any of it?” he asked. “We live in the world as it is. No, perhaps I should have been coddled and cuddled and spared any responsibility, but as it is, that didn’t happen.” He shrugged, never taking his eyes from Snape. “So I’ll do what I have to do, and that includes both healing and helping you.”

“What makes you think that you have to do it?” Snape could feel the world around him tumbling faster and faster, as if he were on the blade of a sword a master swordsman were spinning in his hands.

Harry blinked. “Because I love you. Obviously.”

In Snape’s state, the words were not ones he could hear and not react.

His magic made the walls of the room shake. The Omen snake raised his head and hissed, his long body flexing. The Many snake actually slipped down Harry’s shoulder before he spoke to her in Parseltongue and she stopped.

“If you really want to do it that way,” Harry said.

And his magic answered Snape, with a jolt that welled up out of the stone under Snape’s feet and shook him back and forth, touching nothing else in the room. It felt like a springtime river in flood, bold with an impatient power that Snape had never encountered even in the Dark Lord.

“I’m stronger than you are,” Harry reminded him. “You can’t convince me to back off that way.” His tone was sharp, but it was affection that made it so.

And the world was a mass of dizzying light and emotion.

Snape turned and ran.

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Harry nearly rose to go after him, but then checked himself as he heard the hissing, like a hive of hornets, that accompanied Snape. His magic would lash out wildly now, and once again, he would only blame himself once he returned to sanity. Harry did write a swift note to Vera, advising her to keep guests and Seers out of Snape’s way for the evening—though he thought they would probably know if they were at all magically sensitive, and Snape would probably return to his room and conjure things to destroy soon—and waved it in the air. A white dove appeared in moments, holding out its foot, to which a message tube was already attached. Harry smiled at it as he slid the note into the tube. The doves were the Sanctuary’s owls, condensed out of the pure magic that filled the air and given many similar duties.

“Take this to Vera, if you would,” he said.
The dove flapped its wings and gave a bob of its head and a quick coo, and soared away. Harry watched it go, then sank back down in his seat, shaking his head.

“Why is he being stupid?” Argutus demanded, flowing up and “sitting” beside Harry, which meant several silver coils overlapped the couch with another two to spare, holding Argutus’s head at the height of Harry’s face.

“Because he’s afraid,” said Harry.

“Ah.” Argutus turned and looked along his scales. “Well, I am not often afraid, but you are. So it must make sense to you.” It did, Harry thought. But he no longer felt like letting fear control his life.

He stood so suddenly that the Many snake had to clench around his throat. Argutus regarded him with surprise as he strode towards the door.

“I’m going to visit Draco,” Harry told him, and left the Omen snake to follow or not, as he liked.

Yes, he thought as he took the steps a few at a time, he was tired of letting fear control him. He would find Draco, and if he was free at the moment from a session with Nina, he would speak to him immediately, and if he wasn’t, then Harry would wait. Either way, he wanted to talk to him.

He wanted to tell Draco he was going to regrow his hand.

* * * * *

Chapter Three: Pools of Grief and Pools of Gold

Harry sighed. “Yes, I promise I’ll close my eyes and try to enjoy this like a good little boy.” He met Vera’s gaze and held it until she gave him a slow nod. Her bare feet made soft slapping noises as she walked around the rim of the pool towards the door.

“You might want to think, Harry,” she said calmly over her shoulder, “why it is this part of your training that you resist overcoming, more than almost anything else.”

“I know.” Harry muttered, as the door shut behind Vera. “I don’t like it because it’s silly, both to think about and because I have to put so much effort into overcoming the smallest parts of it. The more effort I have to exert, the more frustrated I get, and the more likely I am to give up.”

But he’d said that to Vera already, and she had simply watched him with serene eyes and asked if he wanted to stop trying to overcome his training. Harry had told her no, and so they’d progressed through childish—in Harry’s opinion—reports of what a pear tasted like, and whether Harry liked a cool breeze or a warm one on his face better, and what chocolate actually tasted like to him, when he was forced to slow down and think about it carefully. Accustoming himself to tastes and smells and mild sensations seemed like wastes of time to Harry even now, but he knew he had no rational reason for feeling that way, and presumably he would be able to demand a Chocolate Frog over porridge someday, and that would benefit—

Well. Someone. Maybe even him.

He eyed the pool reluctantly. It was a stone basin set in the floor of the room that Vera had said the Seers called the Relaxation Room for lack of a better name. It had a concentrated form of the air that was everywhere in the Sanctuary, wearing away at a person’s emotional barriers like the sea carving rock, and would create what it thought was necessary to calm down that person, like a fine-tuned Room of Requirement. A pool full of hot water appeared every time Harry came in here. The room apparently thought he should get used to that—no, more than that, take pleasure in it—before it would give him anything else.

Harry was still having the most problems overcoming the training his mother had given him to avoid touch. He could tolerate a few minutes of hugging, or the light touches from Draco that he had grown accustomed to. He had done much more than that in the Walpurgis Night ritual, and he’d tried to present that to Vera as a sign that, really, he’d climbed over more of the obstacles in his path than she thought he had.

She’d asked him to spend ten minutes in the pool in the Relaxation Room without squirming and wanting to get out.

So far, Harry could manage only five without squirming, and only a half hour altogether before a combination of impatience and discomfort drove him out of the water. There were so many better things he could be doing, not least seeking out the kinds of
rooms in the Sanctuary that centered on magic he wanted to know and studying that.

He was going to try for a full hour this time, though. So he promised himself as he unhooked his robes with the help of his hand and the semi-permanent Levitation Charm that always hovered around him. He’d make it a full hour, and talk to Vera about it without rolling his eyes. Then she would let him do things that were actually useful.

He shrugged out of his shirt and trousers, as well, trying to ignore the shrieking in the back of his head. He felt far too vulnerable this way, especially in a strange place; he’d almost grown used to it in the Slytherin bedrooms at Hogwarts. He wanted to ward the door, or, better yet, collect his discarded clothes, put them back on, and make a dignified exit.

Well, I can’t, and I won’t, he thought, as he finally lowered himself into the water. The pool was more than big enough to let him stretch out. Vera had warned him the first day about falling asleep in the water and drowning, but she hadn’t repeated the warning since she saw how absolutely unlikely Harry was to relax in it.

Harry found a seat on a stone step not far below the surface and craned his neck in several directions. Yes, he could see anyone open the door and approach from here. Yes, he had enough of his body out of the water to be able to leap to the attack if he had to. Yes, the water was thick and murky enough, with the glazed sheen of a hot spring, that anyone who didn’t count his clothes wouldn’t be able to tell what Harry had on under it.

He attempted to lean back and close his eyes. It was impossible. His neck felt like a bone or a dry stick against the rock, and his eyes remained stubbornly open, staring at the ceiling.

The water felt like slime against his skin.

Harry closed his eyes with an effort. He forced himself to remember how Lily had trained him to this—creating a warm sensation and then a disgusting one right after it, or soaking him with cold water and then having him dry out slowly, rather than with a charm or by being wrapped up in warm blankets and bustled to bed. It was only a sequence of events, or a sequence of spells, in some cases. It had clawed its way into his head, but so? Other things had attempted to claw their way into his head, including Tom Riddle. He hadn’t let them. There was no reason to associate the water swirling against him now with the idea of not being able to rescue Connor, or the invisible slug trails that had appeared on his body in the wake of feeling warm.

Connor wasn’t even here, for Merlin’s sake, and neither was his mother.

Insidious thoughts were, though. They twined around him and pointed out, as Vera had, that learning to tolerate this kind of sensation, even relax into it, meant coming to terms with being vulnerable and lowering his guard. But the thoughts went a step further. Could he afford to lower his guard? Harry really didn’t think so. A moment of peace was one that Voldemort would choose for attack. A moment of relaxation could mean he lost the edge on his reflexes necessary to strike, or dodge, or jump out of the water and protect those he loved from someone.

It could be actively harmful to the war effort if he let himself heal from this part of his training. Other parts, yes, he couldn’t see how it would harm his allies if he learned to enjoy the taste of a pear, but this one? Very dangerous.

Relieved with this new justification not to stay in the water any longer, Harry started to stand up. Then he saw the door of the Relaxation Room swing open, and he ducked back into the pool, his heart hammering and his magic abruptly stirring to life around him. Had an enemy actually come into the Sanctuary? One who wouldn’t hesitate to hurt him? Or maybe it was an honest mistake. Harry had thought that Vera had told other guests and Seers when he was using this pool, so that they wouldn’t put themselves out, but perhaps someone had missed the announcement.

“Harry.”

Worse. It wasn’t an accidental intruder, or an enemy who was taking advantage of his being vulnerable to hurt him.

It was Draco.

Harry slid further down in the water, even though disgust was making him shudder now, and it got worse as the liquid crept up his chest to the base of his throat. Draco strode to the edge of the pool and stood looking at him, head tilted and eyes bending at the corners with amusement, even though he didn’t wear a smile.

“Draco.” Harry hated how unsteady his voice sounded. “What’s the matter? Has something happened to Snape?”

“No at all,” said Draco easily. “I just remembered that you told me about your healing the other day, with warm water, and I
thought I’d come and see how you were getting on. Nina told me today that she thinks most of Voldemort’s taint is gone from my mind. She’ll still see me every day we’re here, but the last bits are small now, scattered into the corners of my soul.”

“That’s wonderful,” said Harry, and wished he could sound more enthusiastic. It was hard with Draco staring at him as though he were a Chocolate Frog. “But—Draco, I’m not comfortable with having you here.” There. Best to be as blunt as possible. A lie would have made things worse. “I want you to leave.”

“Why?” Draco asked. “Were you about to leave?”

“I promised myself to stay here at least an hour,” said Harry. Damn. I don’t think he’ll listen to my reasoning about this as readily as Vera would have. “But then I thought that getting used to this probably isn’t a good idea at any rate. Getting used to being vulnerable? Letting my guard down so far that I might fall asleep?” He shook his head, and pushed some water through his hair. The sensation of it wasn’t quite as distracting or disgusting as it was on his skin, since he was used to taking showers and getting rain in his hair during Quidditch games, but it gave him something else to focus on. “It’s not something I can adjust to.”

“Harry.”

Harry blinked. He had expected Draco to sound disappointed. Instead, he simply sounded—soft, as if he were trying not to frighten off one of Hagrid’s wilder pets. He rose and circled around Harry. Harry turned in the water immediately, needing to keep an eye on him. This was Draco, of course, whom he loved and trusted, but it was only his mind that said that. His instincts told him that he was in the water, almost naked, and his enemy was on shore, fully clothed and on the higher ground. If Harry couldn’t see him… His shoulders hunched with tension.

“I do want you to relax,” Draco whispered. “Not just on Walpurgis, or the other nights that we do the rituals. There’s going to be plenty of our lives that we share outside the rituals, and where I’ll want you to relax and sleep in my arms. You’ve managed it before. Why not now?”

“We’ve been more equal before,” Harry said. His neck was beginning to ache with the odd angle he had to hold it at. “Both tired, for one thing. Both recovering from mental injuries. Both clothed.” He let that slip out before he could stop himself, and then winced when he saw the expression on Draco’s face. At least, though, if they were going to have an argument about this, it would distract Draco from thinking about the implications of Harry being unable to relax when they weren’t absolutely equal.

No argument was forthcoming. Instead, Draco crouched down on the side of the pool. “Does this help?” he asked.

Some of the tension ebbed out of Harry’s neck and shoulders. He was actually able to nod now. “Yes,” he said. “It does.” Of course, now that he wasn’t thinking about Draco threatening him, he had to think about the pool. He shuddered. It felt as if a trail of ants were marching up and down his spine. He started to brace his hand beneath him on the step, to push himself out of the water.

“If I got into the pool with you?” Draco asked, distracting him.

“No.” Harry heard the sharp edge of panic in his voice, and Draco apparently heard it, too. He nodded thoughtfully and made a little gesture with his hands. Harry stared at him, uncomprehending.

“Turn around, Harry,” Draco murmured. “Let me massage your shoulders. Touch your hair. Perhaps the water alone can’t relax you, but a combination of the water and my touch will.”

Harry let out a sound that wanted to be a laugh. It didn’t quite succeed. “Draco, I don’t think I can stop thinking about the fact that I’m mostly naked, and you’re not. It would be easier if you’d let me get dressed.”

“And if this is another bit of your training that you need to overcome?” Draco cocked his head at him. “I won’t do it if you don’t want me to, of course, Harry, but I do think we’d have to face it eventually. If you can’t trust me to be near you when you’re not wearing robes, whom can you trust?”

Sometimes Harry hated not only being reasonable, but having to admit that people on the opposite side of an argument could be reasonable. He turned around slowly, trying to convince himself that the water was not ants and not slime, and really, he should be able to see damn well that it wasn’t. He offered his shoulders to Draco, though they tensed when he heard Draco step in one of the small puddles Harry’s turning had flung out of the pool.

“It’s all right,” Draco whispered in his ear, a moment before his hands touched Harry’s shoulders.
It occurred to Harry that if he got his left hand back, he could do this kind of thing to Draco, too. He snorted in spite of himself, in spite of the fact that Draco’s fingers rubbing over his bare skin only felt—rough, strange, not good. There’s a new motive for wanting my hand back. Revenge on Draco.

“You’re at an awkward angle,” Draco complained. “Could you move?”

Harry turned and glared at him, though that was hard; he mostly caught a glimpse of blond hair and bowed head. “You could move,” he said.

Draco glanced up at him and waited.

Harry realized, then, that shifting position would bring him higher on the step and show off more of his bare skin to Draco. At least, it would if he moved to the right. He could always shift to the left and pretend that he thought that was the direction Draco meant. He sucked in his breath through his nose.

I could. But that just continues the pattern of playing into my training, and I am tired of feeling ants crawling on my skin when I try to take a bath. Perhaps I shouldn’t think just in terms of what’s useful to the war. Perhaps just wanting something to stop feeling uncomfortable is reason enough.

Reluctantly, he shifted to the right. He heard Draco give a little gasping noise, and wondered why. Perhaps it was just surprise that Harry had done what he asked for. The next moment, his hands dug in more firmly.

Harry tried to concentrate on them and find them pleasurable. Fear of impending discomfort kept his muscles poised on the edge of flight, though, until Draco said, “Wait. This might help.” His right hand lifted from Harry’s shoulder, and Harry heard him take out his wand. He murmured an incantation. When his hand returned to its place on Harry’s shoulder, it was covered with a soft, warm liquid that smelled like baking bread.

Harry started when Draco began rubbing that into the back of his neck. His muscles loosened under the liquid as they hadn’t under the touch of the water—perhaps the greater thickness of it was enough unlike water to fool his training—and the smell of the bread twined all around him. Harry thought he knew why Draco had chosen it; Draco had been with him in the Sanctuary’s kitchens the day Harry admitted to enjoying the scent, especially when he didn’t think about it as connected to food.

He unwound his muscles, one by one, using the smell as a focal point all the while. He wasn’t anywhere dangerous, he tried to persuade himself. He wasn’t with anyone who would hurt him. He was in a pleasant place, where house elves or cooks bustled just out of side, preparing bread. In a short time, there would be a tray of food to share, and perhaps a philosophical conversation.

Slowly, slowly, it seemed to work. Harry felt himself sliding a little lower into the pool. It could have been natural gravity. He didn’t think it was. And the slime lapping against his sides became—well, water, not the leavings of slugs. He let his head roll back, though he kept his eyes closed. He didn’t think he could bear to see Draco’s expression right now.

His mind remained oddly focused in the center, a bright point of concentration gathered around the image of himself eating bread and debating an obscure point of the Grand Unified Theory with someone whose face kept changing, but fog crept in from the sides. At one point, Harry would have said the fog was dangerous, and fought to keep his head clear. Now, with the smell and the fact that he knew Draco was the only one in the Relaxation Room, thanks to his magic, he didn’t have to.

Besides, he’d felt something like this once before. It was the night Marietta Edgecombe had cast the Blood Whip Curse on him, and he’d had to put up with Draco coaxing him to tell him who it had been. Harry had nearly succumbed to the haze of what he knew now must have been partially trust and partially arousal. And he hadn’t particularly wanted to, knowing Draco would hurt Marietta if he learned her name.

Now, he had no reason to resist it.

His head fell to the side, and this time it was because he really couldn’t support it. He had a brief, hazy impression that he should try to keep it out of the pool so he didn’t drown, and then he felt cool stone under his cheek. He lay with his head on the side of the pool, then. And the baking bread smell and the warm water and the touches of Draco’s hands still ghosted around him, keeping him balanced, fixed on the idea of physical sensations instead of retreating into fear.

He knew he should be afraid, or at least uncomfortable. He kept reaching out to the notion and finding that it fit his mental hand. But whenever he tried to draw the emotion into himself, it faded, into a litany of soft words, a gauntlet of soothing hands.

He felt good. He knew that. But the pleasure had crept up on him just like everything else, slowly, without the sense that he
needed to rush into it. Why rush? He had time. No battle tomorrow, no need to speak with others about defense and healing. He could think about the breath traveling in and out of his lungs, if he wanted, and so he did for a few minutes, and noticed that his breaths were deepening, slowing, softening.

It felt so good. It felt—

Did it feel too good?

One of the stroking hands touched the side of his neck, at a place that Harry vaguely knew existed, but couldn’t find for himself, and the pleasure briefly sharpened into a spike that made him moan. But the hand retreated again, and when the other ventured around to press in the same place, Harry had no trouble accepting that touch as part of the same hazy, foggy world.

He had no idea how long he drifted like that, the pleasure on the edge of overwhelming him and making him panic, but shifting each time. He had so many things to take into account: the smell, the contrasting sensations of cold stone and warm water, the hands, the words in his ears that sometimes seemed like his name and at other times like endearments, the sight of white and blurred vision when he opened his eyes. Someone had removed his glasses. Harry found that he didn’t mind that. He’d let himself retreat into a place where it was all right, and he did trust Draco. As he had said, if Harry wouldn’t trust him, who was there?

One thing was missing, though. Delicious smells, soothing touch, dear sound, and acceptable sight, but taste was missing. Harry waited, tracking Draco’s progress more with his limp muscles than his eyes, until he was sure that Draco’s face was hovering right above his.

Then he opened his mouth.

After a moment’s hesitation, Draco obliged him with a kiss.

Harry thought it should not have felt as shattering as it did. After all, he’d been relaxed. And he had heard stories of shattering kisses and heart-breaking declarations of true love, but they belonged in stories, not real life.

This one—this one was break-worthy. It didn’t snap the world he’d wrapped himself in, warm and languorous and oh so good, but it did strike down through his mouth as though it were a bolt of lightning striking a tree. Harry felt something in him, one of the barriers of his training most probably, sparkle and simmer and begin to burn, fading to ash in a few moments.

He had thought that things that felt good were wrong, but nothing that felt this good could ever be wrong.

He continued the kiss for a few moments more, then let his head loll back and sighed. A moment later, he was asleep, the blurry white haze in his head moving naturally into elegant darkness.

Draco knew that the spells on the Relaxation Room might have helped Harry into this state of helplessness, just a bit. On the other hand, Harry had told him yesterday that his magic largely erased the effects of those spells. The air of the Sanctuary as a whole was subtle, gentle, and unnoticeable enough to lower his barriers, but it was so concentrated in the Relaxation Room that Harry brought his own magic up as a defense automatically.

He had been tense enough when Draco began to touch him that Draco had feared he would have to stop at any moment. And now Harry was asleep, a faint smile on his face, and Draco only had the urge to keep on touching, to not stop.

He reminded himself sternly that it would be much more fun when Harry was awake to share in the touching that didn’t stop, and gently pulled Harry out of the pool, casting a lightening charm on him when his body dragged with unexpected weight. Then he stood up, letting himself notice those details Harry ordinarily frowned at him for noticing: the soft way he drew in his breaths, the way his hand sagged to the side as if he didn’t need it ready to cast a spell or hit anyone, the quiet darkness of the lightning bolt scar beneath his fringe. Draco hadn’t seen that scar a bright red since the day of Voldemort’s defeat, very nearly a month ago now. He took that to mean Harry really was healing, the Sanctuary’s distance from the rest of the world cutting off the Dark Lord’s attempts to reach him.

If he can reach him, at all. If he’s trying. I wouldn’t want to try and reach the wizard who cut a hole in my magical core.

Draco made his way gently towards Harry’s room. And he let himself remember that, too. The wizard in his arms right now was also the one who had willed a werewolf out of existence because that werewolf was attacking Draco, and had cut a hole in the core of the most powerful Dark Lord to exist in centuries.
Draco didn’t know if that was a contradiction, or if he was just lucky that Harry could embody both those extremes and not explode.

He tucked Harry into bed just as he was; he thought Harry deserved to have the sensation of cloth on bare skin, for once. Then he wrote a swift note to leave on the bedside table, detailing some things he’d planned to tell Harry about the next courting ritual but hadn’t had time to give him before he fell asleep, and went to fetch Harry’s robes, shirt, and trousers.

He felt a deep, quiet satisfaction that seemed to leak into all his limbs, and his head was up, and the morning air smelled fresh and sweet in a way that had nothing to do with the Sanctuary’s last three days of heavy rain. Draco wondered if this was what it was like to be in love, and used to it.

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Harry tapped his fingers against the sleeve of his robe, and wondered if Draco would come. Then he told himself not to be an idiot. Draco wouldn’t have let two broken legs and a broken arm keep him from attending the next ritual in their three-year courtship.

Harry hated to admit, as he paced back and forth in front of the room’s golden doors, that he needed this ritual just as much as Draco did. It would make a nice holiday from endless rounds of reasoning with Snape that just pushed him right back into the same corner. Harry was fairly sure the dreams were becoming worse, and that Snape hadn’t spoken to anyone about them. That just made him more irritated and defensive, though, and the more he lost control of his emotions, the more determined he became to keep them under lock and key, and the more he lost the ability to do so. It had exploded today with Snape trying to tell Harry that he never wanted to see him again.

Harry had had his own magic repeat the words back to Snape when he was done yelling, and Snape’s face had turned the color of old cheese. Harry had told him, quietly, that he knew Snape didn’t mean it, and then turned around and left.

It was his and Connor’s sixteenth birthday, the thirty-first of July, and, perhaps not coincidentally—Harry thought Draco’s selection of this particular form of courtship depended greatly on the dates—the day before the old holiday of Lammas, a quarter of the way around the year from Walpurgis. Harry had noticed a peculiar shine to the sunlight today. Given what Draco had told him about this particular ritual, that didn’t surprise him.

And he had chosen a room in the Sanctuary to celebrate in, since the choice of place was up to him, which reflected the importance of sunlight.

“There you are.”

Harry turned with a faint smile. Draco was hurrying down the stairs from the terrace above, fussing and adjusting the collar of his robe. He wore dark blue, the color of starry night, outlined with silver, the color of the moon. Harry wore dark robes as well, but the hem trailed and flashed with gold.

Draco paused and studied him. He nodded. “Good,” he said. Then his voice adopted a formal cadence. “We bring the light of stars and moon into our celebration with us, but on this day, perfectly poised between Midsummer and Mabon, both bow before the sun.”

Harry saw a faint tracery of fire spring to life in the air next to them, like a lighted candle. In a moment, it raced around them both, enclosing them in a golden circle, away from the rest of the world. He inclined his head to Draco, and stretched out his hand.

“We can celebrate in the light of the sun,” he said. “But we can also celebrate by taking the sun into our hearts. Will you come with me, Draco, and bring the sun inside four walls, where it belongs?”

Draco’s smile was unexpectedly tremulous. He clasped Harry’s hand, and said, “I will.”

Harry turned, and raised an eyebrow. The golden doors of the room he’d chosen swung open before them, and he guided Draco inside.

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Draco hadn’t been in this room since Harry had chosen it. That was part of the agreement, in fact; this part of the ritual was under
Harry’s guidance and control, both because the courted partner had to control it, and because it was his birthday.

He didn’t know what he had expected. A room full of mirrors, perhaps, the ones that Harry had told him had helped him find a way to heal his hand. That would be worth their ritual, Draco thought. They would see their true selves reflected amid a myriad of other selves. He was curious to see what kind of worlds his presence standing beside Harry guaranteed or made possible.

Instead, they stepped into a room that at first seemed long, low, and dark. Then Draco realized it probably only felt that way because of the light that shone in the center of it. So intense was its radiance that everything outside it seemed cramped in comparison.

“Come, Draco,” Harry whispered, words which weren’t part of the ritual but which didn’t disrupt it either, and drew him forward.

“What—“ Draco broke off as the source of the light came closer. A pool of golden liquid lay in the floor. Draco didn’t know why it should have impressed him so much. After all, he’d seen something quite similar, and larger, at Silver-Mirror, the Black family home Harry had inherited when Regulus Black went into the family’s portraits. And that pool had bled golden liquid down chains to light lamps, no less.

This pool, though, was wilder. Draco could see that from the curving arcs that leaped from it and fell back down as soft, hot rain. Or perhaps not so soft; the pool’s surface parted under their impact, and the drops themselves appeared to sink into deep wells. And dark spots flickered and danced on that surface, too, randomly appearing and disappearing, and Draco could feel the warmth increasing as he approached, so that sweat ran under his formal, heavy wool robes and made him shift uncomfortably.

“What is it?” he whispered to Harry.

Harry gave him a keen glance. “The ritual said you were supposed to trust me.”

Draco shut his mouth, and let Harry leave him on the near side of the pool as he paced around to the other. He eventually halted opposite Draco. At that moment, the pool became aware of them.

Draco gasped. He had felt something like this only once before, with the “courting room” at Hogwarts that would show a couple their happiest possible future. There, though, the room’s magic had simply reached out to their minds, drawn forth a possibility, and reflected it.

This was—drawing in. Draco could feel the pool gazing at him, harsh, bright light that irradiated his soul. At the same time, he gazed back into the pool, and found himself falling down enormous wells of unending gold.

“This is a sun-pool,” Harry said, somewhere behind the light. “It embodies a practice of fortune-telling that still exists somewhere in the world; Vera told me the Seers think it’s among wizards in Canada. The Seers are blind to everything except the sun, but they can see the future accurately reflected there, in images instead of prophecies. More accurate than what Trelawney does. And it reflects the actual surface of the sun as it exists, sunspots and explosions and all. I thought, when you told me that we needed to come to a place that would let us see the Light and Dark within ourselves, that it was perfect.”

Draco let out a harsh breath. He still saw nothing except light, so brilliant that he feared what would happen to his eyes when he looked away from the pool. “And does it make us blind to everything except the sunlight?”

“No.” Harry’s voice was gentle, amused. “Look at me, Draco.”

Draco raised his head, blinking hard, and found that he could see perfectly after all, without afterimages. Harry held out his hand.

“This pool works differently, since it’s in the Sanctuary,” Harry murmured. “I suppose there’s not much choice for it. No one here actually practices sun-seeing, and Light magic this powerful tends to interact with other Light magic, like that of the Seers.” He focused on the pool, and Draco saw that his eyes were as wide and unblinking as a cat’s. “Veritas,” he said softly.

The sun-pool began to blaze. Draco had never imagined such a storm of brightness and warmth, and felt his eyes watering. He wondered that he hadn’t gone blind already.

Then the sun-pool reached into him again, and pulled something out of him. Draco blinked as he watched a revolving ball come into being above the pool’s surface. Part of it was intensely gold, barely visible against the overwhelming sunshine; the other was dark green. As Draco gazed, entranced, the gold and dark green halves separated from each other and drifted a few feet apart. The dark green ball, which Draco knew represented the Dark within himself, was considerably larger than the gold, which represented Light.
Draco failed to see how this was a surprise. He was opening his mouth to tell Harry so when he realized that more balls were blossoming and splitting in the air. Though the dark green ones were always larger, they were not all the same size as the first time. In fact, the fourth pair was nearly identical.

Draco stared across the pool at Harry, waiting for him to explain, only to find him watching with a faint smile. “Those represent the five old definitions of Dark and Light,” he explained, without taking his eyes from the hovering masses. “Compulsion and free will is the first one. Then tameness against wildness, truth against deception, cooperation against solitude, and peace against war.” His smile widened. “It’s no surprise to find that you want to get your own way, and you’re willing to lie, fight, and work on your own to get it. It does seem, though, that you’re more willing to work with me than you are to tell the truth.”

“I swear, Harry, I didn’t know I had that much of a predisposition towards compulsion.” Draco scowled at the first pair, which could condemn him easily. Harry hated compulsion, after all, and was sworn to destroy it when it came to other species.

“It’s all right, Draco,” Harry said, as the sun-pool began to pull his own gold and dark green from him. “I should have suspected it, from the possession gift. You’re yourself, and at least I know.” His eyes shone as he watched, and Draco blinked. He isn’t angry at me for this?

Then he asked himself, Would I have been angry at him if I found out that he was Lighter as a result of a magical gift he couldn’t help?

No. Of course not.

And if he was going to ask Harry to trust him at his most vulnerable, he really ought to be able to trust Harry with the truths of his suddenly revealed soul. So he devoted himself to watching as Harry’s own gold and dark green separated and revealed his true nature—at least as predicated on the terms of a system Draco thought insufficiently advanced. Dark and Light were both more complicated than those old pairs of dualisms, and Draco was all for free will, as long as it didn’t intrude too much on what he was doing.

The pairs of Harry’s suns arranged themselves. The golden one was larger in the first—no surprise, Draco thought, with Harry’s love of letting others do as they wanted. By contrast, the dark green ball of the second dwarfed the gold, indicating Harry’s wildness. The third and fourth pairs were almost balanced. Draco nodded. Harry had used everything from glamours to cooperative rituals in the past to help his war effort and vates work along. Draco was actually relieved to see that Harry didn’t want to hare off on his own that much anymore.

The last pair was the one he was really interested in, though. He didn’t know if Harry was desperate to keep peace, or if he would go to war. And the sun-pool itself seemed undecided. The pair of gold and dark green orbited each other for a good two minutes before they broke apart.

The dark green ball was slightly larger.

Draco blinked at Harry, who nodded back to him, his mouth set in a thin line.

“That’s another decision I made and thought you should know about,” said Harry. “I don’t like the idea of it. I would much rather accomplish everything I have to do by peaceful methods.” He cocked his head at the sun-pool. “But that measures not only intent, but emotions, rationality, and will. And it knows that I have the will to carry a war or a revolution forward, if it’s the only way.” He let out a shuddering breath. “And I think it is.”

Draco shook his head, and then walked around the pool with rough steps. They had seen each other as they were. Harry had done his part in this ritual, arranging that. Draco could hug him if he wanted to, and he did, burying his face in Harry’s neck and breathing deeply of his scent.

Harry embraced him back, sounding a bit bewildered. “Draco, are you well?”

“I didn’t know if you would find it in you to go to war again, after killing those children,” Draco whispered. The scent of sweat tickled his nose. At least he knew Harry hadn’t been entirely unaffected by the heat inside the room. “I thought you might be broken, and I’d have to coax you along.”

Harry let out a heavy sigh. “I still hate the idea of it,” he said. “That’s a wound that will never totally heal. But I have to work on healing it while pushing the war forward at the same time. And—I’ve decided that I can’t let myself be pushed by fear of anything, Draco, not when fear is the only driving motive. That means that if, say, the Ministry uses violence against the
werewolves, and they aren’t only trying to imprison those who bit others or defend innocents, I have to push back. They can only
go so far and no further.”

“Do you know how long I’ve been waiting to hear you say those words?” Draco whispered into his ear, working his hands
beneath Harry’s robes.

“Why those words?” Harry’s voice had gone slightly breathy.

“Because,” Draco said, lifting his head to catch Harry’s eyes, “it means that you finally trust yourself enough to use your power
the way it should be used. Not to rule the world, no, and not to manipulate everyone the way Dumbledore tried to do. But you can
fight for what you believe in, and you don’t think it’s unfair anymore that you’re a Lord-level wizard and most of your opponents
aren’t.”

Harry smiled faintly. “No, I don’t.” He tilted his head. “I’m ready to fight, Draco, and ready to use my magic to back up what I
say.”

Draco laughed aloud. There was still some of the ritual left to go, a few promises to one another, and of course he had to give
Harry his birthday gift, but he was thinking more, at the moment, about the sensation lifting and expanding in his chest, a soaring
sunrise or a phoenix.

Finally. Fucking finally he’ll be what he always should have been. Not a Lord in name, but he’ll fight for what he wants. And
he’ll change the world if people insist on being stupid and not changing it themselves. And he’ll show anyone who underestimates
him what he really is.

He met Harry’s eyes, and grinned. He knew it was a vicious smile, but Harry seemed to take it in the spirit in which it was given,
because he returned it.

Draco barely contained the urge to howl like a werewolf. And I’ll be right there fighting at his side.

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Interlude: The Outer World

June 30th, 1996

Dear Harry:

I won’t send this letter to you, because you need to heal without being troubled by the outside world, as Peter puts it, and anyway,
the owl would take weeks to get through the shadows. But I wanted to write it anyway. It smothers me out, gives me a sense of
balance to be able to pretend I’m talking to you, even if you can’t talk back. I can imagine you nodding and watching me, and that
helps.

I’m all settled into Lux Aeterna now, and Peter came with me. I can’t believe how different the wards are, now that the house is
linked to me instead of to, you know, the earth. I think it’s calmer. It doesn’t snap at everyone and have wards stalk everywhere
the way it did when it belonged to James. I can be angry and not have the house get angry with me. I think that’s a huge
improvement.

The first day here, I explored some of the hidden corridors and the doors we couldn’t open when James owned the house, and I
showed Peter the room I’d found the sword in. You remember, the sword I used in the battle that talked to me and muffled my
thoughts so I could kill? You didn’t like it. I still think it’s useful.

But Peter didn’t like it, either. He frowned and shook his head at the room, and asked me why I thought our ancestors, whoever
they were, blocked the room off. I told him I didn’t know. Maybe they just wanted to keep the sword from falling into the hands
of anyone unworthy?

Peter said, “The sword’s dangerous.”

“Well, of course it is,” I said. “It can *kill* people.”

Peter turned and looked at me. You know me, Harry, I don’t have the best memory; I leave that for Hermione. But I remember the
way he looked at me, and the exact words he spoke.
“And that’s the reason you think it’s dangerous?” he asked. His voice had gone all soft, like he thought he had something to tell me.

I scowled at him and said—I remember the exact words because I was so angry—“If you mean that I should think it’s dangerous because of the compulsion, then yes. I also think it’s dangerous for that reason, too. I had Tom Riddle in my head for five months and Voldemort himself teaching me compulsion, even if I didn’t know. I know that things like that are dangerous. But it could kill people both ways. It stabs them with its blade, and it could kill their free wills by putting its compulsion in their heads. I know what’s that like, Peter. I might not have seen physical battle very much yet, but I’ve seen lots of mental battlefields.”

That’s something I’ve never really tried to describe to anyone, you know, Harry—the five months I spent trapped behind my own eyes because Tom Riddle was in my head and I couldn’t tell anyone about it. I hate him. I want him dead. I don’t care if you kill him or someone else does. I just want him gone and dead.

Peter’s told me to leave some of the rooms in Lux Aeterna alone for now, and he’s started training me in dueling again, picking up where Snape left off. He’s a lot better at it, and you can tell the git I said so. For one thing, Peter’s Declared for Light, so he doesn’t think Light spells are stupid or weak the way Snape does. And he showed me this spell the other day that was brilliant. I can’t wait to show it to you.

I love you, and I hope the summer’s been good to you so far, even though I can’t send this letter and so I can’t receive an actual reply.

Love,
Connor.

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The Daily Prophet July 2nd, 1996

YOU-KNOW-WHO WOUNDED BEYOND REPAIR, SOURCES HINT

By: Melinda Honeywhistle

Aurors have been unable to locate the hiding place of You-Know-Who since he faced the Boy-Who-Lived in battle, sources confirm.

“I think he’s really gone, this time,” said an Auror who wished to remain anonymous. “He should have left some trace of a magical footprint if he wasn’t. A Dark Lord doesn’t just contain his magic like that. And we can’t find one.”

Others were not so sure.

“I don’t wish to judge the fine efforts of our most noble Aurors as lacking, of course,” said Aurora Whitestag, 45, who lost both her son and daughter in the Midsummer battle at Hogwarts. She wore a polite smile throughout the interview with this reporter, but it was clear that she was worried. “But I don’t think the matter is quite that simple. We knew, last time, that the Dark Lord had fallen. It was obvious from the way the Death Eaters reacted, if nothing else. But this time, most of the Death Eaters were slaughtered, and we can’t find any to ask. I don’t think we should confirm him gone until we see what his servants think of their master’s absence.”…

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From: the Department of Magical Law Enforcement
Dated: July 4th, 1996
Purpose: Creation of a new department

Dear Minister,

This is to confirm the creation of a new department in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Called the Tracking Division, this department will concentrate solely on the hunting and capture of those wizards who have used more than two years worth of Dark magic continuously. Their primary targets will be Death Eaters still in hiding, as You-Know-Who must have left some sleeper agents in the ranks of the free and perhaps even in the ranks of the Light, rather like former Headmaster of Durmstrang Karkaroff. Other Dark wizards will be of lesser priority, but still fall within the Tracking Division’s purview. Several
former workers from all Departments, including Unspeakables, have already volunteered for the Division, and its funding will be supported by concerned citizens as well as the usual Ministry vaults. Enclosed please find detailed plans for such funding and a tentative list of the Division’s first members.

Amelia Bones,
Head, Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

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From: Minister of Magic’s office
Dated: July 4th, 1996
Re: Purpose: Creation of a new department

Amelia,

I know where your funding comes from, and who your main target would actually be. The presence of many people on your roster from the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures rather clinches it. Do stop trying to push werewolf hunts through my office when you should be working on the capture of actual Death Eaters.

This proposal is rejected.

Rufus Scrimgeour,
Minister of Magic.

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The Daily Prophet July 7th, 1996

FORMER HARRY POTTER: DANGER OR HERO?

By: Domitian Peaseblossom

A petition currently circulating among the wizards of Britain stands the chance of redefining one of the youngest wizarding heroes ever to live—at least if Philip Willoughby has his way.

“My daughter died in the attack on Hogwarts,” Willoughby, 34, said on Tuesday. “But she didn’t die because of You-Know-Who.” (It should be noted that Mr. Willoughby did in fact use the name of You-Know-Who, but this reporter could not in good conscience print it). “She died because Harry Potter—and yes, that was his name, I think it’s ridiculous that children are just allowed to abandon the legacy of their parents whenever they want—killed her.”

Though this very paper reported that news some days ago, this is the first sign that some parents are not just sitting back and accepting the deaths as a necessity of war.

“I am circulating a petition among all the parents I know,” said Willoughby. He is a Muggle, but he has immersed himself in the wizarding world, he says, and has many contacts among parents in his daughter Alexandra’s House. “And they’ll send it out to others. What Harry Potter did was murder. If we excuse it in the name of war, what else are we excusing? Terrible tragedies were committed in Muggle wars throughout history because someone thought one murder, one exception, was a good idea. And then there came tons of other exceptions.”

The petition is a demand that Harry stand trial for war crimes. Willoughby hopes to gather enough signatures to force the Ministry to pay attention.

“We need to retain our moral compass in this war,” he said at the end of the interview. “If we don’t, then we’re no better than our enemies.”….  

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July 8th, 1996

Dear Harry:
The stupidest thing is happening. One of the parents of one of the children you killed is circulating a petition, trying to collect signatures and demand that you be tried for war crimes.

I set the paper on fire when I read about it. I didn’t even think, just cast Incendio, and then there were a bunch of drifting ashes all over the kitchen. Peter looked at me severely, but I think that’s just because he hadn’t had a chance to read it yet. I don’t think that he really disagreed with me.

We obtained another copy of the Prophet, and yes, it’s true. Peter was angrier than I’ve ever seen him before. He went off by himself for a little while. When he came back, he looked smug. I asked him what he’d done, and he just grinned at me and asked why I thought he’d done anything. I told him that he was a Marauder, but that was a mistake, because then he started thinking about James and Sirius and Remus.

Remus wrote me a letter the other day. I didn’t read most of it. He told me that he missed me, but then he started talking about you. And—it’s sickening, Harry. I think he really believes that you should just help the werewolves and do nothing else, like there aren’t other people who are suffering. He accused you of dithering and dragging your feet. That letter got lit on fire, too.

I asked Peter today if he’d show me the basics of the Animagus transformation. He seemed startled, and told me that it would take a long time, especially since he knows that I don’t have the same kind of talent at Transfiguration that he does. I told him that was all right. He did mention that part of the reason it took him and James and Sirius so long is that they had to work on it on the sly; they didn’t want anyone finding out why they were trying to become Animagi, after all! They couldn’t just collect ingredients for the potions openly, and it took them months to learn some of the meditation techniques that you could pick up in just a few weeks if you were working with an instructor out in the open. So it might take me two years, but Peter thinks I can master it, since I have him as a teacher. He did insist that I talk to Headmistress McGonagall when we went back to school and tell her what I was doing. Well, of course.

He started me on the meditation techniques today. I asked him what I should think about. He told me that I need to know my own soul first, and that will guide me towards my form. Once I know what my form is, then I can aim at it and achieve the transformation that much faster. He added that I have to accept the form, too. It took him longer to learn to change because he hated being a rat, at first. He hated what that said about him.

I thought about what a dog and a stag said about Sirius and James, and decided that Animagus forms aren’t always right.

I don’t know my own soul yet. This is going to take a long time.

Parvati came and visited yesterday. We spent hours talking about nothing, and kissing, and—other things that you probably don’t want to hear about, I’m sure, because, let’s face it, they’re things that I wouldn’t want to hear about if you and Draco were doing them.

I know you don’t know her very well yet, Harry, and she doesn’t know you very well. But I can tell you this here, since I won’t ever send you this letter (and there’s no way in hell she’ll ever know I’m writing it, either). I really like her. She’s so normal. She chatters and giggles about her clothes and her friends, and sometimes she has a tantrum, and she doesn’t understand Hermione any better than I do most of the time—though I think I understand Hermione more often than she does—and she hugged me when she heard about the battle and what I did, and she owled Lavender Brown with sweets the other day because she heard that she was sick and wanted to make her feel better. And she fights with Padma all the time.

She’s real. I think my life’s gone mad sometimes, and then she’s there, and I’m sure she likes me, too—she wouldn’t tell me she did if she didn’t, she’s not that kind of girl—and she never even blinked when she found out that I wasn’t the Boy-Who-Lived. I just really, really like Parvati, Harry.

Maybe you can get to know her better this year at school?

I have to stop writing now. Peter wants to talk to me about something. See you at the end of August, I suppose.

Love,
Connor.

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The Quibbler July 11th, 1996

**RATS INVADE DAILY PROPHET OFFICES**
By: Julian Lovegood

In incontrovertible evidence of the Daily Prophet’s involvement in the Rotfang Conspiracy, rats invaded the newspaper’s offices yesterday. They appeared to come from nowhere, and the Daily Prophet’s owners claim that there was no effort to summon them. “They simply appeared!” was the common wail. They caused great damage, including eating all printed copies of the newspapers ready for today, before departing as mysteriously as they had come.

Alert Quibbler readers, of course, will realize that the involvement of rats points directly to the Prophet’s entanglement with the Rotfang Conspiracy, which already includes Aurors, Wrackspurt deniers, and hunters of Crumple-Horned Snorkacks…

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The Daily Prophet July 13th, 1996

Are you looking for excitement? Are you tired of being told that you can’t have a voice in the world as it is? Do you have things to SAY and no one to HEAR you?

Owl Dionysus Hornblower now! The Maenad Press is gathering interested writers. Whether you write letters, articles, reports, memoirs, or simply opinions, contact us and lift your VOICE!!!!!!

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July 15th, 1996

Dear Harry:

I’m just writing another quick note—that will never go to you, of course—because I’m frightened and can’t go back to sleep. (And actually, I’m not sure of the dating. It could be the sixteenth now for all I know, it’s so late at night.)

I woke with this itchy feeling on the back of my neck. It took me a minute to realize it was the wards. Someone was outside Lux Aeterna, leaning on them, trying to find a way to slip through.

I went and woke up Peter at once, of course. I might have gone after it on my own two years ago, but I’ve learned better since then. You’ve been a wonderful example, big brother, both of what to do and what not to do.

Peter went with me to the edge of the wards. We saw a figure in a dark cloak there. I thought it was a Death Eater. Peter reminded me that most of the Death Eaters were dead, and anyway it would be stupid for someone to wear robes that would make people think “Death Eater” if he really was. He thought that he had his hood pulled up so that we couldn’t see his face and recognize him.

…He thinks it was Remus, Harry. He really does. This wizard was trying to break the wards down, and get to us, and probably harm us, and Peter thinks it was Remus. I think it could be another werewolf. Peter’s absolutely convinced, though, and I’ve never seen him both so sad and so angry. He’s been locked up in his bedroom writing since we came back inside. I don’t know if it’s a letter like this one, that will never get sent, or whether he really intends to owl Remus.

I feel kind of strange about that. I mean, Remus is my godfather (unless he’s not allowed to be any more, with the new Ministry laws against werewolves having any kind of custody over children). I don’t think he would hurt me. But Peter does. He’s absolutely convinced of it.

Nothing happened though, really. The wards flared for me when I tried to see the wizard’s face, and he immediately Apparated away. No word, no familiar gestures. If we know him, I couldn’t see it.

It does make me think of an odd owl I got the other day, though. It didn’t have anything with it but a silver Snitch. Peter wouldn’t let me touch it. It was a Portkey. Where would it have taken me? I have no idea.

Peter thinks someone’s hunting me. He thinks Remus wants to take me and hold me hostage, to use against you.

I think Peter’s paranoid. Other than that, I don’t know what to think.
I can’t see straight anymore. I’m going to bed. Good night, Harry.

Love,
Connor.

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The Daily Prophet July 17th, 1996

**HOGWARTS HEADMISTRESS DEFENDS HIRING CHOICES**

By: Rita Skeeter

A storm of controversy burst upon the British wizarding world yesterday when Hogwarts Headmistress Minerva McGonagall revealed, at the request of parents, her choices for professors at the prestigious school this year.

McGonagall has hired two new professors, one for Defense Against the Dark Arts and one for Transfiguration. Acies Merryweather, the last Defense professor, changed into a dragon and vanished rather spectacularly, continuing the tradition of Defense professors not lasting longer than a year at Hogwarts, which some whisper is a curse.

Many, however, do not find her choice of formerly accused Death Eater Peter Pettigrew for new Defense professor very reassuring.

“It’s a disgrace, is what it is,” Philip Willoughby, 34, said. His daughter Alexandra died in the attack on Hogwarts in June, and since then he has been circulating a petition trying to bring Harry, the Boy-Who-Lived and the Young Hero, to trial for war crimes. “How much danger is she going to put our children in?”

Other criticism was more measured, but still audible. “As long as the Aurors are certain he’s innocent, of course,” said Sita Patil, 36, yesterday. Her twin daughters, Padma and Parvati, 16, both attend the school, and Padma fought in the Battle of Hogwarts on Midsummer Day. “I’m terribly proud of my daughters and what they’ve accomplished so far, but that was against outside threats. Experience has shown that threats coming from inside the school are much more insidious.”

Headmistress McGonagall has stood firm in her decision to hire Pettigrew, who was already acting Head of Gryffindor House at the end of last year.

“Peter was a Gryffindor himself,” she told this reporter. “And he was a soldier in the First War against You-Know-Who. He’s a fighter, and he’s a fine teacher. I’ve seen him working with students myself. I have no doubts whatsoever about my choice to hire him. It’s about time that more of the British wizarding world acknowledged his innocence, as a matter of fact.”

Her second choice has not stirred as much disquietude, though the selection of a relatively young and inexperienced woman for the post, Hilda Belluspersona, has inspired some questions.

Once again, Headmistress McGonagall is firm in her principles. “I can recognize Transfiguration talent when I see it,” she told this reporter. “I ought to be able to, since I was Transfiguration professor at Hogwarts for several decades. I would not endanger my students, especially in a time of war, by giving them less than a competent teacher.”

Belluspersona, who is said to be preparing busily for her first year in such a demanding job, was unavailable for comment. …. ******

The Bird-gazer July 21st, 1996

“Your Weekly Eye on the Magical Skies since 1957”

**Increased Sea Eagle Sightings Over Britain’s Coasts**

We report with pleasure the return of a magnificent bird to our shores: the sea eagle. This raptor can be distinguished from others by its wedge-shaped tail and immense size, as in the photograph immediately below this report. Sea eagles have traditionally rarely nested in magical areas, as they are in direct competition with several other species, but so frequent have the sightings been of late—though always of a solitary bird, flying alone—that some readers have begun to hope that is changing, and British wizards might soon see some nesting pairs.
July 23rd, 1996

Dear Minister Scrimgeour:

Once again, this must be short. I apologize, but snatching time for writing these letters, and doing the necessary research, has become more and more difficult lately. I suspect my father is arranging a marriage for me, or otherwise hatching a plan that involves me. And if I dare to show any defiance to him, then he will break my wand and stuff me full of Dreamless Sleep Potion until he can locate a potion that will break my mind and put me under his control permanently.

I asked you in my last letter if you had ever heard of Falco Parkinson. I asked that for a very good reason. Falco Parkinson was the mentor of Albus Dumbledore. He was also, at one time, the Headmaster of Hogwarts, and several other things. Many well-researched books report that he died, and the authors all think each other wrong in their reports of how. Many more think him nothing but a myth.

He is not a myth. He is alive. I overheard my parents speaking of him more than once. He is the one who began the Order of the Phoenix, or at least gave Albus Dumbledore the idea for it. I fear it is to him that the members of the Order are turning in the wake of Dumbledore’s fall, hoping to gain prominence for the Light.

I have managed to learn little about him other than his age and his power, both immense. However, this I can tell you: He is an Animagus, and his form is a sea eagle. It may be possible to prevent him from spying on you with that information, as I know there are wards that can be tuned to sense the presence of a single feather of a certain kind of bird, or even to shut spying Animagi out of conversations altogether. I hope that you can find a use for this information.

Once again, please do not try to owl me back. My father is a fanatic for the Light. That I have managed to write you two letters so far and not get caught is a miracle. But fear has kept me silent long enough. I will continue to write, as long as I can, and hope to see my family be of true benefit to society, instead of the tangled tree of obsessed Light zealots they currently are.

Sincerely,
The Liberator.

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July 28th, 1996

Dear Headmistress McGonagall:

I am sorry for writing this letter to you, but I did not know where else to send it. I had not realized that having Harry out of contact with us for two months would prove to be such a problem.

My name is Gerald MacFusty, and I assist my clan in managing the preserve of Britain’s native Hebridean Blacks. Harry approached us for information about the British Red-Gold dragon who has suddenly come into the world, the immense female who used to be Acies Lestrange, in late June. She had settled on an isle not far from our dragons, apparently drawn and soothed and calmed by their presence, and gone into what we thought was a starvation sleep. We expected this to last two to three months, after which she would wake ravenously hungry.

It appears that our information on British Red-Golds was spotty; it has been centuries since this breed went extinct. She has woken and flown. Her flight was out to sea, and slow, as though she were searching for something. We believe that her hunger will drive her to feed on the largest prey she can find, likely whales, but we do not know where she will go after that.

If you are in contact with Harry, please tell him the news. A few of our Dragon-Keepers approached her as she woke, and could not hold her. Her mind is wild, like a surging storm at sea, beyond anything we have encountered.

We will pass the warning along the coasts of Britain and Ireland, and hope that will suffice.

Yours in hope,
Gerald MacFusty.

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July 30th, 1996

Dear Harry:

I wish there was a way I really could send this letter to you. I’m so frightened right now. Yes, I admitted I was frightened. That’s fine. This is a private letter that no one else is ever going to see, rather like a private diary. I can say that I’m afraid here, and as long as it doesn’t paralyze me and prevent me from doing what has to be done, then it’s all right.

We received the Daily Prophet this morning, the way we always do, and Peter got it first. He spat his porridge out. I asked him what the matter was, and he passed the paper over to me without a word.

Harry—they’re hunting werewolves. The Ministry got a department formed somehow, on a technicality, that’s allowed to do it. They’ve killed two of them already. The photograph on the front page of the Prophet was of a hunter holding up two scalps, one of them white and one of them brown.

That’s when I realized that no matter how angry Peter is at Remus, he still loves him. He conjured a Patronus—his is an image of a shining tree—and sent it out as a message to Remus. He explained to me, when I asked, that the Order of the Phoenix used to do that all the time when they had to speak to each other, fast, and owls wouldn’t do. Then he started pacing around the kitchen.

My throat hurt. I wondered what would happen if no message came back, and then I wondered what would happen if we received an owl saying that Remus was dead.

I sat with my head in my hands for a while. That’s all I really remember.

Then a Patronus came back. It was a wolf, which I suppose shouldn’t have been a surprise. It ran in a circle around Peter, and his face grew calmer as I watched. He let out a long sigh and looked at me.

“He’s all right,” he said.

I nodded, and then went upstairs so that I could write this letter.

It’s started, Harry. The storm’s started. It’s strange that I never really felt that way before. I mean, there was the storm of Light at Hogwarts, and the storm of the Dark on Midwinter when the Light came up and asked that I give you some power if I was loyal to you. And Voldemort came back even before that, and tried to come back three other times. There have been all sorts of times when the world could have changed, at least for us if not for everyone in the outer world.

But I’ve never felt this way before, like there’s a storm blowing around me and a war coming, and everything’s trembling on the verge of a fall.

I hope you come home soon, Harry. I know that you need the time to heal, really need it, but we need you here, too. You’re the phoenix who can sing us through the storm.

Love,
Connor.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Four: Recalled From Exile

“Any luck?”

Harry shook his head and leaned back on Draco’s couch, clasp ing his hand and his stump together behind his head. He tried to concentrate on his wrist, to determine if there really was less of a feeling of magic there after he had broken the first of Bellatrix’s curses, but his irritation distracted him. “No. The magic is the same as the magic in Woodhouse—a smooth current, and it circles the room, and when I do something to alter the walls, the magic puts it back together. But I can’t get its attention, any more than I can get the attention of the magic in Woodhouse.” He frowned at the ceiling. “I am starting to think that we’ll need the Black family libraries on this after all. The Sanctuary can only demonstrate place magic, not how it works.”

Draco laughed quietly.
“What is it?” Harry rolled over and looked at him curiously.

“I’m comparing my memories of you a year ago to the way you are now,” said Draco. “And you’re doing much better now than you were then.”

“Of course I am,” said Harry, wondering why this was remarkable enough to make Draco’s eyes shine and his lips curve. He drew out his wrist and showed it to Draco. “I haven’t just had my left hand removed, and my parents haven’t just been arrested by my git of a guardian whom I no longer trust.”

“Do you trust him now?” And the humor was gone from Draco’s face, his eyes narrowing. “Because I’m not sure I do.”

Harry sighed and pulled his hand out from behind his head to pinch his nose. “That’s a complicated question.”

“No, it’s not.” Draco leaned forward on his chair and drummed out the words on his knees, an impact of fingers for every one. “Do. You. Trust. Snape?”

“Yes and no,” said Harry, tilting his head to look up at the ceiling again. It was carved with deep patterns that it had taken Harry a while to notice, since the shifting shadows were prone to conceal them, and the Sanctuary had had enough rainy weather in the past few weeks that the afternoon sunlight rarely reached that far into a room. Now, he watched a sea serpent coiling around a rock and spitting a tongue of clouds and water at ships. He wondered if that was real, or some artist’s rendering of a dragon half-submerged in water. “I know why he’s reacting the way he is, and I trust him not to want to hurt me.”

“But?” Draco pushed.

“You’re pushing,” Harry told him.

Draco laughed shortly. “Yes, and last summer I didn’t dare, except when you risked your life,” he said. “But this is different now, Harry. You’re not a fragile statue that will topple over and break at the slightest shove. You can take and grasp what I’m telling you now, and it’s important. Now, tell me.”

Harry bit his lip for a moment, then said, “But I don’t know if I can trust him not to be a liability by the time we return from the Sanctuary. Perhaps I should tell Professor McGonagall to search for a new Potions Professor for at least the first term.”

“And a new Head of Slytherin House?” Draco had tensed.

“I don’t know.” Harry swept his hand through his hair, absently massaging his scar. It hadn’t hurt, exactly, since he had come here, but it did tingle when he was dreaming. There were plenty of dreams of crawling through dirt tunnels, as though the place where Voldemort had taken refuge after his wounding were underground. “But I think I need to think about what’s best for him, Draco. Not whether he can heal by a particular date. And if that means his staying here because he can’t keep his calm in the outer world…” He shrugged. “That’s what’s best.”

“You sound like he did last year,” Draco murmured.

Harry sighed. “He won’t have a trial with the people who hurt him. I’m no longer sure that’s a good or a bad thing.” He was about to add something else, but he turned his head curiously. From the sounds outside, the quick slap of bare feet, someone was approaching Draco’s room at almost a run. He wondered if it was Nina; Draco had said they didn’t have a soul-cleansing session today, but she might have forgotten.

The door burst open a moment later, and Vera came in. Harry stared. Agitation seemed wrong on her face, as if it were a mask someone else had fastened on her features.

She held a letter in one hand.

Harry felt a wind blow across him from a long distance away, the kind of wind, he thought, that turned water to ice. He sat up and held out his hand for the letter, and Vera gave it to him without thought.

Or perhaps it wasn’t without thought. When Draco asked a question, she turned to answer him in a low voice.

Harry read. The handwriting on the letter was distinctly unfamiliar, and it was dated today, the first of August.

*Dear sisters and brothers:*
Normally, I would ask your permission months or weeks before bringing someone through the shadows, but I consider this situation urgent. I have never seen someone’s soul change so quickly in the course of a few hours. If we wait, then I fear we may lose him. So I send this owl on the swiftpath through the shadows, because this is an emergency.

My wandering feet had led me to the Isle of Man, and the Opalline family. I was staying a few days with them, and conversing with one of the daughters of the family, whom her father feared was succumbing to a sense of uselessness. This was the last day I meant to spend with them, since the wounds in the daughter’s soul were small, and did not require a visit to the Sanctuary.

A dragon came from the sky three hours ago. I have never seen anything like her: red-gold, female, with wings vaster than the earth.

Harry had to stop reading and close his eyes for a moment there. *Acies.*

*Or what is left of her. She’s not human any more.*

He opened his eyes and continued reading.

*The Opallines think she was drawn by their home, Gollrish Y Thie, which is the skeleton of an immense dragon of her breed. They also think she went mad when she realized that the skeleton was dead, and perhaps even made the connection that the Opallines had killed her. One cannot tell, however. Dragons will go mad simply because their wills are balked."

She breathed fire. Two dozen of the Opallines died in a few instants. If the Opalline heir, Calibrid, had not been on the Isle and summoned all the magic of her family to her, then I think more of them would have perished. But she managed to summon it, and compel the dragon into sleep.

However, she lost a sense of her own danger during the moments in which she summoned the magic, and the fire would have reached her. Her brother Doncan, trained to protect and guard her, cast his body and his magic into the way of the flames.

He survived, instead of being vaporized, but his body is so badly burned that his family can do little for him. The fire also took his sight, and has inflicted deep wounds on his soul. He believes now that his survival does not matter, because he will not be able to defend his sister in the way he has become accustomed to doing. He tried to commit suicide in the first moments after being assured that Calibrid was still alive.

*I stopped him, and I will be bringing him to the Sanctuary along the swiftpath. I know that Joseph has studied physical healing techniques that may benefit him. But teaching him to live with his burns will mean nothing if we cannot also reconcile him to life. I am sorry that I do not have time to ask formal permission. If you think it proper, I will serve whatever penalty the brothers and sisters choose.*

*In distress,*

*Calla.*

Harry glanced up from the letter. Vera was watching him with tense lines around the corners of her eyes, and Harry frowned. She looked concerned for him—he knew that expression by now—which did not make any sense.

“He’s coming here?” he asked, to begin the conversation.

Vera nodded. “I wanted to warn you,” she said, “because Doncan does need the Sanctuary, but I did not want you to have no warning of his coming, and blame yourself when he arrived.”

“I don’t blame myself,” Harry said shortly, giving her back the letter. “People I trusted told me Acies would sleep until we returned to the wizarding world. They seem to have been wrong, but I don’t think anyone really understands the magic that transformed Acies. I don’t know why she became a British Red-Gold instead of one of the living species of dragon.” He shook his head, and tugged his mind back to more important matters. “When will Doncan arrive?”

“Calla may have to convince his family, still, but she is right in that they can do little for him on the Isle of Man,” Vera murmured, frowning at Harry. “And they will have their own psychological wounds to soothe, from the deaths of so many of their family. So he should arrive in no more than a few hours, a day at the most.”

Harry nodded. “And she isn’t sure he will want to live?”
“That is true.”

“I can help,” said Harry firmly. “I know I can. I went through a warped version of the same training Doncan chose. I know what it’s like when the center of my universe starts swinging around and changing, and I realize I won’t be able to protect it perfectly any more.” He held Vera’s eyes. “He’s a guardian, the same as I am.”

Vera’s shoulders went up. “You realize that he may not want to speak to you?”

Harry snorted. “Of course I do. On the other hand, he didn’t want to live and come to the Sanctuary, either, and Calla’s bringing him here. I think there’s at least a chance he may want to speak to me. He’s met me before, and he knows the similarities we share. He acknowledged them himself.”

“And if I say,” Vera asked, her voice low, and clear as clear water, “that I do not think you should be involved in attempting to heal his soul, when you are still struggling to heal yourself?”

Harry folded his arms. “I would say that helping others is one of the ways I heal,” he said, dropping his voice into the frosty politeness that had won his way with his Dark allies when he first met them. “I would be sorry to act against your wishes, but I am not so fragile that I need absolute isolation from any other person who is hurt. I’ve been helping Professor Snape, you know.”

Vera stared at him, and Harry blinked. “You didn’t know,” he said. Why did I think she did? I suppose she never was there during the times when Snape and I talked or argued, because our sessions are always private, and she has her own life to lead otherwise.

“That burden should not have been left up to you,” said Vera, her voice even lower now with distress. “I knew he had refused Joseph’s help. I did not know he had decided to make you his Seer in Joseph’s place.”

Harry could feel himself start to scowl. “There are lots of burdens that shouldn’t have been left up to me,” he said sharply. “But they were, and that’s the way it is. I want to help. I can help. I have all this immense strength floating around, and I’m doing nothing with it. And Snape has at least tacitly agreed to let me help, because he talks to me. So why can’t I help Doncan, if he agrees to the same thing?”

“You should not have to,” said Vera. She kept shaking her head, as if that would make the things she didn’t like cease to exist. “You cannot heal if you must be constantly made to carry the burdens of others, Harry.”

“Is that something you See from my soul?” Harry leaned forward. “Or just received wisdom that you’re quoting?”

Vera stared at him.

“I thought so,” Harry said. “I know it probably does sound strange to you, Vera, because you help lots of other people who do need absolute isolation from the world around them, and peace, to heal. That’s not me, that’s all.” He shrugged. “I wasn’t raised normally, and I haven’t had a normal life since the time I was eleven. Why should I be normal in this, either?”

“I wanted to give you a chance to be normal.” Vera’s eyes were bright with grief. “I did not want to force you to help others who should be able to survive with the help of Seers, or on their own.”

Harry let himself soften, because he knew from her words that he had won. “It’s not fair,” he said. “I’ll grant you that. But I don’t really think there’s such a thing as fair unless people make it up and defend it. So I can help with Doncan, if he agrees that he wants my help?”

“If he agrees,” said Vera, still staring at him.

“Of course,” said Harry, puzzled and a bit offended that she would think he would barge into Doncan’s room to speak to him if Doncan refused to see Harry.

“And perhaps we will speak tomorrow about whether you will ever think of yourself first, instead of others,” said Vera, and strode for the door.

Harry watched her go, thoughtfully. So she doesn’t understand everything, even after Seeing my soul. I suppose she thinks there’s no way I can work on my healing and the healing of someone else at the same time. But that’s not true. And she was pleased with my progress until now, and I’ve been helping Snape for part of that progress.
“Harry.”

Warily, Harry turned to face his boyfriend. He was not sure whether Draco would approve of this or not. Of course, Draco was not actually in a position to enforce his will on Harry, either.

“Will it ever end?” Draco asked, his voice tired.

Harry knew the answer to that. He went over to the chair and leaned down, wrapping his arms around Draco’s shoulders and pressing a kiss to his temple. “No,” he whispered. “I told you that after Greyback and Whitecheek, remember? It doesn’t end. Life doesn’t stop moving while you try to learn to live it. I was foolish to think that I could retreat for two months and nothing would happen. I tried to arrange things so that nothing would, but that’s not the way the world works.”

“But you don’t feel guilty for Doncan’s getting burned?” Draco held his hand and searched his eyes.

Harry let out a surprised little laugh. “No. I made the decision to leave based on good evidence, or what I thought was good evidence. You don’t need to worry about that, Draco. I’m not doing this to punish myself. Guilt doesn’t help as much as genuine determination to aid someone else.” He started to pull his hand out of Draco’s.

“Do you know—” Draco began, and stopped.

Harry waited.

“Do you know,” Draco continued after a moment, his voice even lower than Vera’s had been, “I thought that someday, this would be done with? I was picturing us living in an isolated house—not in Britain, even, because people would never stop seeking you out to help them as long as we were in Britain. Maybe Ireland. Maybe Australia, or America, or some other place where they spoke English. Just living there, and our biggest concern would be about fights we had or whether the meat we bought was spoiled.” He laughed. “That was stupid, wasn’t it?”

Harry smiled. “That wasn’t stupid, Draco. Just unrealistic. And dreams are supposed to be unrealistic.” He gently laid his hand on the back of Draco’s neck until he tilted his head to look up, and then kissed him, slowly and thoroughly and with as much love as he could muster. He still didn’t think he was normal enough to convey all his emotions through his body, not the way Draco could, but he was good enough at it now to leave Draco more than slightly dazed when he pulled back.

“It won’t end,” Harry said quietly. “But someday, we might be able to have that isolated house, and we’ll even spend a few days there in between saving werewolves and working the downfall of the Malfoys’ political enemies.”

Draco laughed again, and this time the sound was much better, much clearer, than the last one. “Can I ask you one more question, Harry?”

“Of course.” Harry half-draped himself around the back of the chair. “Ask me all the questions you want.”

“Why do you care so much about helping other people?” Draco was staring directly at him, as if he, too, were a Seer and could read the soul with a casual glance. “The Seers can help Doncan. You don’t doubt their ability?” Harry shook his head. “Then why are you volunteering?”

“Because,” said Harry, “if I see a problem, and I can ease it, I should. Or I should tell someone else who can ease it.”

Draco was quiet for another moment. Then he said, “I don’t think I could live that way.”

“I’m not asking you to.” Harry cocked his head. “I’m not asking anyone else to. After all, it would be stupid of me to demand things from others that would require Lord-level magic to accomplish, when they don’t have that magic, wouldn’t it? And this is an extension of the same thing. If they can’t live that way, it would be stupid of me to demand that they do so. But I know I can, so I will.”

“Without exhausting yourself? Without making yourself into a repository for every kind of guilt?” Draco spoke that as a challenge, and Harry met it the same way.

“Yes,” he said. “Your mother wrote me a letter long ago, Draco, as Starborn, that described a kind of nameless Lord—a vates, I think, though she wasn’t thinking about magical creatures, really, and so she didn’t use that word. She described someone who would use his magic to serve and heal and protect others, but who could also make judgments. Some people would want him as an ally in unworthy causes, after all. And some people would want their goals met in such a way that it would harm others. And
some people would simply ask for silly and stupid things. So he would have to make the decisions as to how he would use his magic, and then live with those decisions, and the consequences if he was wrong. I remembered the serve and heal and protect part, but not the other. I think I didn’t feel confident in myself to make those decisions.” Harry shrugged. “Now, I feel that way.”

Draco, for some reason, broke into a smug smile at that.

“What?” Harry asked.

“They’re not going to know what hit them,” Draco said softly, “when you go back. And there are going to be so many people who want to be close to you, to have your attention, just because of what you are, Harry, not even because you’re powerful or can benefit them. There are going to be people who fall in love with you.” His grin grew wider. “And they can’t have you, because I’m here.”

Harry laughed. “Brat.”

“Prat.”

“Idiot.”

“Git.” Draco leaned forward and kissed him so suddenly that Harry nearly reeled backwards. “Now, go find out when Doncan is arriving, or go talk to Snape, or do something that helps other people,” he said, managing to make the word drip with contempt.

Harry hadn’t heard from him since their third year at Hogwarts, and then only on his brother’s name. “Hero.”

Harry raised his hand in salute, and departed, deciding to go to the platform where his own carriage had arrived. So far as he knew, it was the only place a Seer would land after bringing someone through the shadows, even by the swiftpath.

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“He’s asked for you.”

Harry looked up from the book on place magic he’d been reading—Yelling at the Grass: A Beginner’s Guide—and then laid it down. He’d brought it with him from the Black library, and read through it twice already. Half of that second time had been while he sat outside Doncan’s room, using a small Lumos charm to continue reading when night descended.

He supposed he had missed dinner, but he didn’t feel hungry as he stepped through the unicorn-carved door.

The Seers had given Doncan the most peaceful room Harry had seen yet. There was a contained wind wandering the walls, like the captive current of magic in Woodhouse. Silver traceries crept down from the ceiling, filled with water, shimmering so gently that Harry suffered an immediate increase in his own weariness. A voice Harry thought was a nightingale’s sang from two corners, and when it paused, then the room filled with a skylark’s music. And, of course, there were no mirrors.

It wouldn’t have mattered, of course; Doncan was blind now. But Harry appreciated the fact that the Seers had chosen this room anyway.

A bed stood in the middle of the room, but it had been shoved aside. Doncan hovered in a mass of air currents instead, charmed to a temperature he could endure and that would help the burn. Harry doubted there was any true comfort to be found for him.

His skin looked more like volcanic rock than anything human. Black and leathery, it shed a faint smell of cooking meat even now. Harry took a deep breath and stepped closer to him.

Acies’s flame had caught him across the chest and the face, before curling around his arms and legs; Harry thought he had survived at all only because of the magical shield he’d raised to defend his sister. His face resembled a mummy’s, with hollowed eyesockets, no hair left, all the skin shriveled, and the ears nameless lumps of meat. Harry stared helplessly at the patches of red-white skin where the blackness, and thus the destroyed nerve endings, left off. Nothing was more painful than a burn. He had heard Doncan screaming when the Seers brought him in. They had used potions, but they could only pour them down his throat. His skin was so utterly destroyed that any potion they might have applied directly to the burns would only slide off them.

“Doncan,” Harry said at last. He knew Doncan could speak, and hear, though Merlin alone knew how. Perhaps his magical shield had managed to spare his hearing and his throat more than it had his eyes, or it was a result of the magic Calibrid had used on him immediately after the flames struck. It could even have been a combination of his magic and Acies’s fire. Almost no one knew anything about the effects of a British Red-Gold’s flames.
Doncan twitched against the currents of air, turning his head towards him. Harry pushed aside the wracking pity. He didn’t have time for it right now, and neither did Doncan. As Calla—a young, thin, exhausted-looking woman whom Harry had met briefly before she vanished into this room with her charge—had said in her letter, healing him meant little if Doncan would only commit suicide the moment he was strong enough.

“Harry.”

Harry winced. Doncan had taken smoke and fire down his throat. His voice scraped and wheezed and expired at odd moments, like puffs of steam. But he continued on beyond that one word, giving Harry no chance to ask questions.

“It’s gone,” he said. “Everything is. I may not walk again. They can’t tell me how completely I’ll be able to recover, and even if it’s completely, then I won’t have my eyes back.”

“Never?” Harry asked. “No magic—”

“No.” Doncan’s voice was flat and empty. “There are some things magic can’t put right, Harry. The fire burned out my optic nerves, and—there is magic in that flame, too, power meant to destroy. Nothing will ever grow there again.”

Harry thought of ground scarred by fire, and winced at the thought of human flesh with the same thing done to it. “And because of that, you don’t want to live?” he asked.

Doncan snarled and rolled against the air currents, with what effort Harry didn’t like to imagine. Blue and green light shielded his body for modesty’s sake; cloth could have rested on the black, burned skin without paining him, but not on the places where the burns ended, and that was in irregular patches. “Of course not,” he said. “You changed your mind, Harry, about protecting your brother. But I chose to protect my sister, and to do it, I need all my senses. I know blind fighting, but that’s not enough. An enemy who came near enough without my hearing him could finish her.”

Harry nodded. He had expected something like this. He pulled a chair close and sat down in it. “And you think there will be no shortage of enemies after her?”

“Of course there will not,” Doncan whispered. “Did you know that a few people from Dark pureblood families tried to kill her when she was a girl, Harry? They are not Light. They had no reason to care what the Opallines did—except that they didn’t agree with a pureblood family, of whatever allegiance, treating their Squib child like a human being, much less making her their heir the way my father decided to. And since then, people have tried to kill her for the same reason, and people tried to kidnap her when we were traveling. And when she begins her revolution, bridging the magical and Muggle worlds the way she wants to do, then more people will hate her.”

Harry nodded again, then remembered Doncan could not see him and said, “Has it occurred to you that if you die, you can have no part in her life whatsoever?”

Doncan might have frowned; it was impossible to make out any movement among the leathery folds of his face. “Of course it has. But my part in her life is finished in any case.”

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“It is not,” said Harry crisply. “She needs you still. What do you think you have become to her, with the burning?”


“Not so.” Harry stood, pacing nearer to him and staring down, forcing away his own horror. That wasn’t important right now. “A symbol, Doncan. A symbol of what power costs. Leaders might not get hurt, but the people around them frequently do. Have you ever been injured in your defense of her before?”

“No,” Doncan said. “Each time, I saw the threats in time, and either got her away or defended her.” The bitterness in his voice was stronger than the scent of cooked meat.

“That’s right,” Harry said. “So she’s never had it slam home to her this way before. She’s going to understand being a leader in a way she never would have if her family remained unharmed. And on top of your burning, she’s got two dozen more of the dead to deal with. Doesn’t she?” Calla had told Harry, briefly, that Paton was not on the Isle of Man, but visiting some of his relatives in Italy. He likely would not hear of the news for some time, or, if he did, would not have been able to travel back to the Isle of Man in time for Calla to consult with him about removing Doncan.
“She does.” Doncan stirred restlessly, and rolled over again, almost hanging upside-down. Harry used his own magic to tug gently at him, righting him. Doncan grunted his thanks.

“She’ll be remembering you,” said Harry. “Thinking of you. Missing your presence at her side. Wishing she could turn to you for advice, and then remembering that you burned. She might have thought of you as a shield before, or a guardian, her wise older brother. Now she has to think of you as a victim.”

“Are you trying to make me feel worse?”

“I am trying to make you see the reality,” said Harry. He knew this was the course the Seers would never have taken, or not taken until long months had passed and they realized there really was no other way. Vera’s reaction when she heard of Harry helping Snape showed it. They were too focused on the individual. Vera thought Harry should heal for himself, and Calla, from what little Harry had heard from her mouth, thought the same way. They wanted Doncan to make the decision to live solely for himself, and would not think him non-suicidal if he didn’t. But that wasn’t the way to approach a guardian. “When I broke free of the web that had bound my loyalty to Connor, he couldn’t depend on me to coddle him any more. And he actively fought me, because he thought I was trying to kill my godfather, whom he loved. It took him months to realize that I’d been a victim, and that he had to be strong on his own, but once he managed it, there was no turning back.”

Harry paused a moment. “If I had committed suicide because my sense of purpose had changed, it would have broken him. I can only imagine what your suicide would do to Calibrid, since she hasn’t had months to get used to your gradual disappearance from her life.”

Doncan’s breathing rushed in and out, fast and labored. Harry wondered for a moment if he should summon Joseph, but it calmed again, and Doncan said, “But I won’t change my mind about serving her.”

“I don’t expect you to,” Harry said. I am counting on you not to, so that you will decide to live. “But she needs you now, and not in the role that you used to play. She needs you so much, Doncan. You can’t protect her any more, or so you claim, but you can still advise her. You can still be a symbol, an inspiration, to her, of the people she needs to be strong for—if you survive. Can you imagine what will happen if you die? She’ll plunge down an abyss. Won’t she?”

“She can’t,” Doncan whispered. “She has too many people depending on her.”

“Exactly.” This was the point Harry had wanted to lead him to, but he had wanted Doncan to be the one to say it. “She’s a leader, Doncan, but she’s never had to stand entirely on her own. You’ve always been there, you said it yourself. She can struggle through this loss, I think, because she knows it’ll be only temporary—”

“My eyesight is never going to come back.”

“And is your eyesight you?” Harry raised his eyebrows. “Is your eyesight the mind that advised her, the will that defended her, the magic that spared her from the dragon’s fire? She still has the chance to have all those things. But if you die, she doesn’t.”

“She’d survive,” Doncan said, voice gone fretful now. “She would have to. She would pick herself up and go on.”

“And would she do it as well as if her brother lived?” Harry shook his head, then reminded himself, again, that Doncan was blind. “She’s lost two dozen of the Old Blood, the people she carries branded on her skin, Doncan. I can’t even imagine how much she’s reeling right now. And she still has to be strong for everyone, because that’s what a pureblood heir does. That’s the reason their families grant them power and obedience, because they know that when the crisis comes, they can lean on them. Don’t make her lose her brother, too. Committing suicide right now would be the most selfish decision you could make. And I don’t think your father trained you to be selfish.”

Silence. Doncan breathed. Harry waited. His magic explored, gently, swirling around Doncan’s face, and returned to him with an image of the burned eyesockets. Harry winced. He’s right. Nothing will grow there again.

“The Seers won’t like it,” Doncan said at last. “They want me to say that I want to live just—because I want to live. The carriage only took an hour on the swiftpath, and it was all Calla chattered at me about.”

“They can like it or lump it,” Harry said. “They’re not the ones making the decision. You are. Did you ever listen whenever someone whined about your not having individuality because you chose to protect Calibrid?”

“Of course not.”
“Then don’t listen now,” Harry said. “I think you should live, Doncan, because it’s the only way left to you to fulfill your vows. You can advise her. You can inspire her. Your role has changed, but you haven’t left her side.”

Silence, again. Then Doncan said, “I made the right decision, by speaking with you. You—have given me back her to fight for, Harry. I cannot change my mind all at once, but I must take this under consideration.”

Harry bowed, his hand over his heart, a fierce gladness filling him. “Good,” he said. “Would you like me to carry any message to her, or send one?”

“Tell her I’ll hear her soon.”

Harry dipped his head one more time, and then turned and left the room. Calla, standing by the door, stared at him as he passed. Harry ignored her. She probably couldn’t imagine what he had to be happy about.

Of course, he didn’t think the expression on his face was precisely a happy one. Fierce, it felt like, and feral. He stopped on the nearest terrace and took a deep breath of the fresh air. Overhead, the moon, just waning from the full, sparkled with a breadth of light that made shadows dart around Harry.

He relaxed the barriers on his magic—an easier task than it had been before he came to the Sanctuary, because the gentle, wearing air had attacked even the webs inside him—and let it rise around him. A moment later, blue overcame his vision, and he blinked. Phoenix fire was burning through his skin.

He knew arguments lay ahead of him. He would certainly have to argue with Vera and Snape. He would probably have to argue with Draco. Other Seers might add their voices in, if the way Calla talked to Doncan was any indication. He did not care. He had made his decision.

I must go back.

If nothing else, there were the Opallines, reeling in the wake of their loss, suffering. He wanted to go to them, carry Doncan’s message, do what he could to soothe the hurts of those left behind, and speak with Calibrid and Paton. He did not feel himself bound to do so. He was not torturing himself with guilt.

He wanted to.

And he did think that Acies’s flight was a warning bell. One thing had not remained static and stable in the outer world while he sojourned here. What else had changed? Harry’s gaze drifted to the moon again, and he pursed his lips. He doubted the werewolf situation had remained the same.

Why did I think it would?

Because I convinced myself that needing the time to heal was the same as everyone else freezing while I wasn’t paying attention. And that wasn’t true. I needed the time. The conclusion didn’t follow from that.

He could hear Snape and Vera now, telling him that he hadn’t taken the full two months yet, that he should remain longer, that the outer world should be able to handle itself better without him. If he encouraged people to rely on him, what would happen if he were killed in battle? The wizarding world needed to stand independent of him.

Exactly. It does. But just removing myself from the equation isn’t enough. I have to show people how to follow the principles and not the person—show them that I won’t let them become my own personal Order of the Phoenix. That would be true no matter when I went back.

And I want to go back now.

He formed the phoenix fire into wings of shadowy blue light that beat around him, rising up against the stars and sending strange shadows spinning across the Sanctuary. His magic prowled and snarled and longed to do something. And Harry could think of plenty for it to do.

I don’t think I could heal fully in two months, now. So what I’ll do is go back and keep healing, while working on everything else, too. I’ll break the curses on my wrist, and I’ll study place magic, and I’ll study how to become an Animagus, because that should be useful in war, and I’ll work as a vates, and I’ll play politics as I have to. I’ll live everything all mingled together.
It was different from what he’d had to do other years, he told himself, because then, he hadn’t really been in control of anything. He had reacted rather than acted, scrambled after Voldemort or Scrimgeour or the most prominent political player of the moment, and done only as much as necessary to fulfill someone else’s demands or stop the situation from moving for a little while. Now, he was going to be the one to make it move.

*I trust myself to make at least some of the right decisions. I trust the people around me to tell me when I’m being an idiot and making the wrong ones. I can bow my stubborn neck enough to listen to them. And I have the magic to back up what I’m going to do.*

The phoenix fire spiraled up around him, losing the shape of wings as it rose into a blue cone, and Harry couldn’t help himself. He opened his mouth, and phoenix song followed the fire—not mourning, as it had been on Midwinter, but joyous and strong, and metallic beneath. A fitting song for a bloodless war, Harry thought, or a war he was going to try and keep as bloodless as possible.

He had the means, if he applied them with wisdom and discretion, to make people glad they had been born.

He startled himself, when the song ended, by feeling an intense moment of pity for both Voldemort and Dumbledore, not to mention all those ancient Lords and Ladies who had started out with good intentions and then fallen into the path of compulsion.

*They could do this. They could do such wonderful things. And they didn’t.*

*Well, I will.*

He went to retrieve his book on place magic from outside Doncan’s room. It wouldn’t do to have what he owned lying about everywhere, when he intended to depart from the Sanctuary tomorrow.

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**Chapter Five: The Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts**

“No.”

Harry rolled his eyes. Snape stood with his back to him, brewing the purple potion he seemed to work on exclusively these days. An eyeroll had a fair chance of going unnoticed. He had expected this opposition, and that made it easy to keep his voice calm as he explained again.

“You don’t have a choice in whether or not I leave,” he told Snape’s back. “I’ve already decided that I will—“

“And not spoken with the Seers about this,” Snape cut in smoothly, leaning over the cauldron to scoop up a handful of powdered moonstone, which he feathered out like falling stardust. Harry watched the potion roil for a moment before it swallowed the silver flecks. He wondered what Snape was making. The potions that required moonstone were relatively rare, at least when the stone was that fine. “Do you think Vera will simply let you leave?”

“Come to that, she doesn’t have *that* much control over me.” Harry stretched his arms over his head and leaned against the doorway again. “But I spoke with you first because I knew this would be the hardest battle.” He paused, but Snape still didn’t look at him. Harry shrugged, and continued. “Not only do I want to leave the Sanctuary, but I think you should stay here.”

Snape spun with a snap of his robes so hard that it almost knocked the cauldron from its base. Harry saw him put out a hand to rescue the tipping potion without taking his eyes from Harry. His face was sallow, his eyes so marked by sleeplessness that it was impossible to miss the gray around them in the ferocity of his expression, and he looked as though someone had been wearing him down, scraping him down, by magical torture for nights. Harry checked his pity. The last time he had asked to know what the dreams were about, Snape’s magic had flared and nearly wounded him before he controlled himself.

“And why is that?” Snape’s voice was low and ugly. “Do you not trust me to control myself around your enemies?”

Harry fought against the urge to lower his gaze. It wasn’t visible on the surface, but he knew there was a spark of betrayal in Snape’s eyes. He could not be as close to his guardian for as long as he had been, and not see it.

And he had to be honest, too. He had to show Snape that he wasn’t playing guardian to an abused child any longer. He had become more of the person Snape had always wanted him to be, but Harry suspected, just as had happened when he’d been forced to go with Evan Rosier and free Durmstrang, that Snape was unlikely to see how much he had grown until he was forced to.
“I don’t trust you to control yourself at all,” he said quietly. “You are having temper tantrums at me. And that’s in the privacy of the Sanctuary, where you know the Headmistress isn’t going to walk around the corner in the next moment and reprimand you for your behavior. What’s going to happen when we go back to Hogwarts? The first time someone makes a mistake in Potions? The first time you have to comfort a first-year Slytherin who misses her mum? The first time you get into a dispute with a colleague, or the first time I’m in danger? Do you think you’ll be able to keep from exploding?”

Snape was breathing fast. Harry struggled not to match him, breath for breath. He had sympathy, yes, but his sympathy had sharpened with an edge of exasperation as the days passed and Snape refused to either modify his behavior or tell him what the dreams were about. Harry no longer had much faith in his ability to heal by himself. He showed no improvement after a month, only a steady decline. And the other day he had raged both when Harry asked about the dreams and when Harry ignored him.

He wants something from me that I can’t give—absolute attention, and permission to just do whatever he wants. And that will be disastrous if he comes back to Hogwarts with me and can’t act like an adult.

“You cannot force me to stay here,” Snape said at last.

Harry kept himself from throwing his hand up, but it was a near thing. “I know that,” he said. “I would never force you to stay here. I will tell you that if you come back with me, I won’t let your temper tantrums—“

Snape’s mouth cracked open in an ugly snarl. “They are not temper tantrums,” he said. “They are relics of a suffering that you cannot comprehend—“

“Because you won’t tell me!” Harry didn’t mean to roar the last words, or to let his magic rattle Snape’s ingredient jars on their shelves, but that was what happened. And at least it shut Snape up. He went quiet, staring at Harry as if he were a stranger.

“You won’t tell me,” Harry went on, when he was sure that he had control of himself. “And what I’m walking back into—I can’t tell what the situation might be with the Ministry and the werewolves from this distance, and I know that I’ll need to play a role when I visit the Isle of Man that doesn’t include hurting them further because my guardian can’t control himself. You’ll ruin delicate diplomatic missions so easily, sir. You’ll put people off before they can ally with me, because they’ll wonder why I indulge you to the point of threatening and hurting others. I can resist you, because of the strength of my magic. But others can’t.”

“I cannot tell you,” Snape whispered. “I have been broken in ways that you cannot understand.”

“When my mind’s collapsed under its own weight.” Harry made his voice as skeptical as possible. “When I’ve mercy-killed people in war and faced the wild Dark.”

“Yes.”

Harry cocked his head and studied Snape more closely. “That might be true,” he said. “But I still can’t tell that if you won’t tell me.”

“I do not wish to.”

Harry nodded. “Then the best thing for you is to stay here, and stew in your dreams until you do come to terms with it. When you think you have, you can rejoin me. I’ll tell Headmistress McGonagall that she needs to find a new Potions professor and Head of Slytherin House for—“

“I am coming with you,” Snape said, his voice like a desert wind.

“To rage and destroy my reputation?”

Snape glared at him, angry, wordless.

“You’re uncontrolled,” said Harry. “You’re not acting like a Slytherin, you’re acting like a Gryffindor. And I can’t have you close to me if you do that. As I said, I have no intention of restraining your free will if you must come back with me, but I won’t allow you close to me in political contexts, and I’ll warn the Headmistress about you. She doesn’t need to deal with upset parents wanting to know why you’ve injured their children because you want to indulge your temper.”

“You speak as if—“ And Snape pulled himself up again.

“Yes?” Harry nodded. “Go on.”
“You speak as if you do not care about me.” Snape turned and stalked back to his cauldron, in a perfect show of how much it had cost him to say those words. He cannot even look me in the eye in the wake of them.

“Never,” Harry said. “You can think of the way I’ve talked to you for the past month and decide that?” He paused, but Snape did not turn around. Harry shook his head. “The simple fact of the matter is, I can divide sympathy from action now. I can care about you and know that it would be suicide for me to let you curse someone you thought was threatening me. I can understand an enemy’s motivation and still oppose him. I can long to help someone, and resist the urge, because she’s set herself up as my political enemy.” He couldn’t help the way his voice rang with wistful frustration. “Isn’t that one of the lessons that you wanted me to learn, back when you thought my forgiveness and compassion might kill me?”

Snape said nothing.

“If you come back with me,” said Harry quietly, “I’ll exile you from my immediate surroundings unless you’re thinking. And if you insist on being around me anyway, then I’ll have Joseph come with us.”

Snape stiffened this time, his hand freezing on the ladle with which he was slowly stirring his potion. His voice hissed like a newborn basilisk. “You would not dare.”

“Yes, I would,” Harry said. “He hasn’t been in the outside world in a long time. He has no other guests who are especially in need of the talking he can provide. He’s done all he can for Doncan, and there are others in the Sanctuary who know enough to keep caring for him. He’ll come with us and be your personal Seer if I ask him. And I’ve already asked him,” he added.

“You cannot do this to me.”

“Yes, I can.” Harry restrained the temptation to stalk into the room and shake some sense into Snape. “That’s the point. You cannot bear for someone to cross your will, but you are trampling on the free wills of others. I am vates. I will not permit that because you are continuing on with childish grudges you ought to have won free of twenty years ago!”

Snape whispered in the wake of his words. “You think that is the only reason I am suffering? Because of the Marauders?”

“How would I know?” Harry folded his arms and stared at his back. “You haven’t told me any differently, remember?”

“You ought to know it is more than that.”

Harry felt disgust snap like a broken twig inside himself, and he drew his lips back from his teeth as he hissed. Snape stared at him as he said, “Like it or lump it, Snape. Those are your choices. Come with me with Joseph at your side to act as your Seer, or stay here, or go and keep away from me. That is all.”

He turned and left, phoenix fire starting and sparking up his arms. He tried to quell his anger as he walked, and, most importantly, his disappointment.

What in the world does he expect from me? Two months ago he would have been angry that I was putting myself out that much for anyone, let alone for him. A month and a half ago, he scolded me against letting personal emotions take over so that I was useless in politics or battle. Why is this so different?

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Snape leaned over the cauldron, his breath coming fast. Then he remembered the dangers of breathing in the fumes from this particular experimental potion, and whirled away from it with a low curse.

His thoughts ran along what Harry had said to him in a passionate tide. It is more than the Marauders, and he ought to have known that. Why can he not leave me alone to heal at my own pace? Why must he push, now of all times? I left him alone to heal at his own pace.

He had, perhaps, overindulged himself, but he had thought he would have another month in the Sanctuary to recover the broken shards and fashion them into a cold, smooth mask. By the time they went back, he had planned to be fully in control of himself again.

And now Harry had said that he was leaving today. And he had offered Snape a choice that was no choice at all.
He leaned against the wall and cursed softly under his breath, the vilest words he knew, Muggle ones from his father mingled among the names of spells that, if he spoke them aloud and if they would work at all in the Sanctuary, would summon crawling nightmares that made Crucio look tame. When that lost its charm, he whirled to face his potion again.

He should have had more time. He needed more time.

But he did not have it.

It seemed that he had done the impossible, or the Seers had done the impossible, or Harry had done the impossible, or they had all done the impossible together. They had made Harry into an imposing young man who no longer looked as if he would crack and break at the first sign of strain. It was such a far cry from the way he had appeared when he first arrived in the Sanctuary that Snape could not imagine what had prompted the change.

Then he looked out the window of his lab at the distant, twining vines and flowers and trees of the Sanctuary, and he knew.

He embraced what happened to him here. He sank his roots deep and grew. He may have thought he had two months and not one, but he seized every chance that he could to break his barriers and his training and heal.

And you have not.

Knowledge burned like ashes in his throat, at least as bitter as the day he had realized Dumbledore was not about to expel Black. He tried to tell himself it was the aftertaste of powdered moonstone.

He knew better.

When Snape faced the choice head-on, he knew there was only one way it could end. He could not stay in the Sanctuary without Harry. Being back at Hogwarts but distant from Harry was only marginally better.

He would have to accept the company of a man he hated, a man he knew was like Black whether Harry would admit it or not.

I cannot fool him, it seems. But I may be able to take him by surprise. I may be able to grow into something that will satisfy him without changing myself completely. The Seers are less pushy than Harry has become, more delicate and careful.

Snape straightened his spine with a snap. It would mean playing a long game, working against the Seer’s sight of his soul as well as the dreams that attacked him with long claws nightly now. But he could do it. He had done harder things, including being a spy among the Death Eaters for a year.

Let me do this, then.

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“I fear only this,” said Vera. Harry had told her what he intended, and she had taken it more quietly than he had suspected would be the case, only sitting with her hands clasped in her lap and staring out the window at the sunlight that so often sheltered her. She turned back to him now, her face grave. “That you will, once again, begin to neglect your healing, because you would rather countenance the healing of those who need you.”

Harry tried to remind himself to be patient. It had been his own idea to come to the Sanctuary and subject himself to the way of the Seers, after all. And he had been patient with Vera before when she said something that he thought ridiculous. I bathed in that pool in the Relaxation Room even when I knew it was doing me more harm than good.

“I will be healing at the same time as I finish other things,” he said. “I did invite Joseph to come along, and he is one of the most relentlessly honest people you know; you said so yourself.” And she had, when she first explained why the other Seers had chosen Joseph for Snape. “He might come along even if Professor Snape doesn’t, because he has an interest in seeing the outside world again, and seeing what becomes of me. He told me that. So the Sanctuary can still keep an eye on me.”

“Not as well as it could if you stayed here.” Vera cocked her head at him. “You have only Acies as proof of the disasters in the outside world that you fear, so far. And Calibrid has confined Acies in sleep. Why must you hurry away? Aren’t you only teaching your enemies that you will come when called, and your friends that they must depend on you to the exclusion of their own powers?”

Harry shook his head. “I think Acies is a sign. And the Opallines would need my help even if nothing else was happening.”
“That means you will neglect yourself,” Vera said at once.

“You don’t know that.” Harry frowned at her. “It’s what I did in the past, but have I done it for the past month?”

“A month is not long enough to make a permanent change in your life.” Vera pushed a hand through her hair, disordering it for the first time Harry could remember seeing.

“A moment was enough to change Doncan’s life,” Harry said harshly. And he knew he was being harsh, he knew it, and he did not care.

“Physical wounds are different from the mental ones,” Vera whispered. “Your Bitter One is an example of how deeply cankered the soul can become when it goes untreated for years.”

“Draco and Snape are not going to let me retreat into being the mindless shell that I was,” said Harry. “I’m not going to let myself retreat into that.” He rose and paced restlessly over to the window. “I appreciate that you don’t want me to go, that you fear for me, that you wouldn’t want to see me regress just when I’ve begun toddling forward. But I’m afraid that you have no say in the matter, ultimately. I wanted to explain instead of vanishing.” Vanishing would have been easier. “But you cannot make the choice for me.”

Vera sighed. “No, I cannot,” she said. “And anyone who accepts the vates as vates knows that one cannot compel him. But I will miss you, Harry, and there is one final thing I fear, and have feared since I learned that you were helping the Bitter One and Doncan yesterday.”

Harry looked over his shoulder. “What?”

“That you do not know how to lead a normal life.” Vera was rising to her feet, her face ancient. “That no matter what happens, you will find yourself relentlessly addicted to the thrill of danger, the rush of pleasure. You might not be needed someday, but you will find yourself unable to retreat from the world.”

Harry couldn’t help the amused smile that widened his mouth, even though he knew Vera’s words were sincerely meant. “I think I was aiming too high,” he said lightly. “Normality and I aren’t meant to inhabit the same walks of life. That’s all right. I don’t need to retreat from the world. I just need to live, no matter what it means.”

Vera studied him one moment more. Harry faced her proudly, somewhat startled as he remembered how afraid he’d been of her the first time he’d seen her, almost two years ago now. She could see his soul, that was true, but he had nothing to be ashamed of. She touched his hair, murmured a blessing, and passed out of the room. Harry gave a satisfied nod.

Now to tell Draco.

He made sure to collect Argutus from his favorite sunbathing spot just outside the room. He planned to leave directly after his talk with Draco.

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“You’re sure this isn’t going to be a repeat of the last year and a half, with you ignoring yourself in favor of everyone else?” Draco asked the question looking out the window, so that he stared at the waterfall below his room instead of Harry’s face. Harry wondered if that was deliberate, then told himself that of course it was deliberate. What would have been more shocking would be for Draco to stare him in the eye the entire time. Draco had become more studied lately, judging his actions and expressions to a nicety. Harry suspected that his talks with Nina had helped with that, though he hadn’t been present for many of them and so couldn’t be sure.

“I’m sure,” said Harry, and kept his voice strong and certain.

“You’re certain that you can keep your goals in balance, instead of sacrificing yourself to save just one person or thing?” Draco shifted his weight from his left foot to his right. Harry couldn’t wait until he learned what that meant. One of the things he was most looking forward to was becoming a student of Draco, understanding him in a way that he hadn’t been present for many of them and so couldn’t be sure.

“I will try,” said Harry. “And if I do start making an unnecessary sacrifice, I trust you to pull me up.”

Draco turned around to face him then. Harry expected a smile, but there was nothing, only the deep, assessing gray gaze. Harry thought Draco was looking at him more as a comrade-in-arms at the moment than as a lover, and felt a strange thrill of pride at
“And you think that you can continue to actually heal, instead of just stay in place?” Draco flung the challenge like a spear.

Harry put his chin up. He was fighting the urge to smile. He would have, except that it seemed right he should match Draco’s solemnity with his own. “I do.”

Draco took a step forward and held out his hand. Harry clasped it with his own. Draco gave a little nod, as if that answered one of his own internal questions. “When do we leave?”

“Thank you for sending us by the swiftpath,” Harry told Vera, as he clambered into the carriage waiting for them. Argutus was looped in shimmering coils around his shoulders and waist, and the Many snake curled tight around his neck. Harry wondered if she would be glad to get out of the peaceful air of the Sanctuary and back into places where she could attack someone else. Of course, Harry was also going back to places where he was more likely to be in danger.

“It is nothing.” Vera looked as if she would like to say something else, but rallied back to the topic at hand. “I know that you wish to reach the Isle of Man quickly, and if not by the swiftpath, it would take you much longer, with the mortal distance as well as the distance through the shadows involved.”

Harry nodded. He was not sure of the Sanctuary’s exact location, but it had not escaped his notice that the carriage had flown east from Hogwarts, the opposite direction from Gollrish Y Thie.

Draco clambered in after him, and sat on the seat next to him, claiming his hand for his own. Harry smiled, and used his Levitation Charm to pull in their neatly packed trunks, shrunk to manageable size.

Snape was next, with Joseph just behind him. Harry studied him from beneath his eyelids as his guardian settled himself. *We’ll see how well this works.* He caught the look of utter loathing Snape was giving Joseph without seeming to do so, and concealed a sigh. *Probably not very well. But it’s the best compromise I could come up with, and Joseph is stubborn.*

Joseph looked directly at Harry then, and closed one eye in a slow wink. Snape looked livid, but given that he was pretending to ignore the Seer altogether, he couldn’t say anything about it. He tugged a book about Potions into his lap and began reading. Joseph smiled and settled himself, murmuring what sounded like the words of an old ballad under his breath.

“Farewell to you all,” said Vera, her face solemn. “Remember us, out in the mirror-world, and do not hesitate to return to the Sanctuary, where things are the opposite of distorted.”


“Be prepared,” Vera said, a small smile seaming her mouth then. “Our carriages usually take the slower path through the shadows because our guests need time to take in the soothing atmosphere of our home. But the swiftpath is for emergencies, and—very different.” She moved backward with a sweep of her hand, and the carriage bobbed into the air. Harry tilted his head back to see the spiraling golden line it ran on, like the one that had borne them here, and was more than a little surprised that he couldn’t find it.

A moment later, he figured out the difference. *The swiftpath must make the carriages fly differently.*

And *how.*

The carriage shot forward the moment they were sufficiently clear of the ground. Harry caught a blurred, bruise-purple glimpse of the various buildings of the Sanctuary, and then they were below them and the carriage was wheeling high, making tighter and tighter turns. Harry shuddered as the air in front of them turned the color of chalk.

The carriage made a sudden bound forward, and however fast they had been going, they were now going impossibly faster. Harry swore and sat back in the seat, unable to hold on to it, since Draco was firmly gripping his hand. Draco’s grin, Harry noticed when he looked over at him, was more than a bit maniacal.

“Nothing like riding a Firebolt, is it?” Draco said.

Harry shook his head dazedly. On a Firebolt, he was always in control, and he could tell the broom where to go. On the swiftpath,
the magic that hurtled the carriage along was in control.

They jolted then, and appeared to rise. Harry looked out their windows, but could see nothing remarkable. They were in the shadows, he supposed, as they had been when they came to the Sanctuary, but this time he could see the edges of the shadows whipping past like gray curtains. Now and then, their path flashed from above them, glowing like diamond dust. Harry felt something strike the carriage’s wheels, but it only made them spin; it didn’t stop them or slow them down.

“Do things live in the shadows?” he asked Joseph. Snape was apparently absorbed in his book.

“Sometimes,” said Joseph. “Some of us think the ghosts of the shadow-weavers are still with us, wandering in the last product of their magic. Did they have souls?” He shrugged. “We don’t know, but it makes a nice story to scare someone with the first time they take the swiftpath.”

Harry opened his mouth to reply, and then the carriage fell.

Draco let out a loud whoop and grabbed his hand harder than ever. Harry heard Snape snarl out an instinctive Shielding Charm. He held still and tried to tell himself that this was just a Quidditch dive, just like anything he’d made in a game against Gryffindor.

“What was that?” he asked Joseph, when the carriage had righted itself and soared upward again.

“The swiftpath is hung on various hooks,” Joseph, who didn’t appear at all discomforted, said. “Strung across the sky and among the shadows, if you will. That was our being tossed to a hook that was lower than the rest.”

Harry turned his head to stare out the windows, but still could see nothing but the shadows and the occasional flash of diamond from above. “It would be something, to know how to do this, myself,” he said softly.

“I don’t think anyone now alive knows how to do this,” said Joseph pleasantly. “There’s certainly no room in the Sanctuary for it. And the shadow-weavers weren’t human. They were the ones who made the swiftpath as well as the rest of the shadows. You’d have to ask them.” His eyes gleamed. “That would be an interesting question for a necromancer, if you wanted to approach one.”

“The only necromancers I know of are with their kin,” said Harry quietly, his mind reciting names. Dragonsbane. Pansy. “Dead,” he added, when Joseph looked at him.

“Oh.” Joseph was still, and Harry wondered again if the Sight didn’t tell him about specific memories, or if he was simply too polite to use it all the time. “Battle?” he asked a moment later.

“Yes,” Harry said. “Both of them.” Then he turned his head and stared out the window at the shadows again, with Draco squeezing his hand reassuringly. Snape read his book, and Joseph softly sang the words to his old ballad.

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The carriage came down like a dragon—and the comparison had Harry wincing as soon as he made it—over Gollrish Y Thie. Harry, surveying it anxiously from this high up, couldn’t see any damage.

No, that was reserved for when they approached closely.

The home of the Opalline family straddled Snaefell, the highest mountain on the Isle of Man. Paton had told Harry that there was an illusion of solid stone over the top of it, so great that a Muggle railroad ran across it and never noticed any difference between it and the normal stone of Snaefell. Harry assumed the illusion had been removed for the benefit of guests, because he could see the skeleton of what had been a British Red-Gold dragon immediately.

The carriage swung around to the west, the direction Harry had approached from with Paton when he came here to celebrate New Year’s Eve with the Opallines, and he heard Draco gasp. Harry didn’t blame him. He was staring himself.

Fire had blackened the great slab of stone on which Gollrish Y Thie sat; Harry thought he could still see wisps of steam rising from it. Melted snow and equally blackened earth lay beyond that, and small pits that Harry thought might be where magical defenses had burst open, or perhaps where the dragon’s claws had gripped. The corpses were gone, but that didn’t surprise him. The Opallines would take care of their own first. The house itself seemed to have escaped damage. Perhaps British Red-Gold bones were resistant to its fire. No children played around its gates, though.
 Though Harry hadn’t thought anyone had announced their coming to the Opallines, someone was waiting for them. Harry knew him by his height and his ragged white-blond hair, not yet grown in completely from where he had cut it in mourning. He had difficulty in waiting until the carriage settled to the stone like a diving bird before he opened the door and advanced to meet him, holding out his hand.

Paton gripped his wrist and nodded to him. “Harry,” he murmured.

“You knew I was coming?” Harry asked, studying the Opalline family head’s face closely. It showed signs of weariness, but that wouldn’t be unusual. Paton would have traveled from Italy to home in the last day, and the travel must have worn him out, to say nothing of what had happened to his blood.

“We felt your magic the moment you left the shades protecting the Sanctuary,” said Paton simply. “It has grown very much greater. Did you know that?” He studied Harry with a trace of the gentle curiosity that Harry remembered. “It rings like a song or a chorus of hunting horns.”

Harry blinked. “I—didn’t know that.” It was true that most of the last webs he’d put on his power had been released in the Sanctuary, webs of distrust and insecurity about his own magic and his right to hit other people with the strength of that magic. He hadn’t realized it would make that great a difference. Possibly the magic in the Sanctuary had damped his own, or he had become used to it so gradually he didn’t notice.

“It’s true you positively stink of roses,” Draco volunteered.

Paton chuckled, then sobered. That brought home to Harry, more than the mere sight of his face, the gravity of what had happened here.

“Thank you for coming, Harry,” he said quietly. “Two dozen dead—we are reeling from the blow.” He moved his hand over his face, and the glamour he usually wore faded, revealing the swirls of color that marked his Old Blood tattoos. “Calibrid is working herself into exhaustion to soothe the grief of those around her, and to forget what happened to Doncan while she put the dragon to sleep.”

“I can tell her that he’s still alive,” said Harry. “He did want to die, but we talked, and he changed his mind.”

“Did he?”

Harry met Paton’s eyes calmly. He wasn’t sure that Doncan would want him discussing the details of their conversation with anyone else. “Yes, he did.”

Paton seemed to know when not to pry into his son’s privacy. He inclined his head. “You are welcome, all of you,” he said. “We can offer you food and drink. Many of my relatives who don’t know what else to do have been cooking, and the food provides a good distraction for the rest of the family.”

“I am a Seer,” Joseph said. “If some of those most grief-stricken would consent to see me, I may be able to help.”

“I have some healing potions with me, if you have wounded,” said Snape.

“And I will lend my magic to do whatever I can,” Harry finished.

Draco vibrated at Harry’s side, but didn’t add anything. Harry squeezed his hand, to let him know that he didn’t go unappreciated, and looked up to see Paton nodding at them all.

“We need those and more,” he said. “Beyond the dead and the survivors of the dead, we have others wounded by the dragon’s fire, though none so severely as Doncan was. Healing potions—we do not have enough, and our few skilled brewers are coming from Siberia and have not yet arrived. Harry, the approach of your magic was soothing some tempers from a distance, but inside, the effect may be greater.”

Harry nodded, and followed Paton inside Gollrish Y Thie. “I am sorry this happened, sir,” he murmured to Paton’s back. “I thought the dragon was asleep, and safe enough for me to leave.”

“It was not your fault,” Paton said gently, “and ours was not the only loss.” He hesitated for a long moment, then continued, “I assume you have had no news since you went to the Sanctuary?”
“None at all,” said Harry. “What has happened?” He was already bracing himself for a blow, anything from the Wizengamot passing a resolution to make Dark magic illegal to Philip Willoughby, one of the parents of the children he had killed, successfully bringing him to trial.

Paton sighed through his nose. “Many things, but the most urgent to your particular cause is that the Ministry has managed to form a department for the hunting of werewolves.”

Harry jerked to a stop. “What?”

Paton turned and faced him, his eyes grave. “Yes. Apparently, it had been tried before, and rejected. Then Amelia Bones, who is, after all, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, approached the Heads of the other Departments within the Ministry. It seems there’s an old rule that all of them, acting in concert, can overrule the Minister of Magic. Traditionally, of course, there’s too much rivalry and professional jealousy among them to permit something like that to happen. But the werewolf panic is higher than we estimated, or Minister Scrimgeour has angered all of them at once.”

“Or Bones promised them something,” Harry murmured, remembering the panicked woman he had seen after the biting of Elder Gillyflower.

“Perhaps,” said Paton. “My relatives who work in the Ministry were not able to learn the whole of it. But the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts has now formed. They sent out hunters a few days ago, with the full moon. Two werewolves were killed, according to the *Daily Prophet*.”

“Did they say where?” Harry’s throat felt tight enough to constrict his breathing.

“London,” said Paton, as Harry had almost known he would. “A pack in London, one of the fringe ones who live close to the Muggles. The charge was that a rogue werewolf had attacked a Department hunter, and when they killed him, another leaped at them, so they killed her as well.”

Harry finally managed to swallow. “And did they happen to give a name of the pack, or a name of the pack leader?”

“Loki,” said Paton quietly.

Shock swept through Harry in a windstorm, though in one part of his being, the one that expected bad things to happen, he was not surprised. And then came rage like a firestorm, such that he was hard put to keep his skin from burning.

*You’ve pushed me too far*, he thought, aiming the condemnation in the direction of the Ministry. *I wanted to remain poised between both of you, taking neither side, but now I have to take the werewolves’. Good luck to you in weathering this war now.*

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Chapter Six: Downrush

He felt the boy’s magic the moment he returned to the world, because, of course, there was no way Harry Potter could ever be quiet.

Falco was meditating in his sea eagle form on top of a church steeple, most of his mind tucked and wandering in contemplation while a small shard floated on the surface to alert him to happenings in the world, including a gun going off anywhere close at hand. One disadvantage of having a large and noticeable Animagus form was that Muggles were likely to choose to shoot at him, for no greater reason than the pleasure of bringing down something unusual.

He felt Harry’s magic as light, a fiery star rising in the east. Falco spread his wings and gave a little hiss of displeasure when the sentry shard summoned him. *No sense of decorum at all,* he thought, as he took off and turned east. *No sense of quietude. He is a child.*

Lord-level magic ought never to go into the hands of a child. Falco mourned the fate that had made it so.

He had been to Godric’s Hollow, to study the twining magical signatures there so that he could better understand his opponent in the fight for the balance of the world. What he had found had puzzled him, but he had understood it after some study.

Most wizards had natural barriers on their magic, walls blocking off the deeper parts of their magical core, beyond which they could not press. Some wizards could not become Animagi after years of study, for example. Others could not cast the
Unforgivables, or could not cast Dark Arts pain curses, or could not stay seated on a broom well enough to play a game of Quidditch. Most people accepted their talents and their interests as limitations, but those barriers played their part. And a good thing, too. When a wizard pushed beyond them in a tide of extreme emotion, he might wield Lord-level power, but only for approximately two moments. Then his body, unused to accepting such a flood of magic, would destroy itself. These days, most wizards only breached the barriers when they were trying to both commit suicide and take a hated enemy with them.

Falco would have considered what happened at Godric’s Hollow the greatest of coincidences if not for the fact that a prophecy was guiding it. That Voldemort’s Killing Curse had been strong enough to smash Harry’s barriers but not strong enough to dominate the magic that lay beyond them, as it was in most cases; that the magic had defended its host the only way it knew how, by forming into a mirror and reflecting the *Avada Kedavra* back at its maker; that the rebounded Killing Curse had struck Voldemort just as he was casting the second one at Harry’s brother; and that that second curse had penetrated enough to leave a curse scar but no other mark, sparing Connor Potter’s life, had Falco shaking his head.

It was what the prophecy had demanded. It was what fate said should happen. But it still made Falco think that the whole thing was so unlikely that it should not have been allowed to happen in the first place. He would certainly have arranged matters differently if he had been in charge.

He had read the magical signatures, and used a spell that would pull images of the past from the walls and allow him to see what had happened. The magic that saved Harry’s and Connor’s lives should then have killed them immediately afterwards, as it roared through Harry’s body in an unstoppable flood of fire and then consumed Connor. But instead it had swirled into the shadowy image of a serpent and coiled around Harry’s cot, guarding him. The child in the memory had smiled and put out a hand to stroke the serpent’s head, giggling when it flicked its tongue out to touch his cheek.

Falco could only surmise that Harry’s barriers being broken so young had given him a chance at survival. It was not, for obvious reasons, something that happened to children normally. His body wasn’t used to containing any usual amount of magic, the way that adult wizards’ bodies were. So it had adapted itself to carrying Lord-level magic, and his power, strong enough that it had almost a personality of its own for those first few years, had helped, madly glad to be free from the walls that would otherwise have imprisoned it forever.

Falco had seen, and could feel pity for, the terror that had consumed Albus and Lily Potter when they realized what had happened. There was even the chance that Harry himself could have been the fulfillment of the prophecy, if they did not chain it so that it would not shift. And, of course, they had hated the Dark edge of Harry’s magic, surmising rightly that it came from Voldemort, that the Dark Lord had given some of his abilities, most dangerously the *absorbere* gift, to the baby.

He did wonder that they had not ever sensed the other Dark edge of magic lingering in the house, but he understood why they might have ignored or denied it. Or simply not felt it; the overwhelming evidence was that Harry’s magic had blanketed it from their notice.

But now he understood, and other than wondering if this prophecy might yet end in a tumble of coincidence as unlikely as that which had produced its beginning, Falco had no reason to wonder about Harry Potter’s beginning anymore. He *did* know that the child’s birth was natural, but his sudden acquisition of magic was unnatural, and he really should not have been cluttering up the world, still.

And now Harry had come back, blazing and blaring, as though he were the only wizard in the world.

Falco lifted his wings and spiraled higher, turning to the west, towards which the flare had traveled. He supposed he must go along and watch Harry. Soon, the watching would end. It would be time for him to take the field, and to do what he must to keep the balance, a cause greater than his life.

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He felt its return as a thick, stinking, choking mist, spreading throughout the clean air and hurting him. He snarled and sank back into himself, curled and coiled, wrapped around the treasure that had sustained him.

One of the treasures.

Then he lifted his head, he, Lord Voldemort, and sought out the direction of the magic, his nose twitching. It came from the east, thick choking magic, horrible dusty magic, the reek of tombs. It was Harry come back, and he might hunt and inflict another punishment on the wounded hunter.

He lowered his head and rested it again in the soft, cool dirt. There was only darkness around him here, no light to mock his
blindness. He would rest in this burrow, coiled around the cup, and he would grow strong. He would find a way to heal the wound that kept bleeding his magic away from him.

And he lay in a burrow where no one would think to look for him, save his Thorn Bitch when she woke. This was his property, uniquely his property. He closed his eyes and felt the cup’s smooth sides beneath his hands, his fingers spidering over the badgers carved on the handles. He felt an answering echo from deep inside, the whispers of a fragment of immortality.

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Harry went into the bedroom of the first burn victim determined not to think of the Ministry for a few moments. Think of the wounded, he instructed himself firmly. Think of how you can help them.

That first victim was a child with bandages wrapped around her burned face, a girl Harry thought he remembered vaguely from the Opallines’ New Year’s celebration. Sitting by her bed, softly reading to her, was a tall woman he knew he remembered: Angelica Griffinsnest, Paton’s first wife, who had separated amicably from him. Harry supposed the little girl was probably her granddaughter. He winced; he could only imagine the pain she must feel right now. She was Doncan’s mother.

Angelica looked up when Harry came in, and then nodded and held out her hand to him. Harry clasped her wrist, secretly impressed that she didn’t flinch from his supposedly overwhelming aura of magic. Perhaps concern for the little girl kept her from doing so.

“Greetings,” she said. “Paton told you what has happened to Oriela?” Her gaze was anxious as she turned back to the bed, and Harry could see why. The girl seemed to have retreated into herself, if the dull glaze of her eyes between the bandages was any indication.

“He did,” said Harry softly, taking a seat on the edge of the bed. “That she had given up on living since the burning.” He hated talking about Oriela as if she weren’t there, but she wasn’t reacting to anything. Harry supposed she wasn’t there.

Angelica nodded, her curly hair rustling around her. “Some of the others were burned worse than she is, but she’s the youngest.” Love bled through her voice as she leaned over and picked up the girl’s hand. Harry had to look away for a moment; part of him was still wracked with bitter envy whenever he saw parents acting around a child like that. “She knows that she won’t ever look the same way again, and—we shouldn’t have put it quite that way. The Opallines try to give their children to reality young.” Angelica’s voice glinted with frustration for a moment. “In this case, it was exactly the wrong thing to do.”

Harry nodded. “I think I might be able to help.”

Angelica gave him an intense, curious glance. “You’re a Legilimens, I know. Paton told me. Will you go into her mind and bring her back?”

Harry shook his head. “I would only want to do that with someone I knew well,” he said. “Besides, she’s so deep in shock that I might hurt her.” He licked his lips, and told himself that just because he hadn’t fully explored the limits of this gift didn’t mean he could avoid using it to help. “I’m going to sing to her instead.”

“What?”

But Harry was already fixing his eyes on Oriela’s face, and opening his mouth.

He wasn’t sure what would come out. The phoenix song had sounded different each time he sang it. Harry thought it adapted itself to the circumstances, rather than his consciously choosing a sound for it. He barely remembered the music he had made in the hospital wing after Fawkes’s fall on Midwinter.

And this time, the phoenix song was gentle.

Harry didn’t try to control it; he let the notes swirl out from his lips and go where they would, other than keeping his mind focused on the goal of bringing Oriela back from her catatonia. The song itself warbled and coaxed, dipping almost into inaudibility on a few occasions, then rising into a soaring spire of triumph. Harry found he could imagine this as a song that the phoenix might sing to coax the sun into rising, or a flower to come through the last of the snow in spring.

It did not force. It did not push. It simply danced, and showed off how beautiful the world was, and asked the listener if she really wanted to give that up. Harry nearly lost himself in a sweet, chortling cascade that soared so high falling out of it was physically painful. He caught himself with his hand on the bed and blinked, but he didn’t stop singing.
Flames abruptly sprang up along his arms, blue ones. Angelica hissed at him, something about not bringing fire near a girl who had been so badly burned, but Harry didn’t let himself be distracted. The song had called the fire for a reason. He wasn’t righteously angry, so it had no reason to emerge otherwise.

He held out his arms, and the blue flames crept down to the end of his fingers in one case and to the end of his wrist in the other. They blazed steadily there, pointing at Oriela, giving her, Harry realized abruptly, an example of a fire that would purify instead of hurt her.

He did not know how long he sat there, flame and song both outstretched, doing nothing to tug her back, but offering her the chance to come out of her coma and see what beauty was all about.

Oriela stirred.

Angelica made a sound that might have been a sob. Harry heard his voice lift exultantly, and for a moment his body seemed to break apart into light as long ago, on a certain Walpurgis Night, it had broken apart into darkness. Golden sunbursts pushed through his skin and struck the walls. He felt a sense of involuntary, instinctive hope, the same kind he felt when he saw the sunrise, regardless of how he might feel about the Light or Light magic. The dawn was coming. He smelled roses, or something like them, and the air was thick and warm and very sweet.

Oriela put out a hand. Harry clasped her fingers with his.

She gave a little shudder when she felt the tickling warmth of the flames, but she didn’t try to pull away. She leaned nearer, and then her lips moved under the bandages, whispering a word Harry couldn’t make out.

He brought the song to a sliding, swooping end. Oriela stared at him with living eyes for a moment, then looked beyond him at Angelica.

“Mwarree?” she asked, which Harry suspected was Manx for “grandma.”

Angelica leaned forward, answering in the same language, her hands fluttering around Oriela’s body to avoid touching the burns. Harry sat back, and smiled, and let the flames coil back into his body and his skin snap shut over them.

Perhaps I don’t have to learn how to control this magic after all, he thought. It does well enough when it guides itself.

And this had settled him, grounded him, reminded him of what he really was. He was angry about the Ministry, but he would go in angry and determined, rather than simply raging. What he wanted was to bring about circumstances much like these for the werewolves, not to destroy.

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Draco had to admit, he appreciated the way that Harry had decided to take this in stride.

When he emerged after coaxing a few badly burned Opallines back from the edge of sinking into themselves, and, apparently, letting the flow of his magic soothe a few more, he nodded to Draco. “Shall we go to the Ministry?” he asked. The words were light, cool. The green eyes were not.

Draco smirked and followed him, walking at his right shoulder. For his birthday, he had given Harry a copy of a book about pureblood rituals and traditions that his own parents had presented him with on his sixteenth birthday, feeling that Harry needed to know about them, too, a year away from his becoming an adult. That book had mentioned in passing that the companions of those Lords and Ladies who actually treated other people like human beings had often walked at their right shoulders. The book had debated whether it was any companion that did so, on a rotating basis, or only the most favored, the most necessary, the closest to being an equal—in terms of influence if not in terms of power.

Draco thought, although the author of the book didn’t, that it was, of course, the most necessary.

They arrived in the courtyard of the Opalline home—which, frankly, made him uneasy with the bony structure of it—and Draco looked around, noting the absence of both Professor Snape and the Seer. “We’re leaving without them?” he asked, trusting Harry to know who he meant.

Harry walked ahead without looking back. “Yes. We are.” He turned to face Draco then, one eyebrow raised. “Unless you really
think that I can trust Professor Snape to behave in the Ministry?”

Silently, Draco shook his head. He was surprised and dismayed to note the changes in Snape. Only Lucius had taught him more about self-control. Draco had seen his Head of House walk through many trying circumstances and not lose his temper. He supposed his losing it now had something to do with the Sanctuary, but if he couldn’t control himself, he had to expect to be left behind.

Harry nodded. “We’ll go alone. But first, I need you to tell me what my magic feels like. I can’t feel it, myself.”

“I’m not the best person to ask,” Draco mused, his eyes fixed on Harry. “I had time to get used to it, so it isn’t bursting on my senses like Mr. Opalline described. But it does stink of roses, Harry. I meant that.”

“Hm.” Harry gave a long, slow blink. “That could be a problem. I’ll want to surprise my enemies some of the time. What about this?” He did something Draco could barely sense, like flinging a cloth up.

The scent of roses lessened considerably. Draco nodded his approval. Then he asked, because he wanted to see if he was right, “Harry, are you going to walk into the Ministry and then unleash your magic at everybody?”

“Good guess, Draco,” Harry said. “Are you sure that you still want to come with me?”

“I wouldn’t miss this,” Draco said, and stepped forward firmly to take Harry’s arm. He knew that the distance between the Isle of Man and London was too large to be covered in one Apparition jump, and he still couldn’t Apparate himself. Harry would have to Side-Along Apparate him a few times, a process Draco hated. He comforted himself with the knowledge that there would be flustered Ministry officials at the end of it.

And an angry Harry. Draco did not mind seeing an angry Harry. It confirmed his own beliefs, it comforted him with the knowledge that Harry had learned to be a warrior instead of a peace-maker, and it made Harry look attractive enough that only in the midst of his laughing, exultant joy did Draco want to bed him more.

“Ready, then.” Harry jumped, pulling Draco along for the ride, while Draco thought firmly of the Ministry and not of his nearly lost lunch.

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They arrived precisely in the middle of the alley with the disused telephone box, which Harry remembered from his first visit to the Ministry with Snape, when he’d been asked to register as a Parselmouth. Harry stepped forward, with a swift glance at Draco to make sure he was well and not trembling too badly after the Apparition, and punched the keys that spelled out the word “magic.”

The welcome witch’s voice spoke, asking them to state their names and business. Harry thought for a moment, wondering how to phrase it, then decided that inconspicuous was best. He had approached the Ministry with his magic tightly under wraps, after all.

“Harry and Draco Malfoy,” he said. “Here to see Amelia Bones.”

The telephone box whirred, and two silver badges dropped into Harry’s waiting hand. He tossed Draco’s to him, then paused in the middle of fastening his own to his robes. The magic on the telephone box had obviously misinterpreted his words. The badge said HARRY MALFOY.

Draco snickered.

“Oh, shut it,” Harry muttered, and used his magic to blur the last name into recognizability. They stepped into the box, which shut behind them and, after a moment, lowered them into the ground.

Harry kept his eyes half-closed on the way down, pondering what he would say. He knew how he wanted the conversation to go—his demanding an apology, Bones offering the apology and the immediate rescinding of all werewolf hunting—but he knew it wouldn’t actually happen that way. She had pushed through a Department to hunt werewolves. She was desperate. He wondered if it was only fear, or if someone had pressured her, or if she stood to gain political power out of this, or if it were a combination of all three.

Well, I’ll start by letting my magic flare, and see what she might betray. After that, I’ll speak as openly as I can, to let her know that this does not please me. And then I’ll go to Scrimgeour. I still don’t know what he’ll do in this.
That Scrimgeour hadn’t interfered so far, however, suggested that his hands were tied. And Harry knew that he might be angry at him for using magic inside the Ministry. They had had an agreement. Harry could use the means that other wizards did to influence action in the Ministry—political power, money, persuasion—but he wouldn’t use magic. It was Scrimgeour’s position that Lord-level magic, because it wasn’t available to ordinary wizards and witches, was unfair to use in a place largely devoted to ordinary wizards and witches.

But I don’t think the Ministry is what he wants it to be, and it never will be if some of its excesses aren’t curbed. Right now, they’re helping ordinary witches and wizards at the expense of some who happen to be lycanthropes. If Scrimgeour denies that, then I’ll refrain from using magic in the Ministry as long as I can, but I’ll be on the opposite side from him.

The lift clicked to a stop, and they stepped out into the Atrium. Draco blinked at the fountain of a wizard, surrounded by a witch and magical creatures all gazing adoringly at him. Harry ignored it. It stung his temper, and offended him on several different levels.

The guard waiting by the gates into the rest of the Ministry was a woman with gray hair and an incurious face. She just watched them as they approached, and Harry congratulated himself. He must have done a good job of wrapping up his magic if she sensed nothing out of the ordinary.

“Welcome to the Ministry of Magic,” she recited, in a fast, dull drone. “My name is Erica. Let me register your wands for you.” She reached out an expectant hand, and Draco gave her his.

Harry waited until it was handed back, then shook his head with a woebegone expression when she looked at him. “I can’t,” he said. “Sorry. I just came back from a long journey, and I left it with my trunks.”

Erica frowned and started to say something, but then caught her breath. Harry realized that she’d noticed the lightning bolt scar on his forehead. In a moment, life and animation returned to her face.

“You’re him,” she whispered. “Harry Pott—the one who used to be Harry Potter?”

Harry nodded, wary. She could do anything from demand an autograph to let them sneak in to summon other people to see the Boy-Who-Lived. With Harry’s luck, she would turn out to be related to one of the children he’d killed, and would delay them.

“It’s such an honor to meet you,” said Erica. “Imagine, you coming into the Ministry this way, like any normal person!” She clasped her hands and beamed at him.

Harry saw a way to take advantage of the hero-worship in her eyes. “Yes,” he said, lowering his voice and leaning forward. “About that. I’m not here with magic blaring because this is a secret mission, Erica.”

“Really?” Erica’s eyes shone. “It is?” She looked like a young girl, and Harry wondered if he had misjudged her age. On the other hand, being on the gates into the Ministry and having nothing to do but register wands all day might make any excitement enough to reduce her to babbling.

Harry nodded seriously. “No one can know that we’re going into the Ministry right now. We have enemies.” He stressed the word, and saw Erica’s eyes widen in delighted comprehension. “So can you let us through, and not tell anyone that I don’t have my wand?” He stared up at her from beneath his fringe, and waited.

“Of course!” Erica opened the gates for them with shaking hands. “This is wonderful. You’re wonderful. This is so wonderful. I promise I won’t tell anyone, I promise, I promise—”

Harry managed to incline his head and look grateful, or, at least, grateful enough to satisfy her. They were through the gates in a few moments, and making for the lifts. Draco was chuckling at his back.

“Someone has a worshipper,” he said.

“I could have a lot more, if I wanted to try,” said Harry, and shook his head to get rid of the uncomfortable prickling sensation that Erica’s fervent gaze had given him. “Now, let’s get to the second floor.”

******

Harry let Draco go in front of him when he got to Amelia Bones’s door, and chat and flirt and laugh with the Auror standing
guard there, enough to get him to lower his guard and at least ask Bones if she’d see them. Harry himself remained behind Draco, head bowed as if shy, his trainer scuffing the floor to add to the image.

“Tell her that it’s very important,” Draco said, near the end of the conversation. “I’m acting as my father’s messenger in this.”

“I’ll tell her,” the young Auror promised, and then opened the door to speak to Bones.

Draco wandered back to Harry. It was no surprise to Harry to glance up and see him looking pleased with himself, though his smile lessened a bit when he looked at Harry. “You could at least look as if you were jealous of me for flirting with someone else,” he muttered.

“But you don’t mean anything by it,” said Harry, wondering why Draco wanted him to be jealous.

“Neither did Nina, and you got jealous of that,” Draco pointed out.

Harry flushed. He hadn’t liked feeling that way. “She could See your soul,” he said, “and help you in ways I can’t. That isn’t true this time.”

Draco, who now appeared extremely smug, had just opened his mouth to reply when the Auror leaned back around the door again and said, “Mr. Malfoy? She’ll see you now.”

“Excellent,” said Draco, fitting the haughty pureblood mask to his face so fast that Harry blinked in surprise, and he led Harry through the door and into an office that seemed, to Harry, to be even more crowded with wizarding photographs than Scrimgeour’s old office had been. In this case, though, they were mostly Aurors posing with captured criminals, who seemed to be fighting like mad to get away.

Amelia Bones herself sat behind her desk, a formidable, gray-haired woman Harry had only seen in the Wizengamot before. She had a straight back and direct eyes that fixed on Draco the moment he entered.

“What do you want?” She sounded wary but interested. “Has Lucius Malfoy actually sent his son to make peace with the Light elements in the Ministry? That would be a first, for him to work with us instead of trying to corrupt us.”

Draco shook his head. “I think you misunderstand me, Madam. I do have a message, but it’s much simpler than that. Look behind me.” He bowed and stepped away.

Harry looked up at Madam Bones and released the muffling cloth on his magic.

Bones gasped and sagged back in her seat. Harry himself didn’t feel much difference, other than the removal of the barrier, but Draco put out a shaky hand. Harry turned to look at him. His face was pale, awed, his eyes wide with something that might have been desire. Harry told himself that was natural, the reaction of many wizards and witches to Lord-level magic, and turned back to Bones.

She obviously didn’t feel his magic as a pleasant sensation, like the scent of roses. She had her hands clenched so she wouldn’t cower, Harry thought, and she was striving to keep her chin up while she shook.

“What do you want?” she whispered.

“I came to tell you that I’m angry about this Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts,” said Harry, his voice so steady it surprised even him. It was stone on the surface, but the cold anger beneath that stone was obvious to anyone who listened. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw one of Bones’s office walls slowly icing. “I have not taken a single side so far because I think that both the Ministry and the werewolves are wrong in how they go about waging this conflict—and while I am bound to help the werewolves, I am not bound to violent revolution. But now, you have done this. What am I to think? It seems as if you are playing right into the hands of the werewolf packs. You’re hunting them, making the dead into martyrs and giving the live ones the idea that they must strike back, because you will give them no mercy, and they should at least die fighting. There will be people who might have used political means against you but will grow angry now. Laura Gloryflower, for instance. Her niece is a werewolf, and she is puellaris, sworn to defend her children whatever comes. Do you really want a lioness breaking your neck for what you have done?”

How could you be so stupid? he asked in his head, but he was being diplomatic. Do you want to tug the wizarding world into another maelstrom, divide us with Voldemort still out there? Fenrir Greyback is dead, but Loki might join the Dark Lord if he thought that was the only way to gain protection.
“We had no choice!” Bones snapped, her hands clenching harder than ever. “I had received threatening letters. We all have. It’s true that no Elder of the Wizengamot has been bitten in the last two full moons, but those letters—they promised a revolution. They promised blood.”

“Can I see one?” Harry asked. His voice was still smooth and steady and cold, but he was thinking over the terms of his promise to Loki. I bound him and his pack not to bite anyone for the full moons of July and August. I didn’t make them promise not to write threatening letters. Damn it!

Bones, never taking her eyes off him, fumbled in her desk, opened a drawer, and tossed a folded letter to him. Harry opened it. The handwriting was unfamiliar, but the pawprint at the bottom, the only signature, did rather announce that it came from a werewolf pack, and the phrasing was similar to the phrases that Loki had used in the letter he sent Harry.

He skimmed the letter. Rivers of blood will flow...no wizard allowed to hide...wizarding world made to pay for its crimes against werewolves...call us crossbreeds...engage in a contest where strength and speed alone matter, and the strength and speed are all on our side...

Harry looked up. “I fail to see how threatening letters made you feel you had no choice but to hunt wizards like beasts.”

“They are not wizards,” said Bones, her eyes and face full of passion. “They are animals. They become so from the first moment they take the bite. It alters them. I mourn a friend lost to them, because she is dead, the Emily Gillyflower I knew. They will run wild and bite others even under the influence of Wolfsbane. I know that. The Evergreen who bit Emily was under the influence of Wolfsbane. He chose her as a target. Saying that werewolves will become docile because they register and take the potion is wrong.”

“You seem to forget they can pass that curse on even as you hunt them for doing so,” Harry remarked, tossing the letter back to her. “Werewolves can make more of themselves. And they’ll have the motive to do so if you keep pushing this hunting, and the new werewolves will have to join the other side, or go completely rogue from either, because you offer no compromise. Didn’t you think of that at all?”

Looking into her eyes, Harry saw that she hadn’t. She was terrified. Fear ruled her.

He couldn’t control her through fear, either. She might do what he wanted for a little while, but then something or someone else would scare her more, and she would go back to her old ways.

“They’ll die eventually,” Bones said fiercely. “There’s been no evidence that the curse can exist apart from a werewolf, if it ever could. We kill them all, and there’s no one to pass the curse on. If you had remained away like you were supposed to—”

She cut herself off, but Harry had heard it. He leaned forward. “If I had remained away like I was supposed to?” he asked mildly. “What?”

Bones wavered for a moment, but her anger, or maybe her self-righteousness, seemed to overcome even her terror of him, and she rallied. “We would have hunted most of them to death,” she said defiantly. “There’s a spell that can let us find them in human form, now, that tracks the beast within them. We don’t have to confine the hunting to the full moon anymore.”

Harry’s heart gave a single, hard beat. They could find Hawthorn. And Wilmot.

“I do wonder,” Bones went on in a musing tone, “what that spell would say when applied to you. Comperio lupum!” She flicked her wand, which she must have pulled out of the drawer at the same time as the letter, at him.

Harry, caught in a calm rage, let the spell take effect. A blue glow formed around him, and then faded into his skin. Bones looked incredibly disappointed.

“That surprises you, doesn’t it?” Harry asked her, in a voice gone so flat that he saw Draco edging away from him out of the corner of his eye. “It shocks you that I could fight for the rights of werewolves without being one myself.”

Bones had her hands clenched again. Harry hoped vaguely that she might snap her wand. “It does not matter,” she said. “You will be defeated in the end. Hunted down like the rest of them. Laws can change. Departments can get created. Restrictions on the use of magic can pass. A restriction on the use of dangerous and destructive gifts, for example. Absorbere abilities, perhaps?”

Harry stared at her in silence for a long moment. Does she know what’s she dealing with? No, it seems she doesn’t.
He let his magic rise around him, the phoenix flame burst through his skin, his confidence shine in his eyes. Bones cowered again, but Harry suspected she would tremble before any strong opponent at the moment. What was important was to give her words to remember, so that she would know he wasn’t just any strong opponent.

“I’m not who you used to oppose,” he told her, quietly. “I’m something much worse than that. I’m someone who is going to win this struggle, because I will never give up. I’ve tried to refrain from stepping on the Ministry’s free will. Now, I don’t care, because the Ministry has both broken the wills of others, and encouraged those others to enter a situation of war in which more people will suffer confinement and torture and oppression. No. No more. I will try to keep this a bloodless revolution, but I promise you a violent one. In the end, I aim for all the old preconceptions to be snapped, for people to think instead of reacting in fear, for werewolves to have as much right to justice, including being tried for their crimes, as everyone else. We’ve always tried to force any dangerous situation to go back to normal, to stay safe and the same. I want nothing to be the same when I’m done.”

Bones shook, lowering her head to bury it in her arms. Harry turned on his heel and made his way past Draco, who scrambled to follow him.

“We’ll visit Scrimgeour next,” Harry said, in a voice he hardly recognized as his own. “I want to know how much of this he knew about, and why he hasn’t done anything to stop the hunting so far.”

“A moment,” said Draco.

Harry turned around, wondering if the young Auror who guarded Bones’s office was aiming his wand at them. Draco, though, caught his chin in one hand and leaned forward to kiss him. Harry welcomed the kiss eagerly, and Draco stepped away from him too soon, looking less smug than proud.

“That was wonderful,” he said.

“Glad you think so.” Harry smiled grimly as he headed for the lifts again. “I suspect Scrimgeour won’t.”

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Rufus felt Harry coming, of course. Who wouldn’t?

The wave of magic traveling through the halls of the Ministry felt to him like a pounding pulse, the steady push of sap up through the trees in spring. Rufus had learned from his Muggleborn grandmother, whose father had been a forester, that such a force was enormously powerful. It brought life back to the world. But it was also relentless. Once the sap started moving, nothing could stop it.

And that was Harry, now, apparently.

Rufus was waiting, with his hands folded and Percy Weasley behind him, when Wilmot opened the door for Harry. Behind him came only young Malfoy—and no one else. Rufus raised his eyebrows, and almost asked where Snape was. That Harry was here without him would have made a story, he was sure.

But it would also have put off the main point of why Harry had come to see him, and that was something Rufus would not do. He kept his eyes fastened on Harry’s and waited.

Harry’s face shone. His eyes shone. The air around him rippled now and then, seeming to reflect light, as if it were a sheet of tin only sometimes turned so that it caught the sun. Rufus wondered if he was looking on the young vates or a young Lord. He was sure that Harry, when playing a vates role, had had a more thoughtful look on his face in the past.

So he has been pushed too far. He has crossed a line he would not otherwise have crossed. I have heard that a vates is not compelled to care about the wills of those who actively trample freedom. He may be required to defend, rather than attack anyone, and oppose only those actions that hurt others, but he need not hold himself back as far as Harry does. Or did.

They had an active vates on their hands now, Rufus supposed, rather than a reactive one.

He had known this day would come. It was the reason he had begun doing the research on vates and the wizards who had tried to achieve the title. What he had learned had told him that Harry could be more formidable, and thus more of a threat to the
That day has come.

“I need to know what you know about this,” Harry said. “And why you didn’t try to stop them.”

Rufus gave him the truth. “I knew nothing about the Department until it was created, a day before the full moon. And I’ve talked with the Department Heads. All of them are united against me, in agreement with Amelia. I had thought I managed to recover enough balance after my misstep in opposing their decrees too openly, but I haven’t. They distrust me, and they have my every move under scrutiny. The only actions I could take against them would be illegal, and they would have a reason to call for a vote of no confidence.”

“So you won’t act,” Harry said.

Rufus shook his head. “No. Not when I know Amelia would become Minister the moment I was voted down.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. Then he snorted. “I was going to ask where your principles are in the face of your citizens being murdered, but that’s unfair. I know exactly where they are.”

Rufus gave a slow nod. So he is not totally given to irrationality, then, even if he no longer sees a reason to respect our wills. Interesting. And that will only make him the more dangerous, of course. Revolutionaries who fall into the depths of their passion are easier enemies to handle. “Yes. I favor reform. Amelia would do more and more damage if she became Minister, and though I suspect a few of the Department Heads would abandon her inside of a month, what would that month bring? I can do nothing right now but move slowly. Slowly work myself back into their good graces, slowly rebuild my support network, slowly convince most of the Aurors to ally with me instead of with Amelia.” And the Unspeakables, he thought, but he could not say that aloud. The Unspeakable contacts he had were the most delicate part of this whole affair. They had approached him, quite unexpectedly. But they had warned him they would abandon him again if he spoke of them to anybody. Rufus had never understood the internal politics of the Department of Mysteries, but he didn’t need to understand to do what they told him.

“I favor revolution,” Harry said quietly.

Rufus asked, because he had to ask. He knew Percy, at least, would ask why he hadn’t asked when this was done. “With yourself as Minister?”

Harry’s eyes flashed in disgust. “No!” The denial was so vehement that Rufus sat back in his seat, relaxing for the first time since Harry’s entrance. Harry went on, his voice rushing headlong. “I favor mental revolution. I favor people having to think about what they’re doing, instead of just jumping to conclusions. I favor people knowing when something’s just a lie, the way the idea of Wolfsbane doing nothing for werewolves is. I favor getting people to follow my principles, not me.”

Rufus sighed. “That cannot come about suddenly.”

“Probably not,” said Harry. “But it can come about faster than it has been doing. And in the meantime, I can protect and defend those who are being hurt, and work to change minds without compulsion.”

“What weapons will you use?” Rufus asked.

Harry looked at him, let his magic flare around his body, and swept his fringe back from his face to reveal the lightning bolt scar. It was answer enough.

“I cannot let you interfere in the Ministry with magic,” Rufus told him.

“I shall hope that I don’t have to.” Harry’s voice was polite, but implacable.

Rufus wished, in deep frustration, that he had not taken the Minister’s office. If he were still Head of the Aurors, he would enjoy being on Harry’s side, doing everything he could to foil Amelia without letting her find out it was him, letting his Slytherin cunning and love of risks that might pay off hugely overtake his Slytherin caution. But he was Minister, and bound.

“Then good luck in those parts of it I can wish you good luck in,” said Rufus. The Boy-Who-Lived and a Lord-level wizard, using his fame and his magic against us. Merlin, let it not come to war.

“Thank you, Minister,” said Harry. “The same to you.” He turned and left the office, with Malfoy close behind him. Rufus
wondered if he had seen how adoringly young Draco looked at him. Well, he probably knew the general outline of that adoration, but not the specifics of it.

Bloody hell, Rufus could feel something like that stirring in his own belly. The natural desire to be close to such a source of magic was mingling with the knowledge that Harry had weapons no one else had ever had, and might actually be the one moral Lord in several hundred years. Rufus could imagine a future in which he did follow Harry, and was the happier for it.

But this was about responsibility, not simply personal happiness. And thus he and Harry had come to a parting of the ways.

“You did the honorable thing, sir,” Percy said, as if to comfort him.

Rufus nodded, then frowned. “Not as honorable as I could have,” he muttered. “I forgot to tell him about the Liberator’s letters.” He turned to Percy, but he was already scrabbling for quill and parchment. Rufus smiled grimly. His enemies couldn’t watch Percy’s correspondence as closely as his, since Percy handled so much paperwork.

_Let it begin, then._ He lifted his head and met the eyes of his grandmother in the portrait of her that hung across the room. It seemed that she winked at him. _I’m doing what I know I have to do. There’s that comfort._

******

Wilmot met them outside the door, and from his glance, Harry knew he wanted to talk. He nodded and used his magic to wrap them in a privacy ward. Wilmot at once leaned closer, and whispered.

“Did you know that the hunters are stalking Loki’s pack?”

“Yes, and that they’ve developed a spell that tracks werewolves.” Harry stared at him. “Are you all right?”

The Auror gave him a strained smile. His blue eyes, Harry knew, were really amber behind his lenses, and he would have slightly longer teeth than normal from the full moon nights just past. Merlin knew how Edmund Wilmot had managed to maintain his job in such a werewolf-paranoid Ministry, but Harry wanted to see him keep it. “They don’t use it in the Ministry,” said Wilmot. “For the most part. People consider it an insult to be suspected of lycanthropy these days, and would object. Besides, they have no reason to suspect me. So far.”

Harry nodded, a bit reassured.

“Do you know who died?” Wilmot asked then.

Harry shook his head. “Only that two werewolves did. I didn’t see the _Daily Prophet_ article, though someone informed me of it.”

“Well, the names wouldn’t have meant anything to you, anyway,” said Wilmot. “They called them by their legal names, not the ones they chose.” He hesitated and swallowed, then said, “It was Loki who told me, because what happened changes everything.”

Harry felt a rush and roll and swoop in his stomach, and told himself to stand steady. “Does it?” he asked.

Wilmot nodded, his face shadowed. “Yes. The male werewolf who died was a youngster named Briar. The female—” He shuddered a bit. “The female was Gudrun. Loki’s mate. An alpha pair of a pack is one heart, one blood, one breath. Loki’s declared vengeance on her murderers, Harry, in accordance with pack law, and there isn’t anything that will stop him.”

~*~*~*~*

**Chapter Seven: The Alliance of Sun and Shadow**

Harry spoke with McGonagall via the communication spell Charles had taught all of them the moment he was out of the Ministry. The news of Loki’s mate had prompted him to put his plans in motion sooner than he would have liked. When he had left Bones, and then Scrimgeour, he had envisioned having at least a month, until school began, to pull everyone together. Now, he knew that would be impossible, and it was especially important that he meet with the werewolves before the next full moon.

Hogwarts was the best place to do so, if the Headmistress would permit the wards to be lowered in the Forbidden Forest.

“Madam?” he asked, the moment the soft chorus of phoenix song above his wrist was answered with the Headmistress’s voice.
“Harry!” He could hear more dismay than anything else in that voice. Harry smiled grimly, wondering if she were worried that he was back from the Sanctuary early or that he had walked straight into the center of a maelstrom.

“Madam,” he repeated, and then went ahead with his request. “I am trying to create a formal alliance between wizards and magical creatures. I think it’s needed, with what happened to the werewolves and to the Opallines—"

“The Opallines?”

“Acies came with fire,” said Harry, narrowing his eyes to try to get certain images out of his head. “I would not be surprised if the Department started hunting her, too, or at least demanded that she be given over to them when she wakes. And of course the other magical creatures are always vulnerable. Umbridge was able to get laws passed against them very easily when she was head of the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures. I think this department is less sane than she was.” He turned into the main point of the conversation then, afraid that McGonagall’s questions would distract him again. “I need your permission to meet with as many magical creatures as possible, and as many of my allies as will come, in the Forbidden Forest. I’m issuing an invitation to the werewolves.”

McGonagall’s tense silence was answer enough.

“I know that you don’t like them on school grounds,” said Harry quietly. “But I give you my word that they will be safe for the duration of the meeting. If they try to attack Hogwarts, or anyone there, I will use my magic against them.”

McGonagall’s voice crept back like a kicked dog. “I am reluctant to grant permission even so, Mr.—Harry. You know that you cannot predict their actions, and after these killings, they will only be wilder and more irrational.”

“Some of them will be,” Harry said, thinking of Loki. Wilmot had emphasized twice more how nothing, not the threat of magical punishment to his pack nor offers of assistance, would keep Loki from taking vengeance. “But others have seen the danger now, I think. And it is not the day of the full moon. Their magic resistance and their strength will lessen each day until the dark of the moon. I would choose to set the meeting at the actual dark if I could, but that is too far away, and I must move now. Will you let me use the Forest?”

“If you must.”

“Thank you, Madam,” Harry said. “I intend to have the alliance meeting there on the fourth of August, two days from now.” He started to cut the communication spell, but McGonagall spoke before he could.

“Why did you return early, Harry?”

“Acies came and burned the Opallines,” Harry said simply. “I knew that if one thing had gone wrong in the outer world, then something else might have. I decided to return.”

“Are you done healing?”

“As near as I could come in a month,” said Harry, certain Draco was snickering, though he couldn’t look over his shoulder to check. It was humiliating, to be standing in the middle of an alley covered with graffiti and talking to his Headmistress about his mental health. “I’m going to continue the process now that I’m back. I brought a Seer with me, though he’s mostly for Snape.” He supposed he could talk to her about that, too, though he didn’t have time to answer every question. “I should warn you that Professor Snape is on the verge of snapping altogether, Madam. He often loses his temper with me and goes into magical rages. The Sanctuary began the work of destroying his mental walls, but he won’t tell me what his dreams are about, and he won’t tell me what made him so upset.”

McGonagall sighed. “If he can gain control of himself, of course, he’s welcome to come back and teach in the autumn. If not, then I will ask someone else. I do have another candidate who could teach Potions for at least a term, if I offered him enough.”

“Thank you, Madam,” said Harry, and this time he did let the spell fade. He reached out and took Draco’s arm, drawing him nearer to prepare for a Side-Along Apparition. His mind worked busily. Wilmot had promised that he would send the invitation to Loki’s pack, though he was doubtful about how many of them would come. Harry himself could visit the Forbidden Forest and inform the Many and the centaurs of the alliance meeting, assuming they wished to attend. He would send owls to his human allies whom he hadn’t taught the communication spell to. He had no idea how to get in touch with Dobby, the only house elf who might have an interest. Harry supposed he was perfectly capable of finding out about the meeting on his own and attending.

“Harry!”
He jumped and looked at Draco. “What?” he asked.

“I’ve been trying to get your attention for two minutes.” Draco shook his head, then leaned forward and stared into his face. “You realize Snape will go mad when he realizes that you’re attending a meeting with werewolves at it? Specifically, the werewolves who coerced and threatened and tried to bite you?”

“That’s why he’s not going,” Harry said.

He thought he heard Draco mutter something just before they vanished, something along the lines of, “This, I have to see.”

******

Snape knew that Harry had disappeared while he was brewing healing potions for the Opallines. That was the only thing that kept him from running out of his lab and demanding explanations immediately. If it had been during the carriage ride, then he would have cursed Joseph by now.

As it was, the Seer was on the other side of the lab helping prepare and chop and sift the ingredients he needed.

Snape gave him yet another over-shoulder glance of wary disbelief. When Joseph had first slid into the room between the dead dragon’s ribs which Paton Opalline had given Snape for a lab, Snape had whirled around, his wand up and an Unforgivable hovering behind his tongue.

Joseph had held out his hands and said, speaking slowly and clearly, “I don’t know that much about potions, but I’m an expert at following directions. Let me. You need an extra pair of hands.”

And, well, he was right. Snape did. It seemed that he was still capable of being rational on the subject of Potions, if nothing else. He moved his head sharply at another table, already set up with mortar, pestle, several knives, and beetle shells, flower petals, and other ingredients that needed to be of a certain consistency in order to work. “The flower petals into a dust,” he directed. “The beetle shells to be pounded like sand.”

And Joseph had nodded and set to work.

Nor had he once tried to speak while they were working. Snape had waited for it, certain it was coming, some gentle inquiry after his health or teasing comment about how similar their shared pasts must have been. Some of the best retorts he’d ever thought up waited impatiently for use.

Joseph said nothing. He passed Snape each ingredient as he finished with it; he knew a useful spell that curled around the fine dust like an invisible jar and wafted it across the distance between them. He never looked over except to be sure that the ingredient arrived at its destination. Then he went back to pounding, slicing, sifting, sanding, with a dedication that said he had won his patience and skill at the task with hard labor.

Snape grew more and more distracted himself, to the point where he almost substituted dragon scales for beetle shells, which would have ruined the potion entirely. He waited. Joseph said nothing.

Another packet of purple, lavender petals turned almost into a fog, floated over to him. Snape counted to three, then whipped around, ready to surprise an expression of pity on the Seer’s face. Joseph was bent over his mortar and pestle, counting each beat with a soft voice.

Snape could not take it any more.

“Say what you came to say and be done with it!” he snarled.

Joseph finished the count before he responded—so much like something he would have done himself, in an ordinary mood and confronted with someone upset, that Snape’s resentment soared to new heights. Then he looked calmly back at Snape. “Why do you assume that I came to say something and not help you prepare potions?” he asked.

“Because otherwise you would be talking to grief-stricken Opallines and easing their petty fears.”

Joseph adopted a wistful smile. “No. The worst cases were all sung out of their dreams by the time I reached them. I spoke to a few grieving relatives who just needed to see that this wasn’t the end of the world.” He shrugged and turned back to the mortar
and pestle. “That son of yours is remarkable.”

“He is not my son.” Snape made an ugly sound that he’d meant to be a laugh when he started it, and which now had no name. “Or had you missed my distinct lack of any kind of charm, either to attract a mate or pass on to a child?”

“Whatever you say.”

Snape just barely kept himself from snapping, eyeing Joseph’s back. Joseph was sweeping some beetle shells that weren’t fine enough for him back to the knife now.

He had met someone like this once before, Snape finally realized, and it was not Sirius Black. It was Gray Grim, whose real name he had never known, a Death Eater and recruiter for the Dark Lord. He was like water; whatever someone else said, he knew the counter to it, and he would wear down logical arguments against joining the Dark Lord like water wearing down stone.

Snape himself had never argued against him, because he had had Lucius to convince him to join the Death Eaters, but he had seen him demolish opponent after opponent, without ever appearing to do so. And now it seemed that he had a Seer doing the same thing.

He turned, stiff-shouldered, back to his cauldron, and wondered whether this new discovery would make his life easier or harder.

Draco made sure to step out of the way when Harry landed with a sharp thump on the flagstones outside the Opalline home. He suspected that Harry would either go after Snape or to Paton Opalline immediately to demand ink and parchment and a quill. Draco would rather go along and watch than get in the middle of any conflicts that might result from those things.

As if watching is a problem, he thought, as his eyes traced the slight shimmering in the air around Harry. He’s beautiful when he’s angry. Well, and plenty of other times, too, but especially then.

Harry found Paton Opalline in a few moments; Draco was unsure if Harry had tracked him down or if the Opalline leader had felt Harry’s magic approach and made himself easy to find. Harry’s words were clipped as he explained softly about the meeting he wanted to hold. Paton nodded and made a few apparently sensible suggestions, which Harry accepted with short nods of his own. Draco strained to listen in, but heard little more than the names of some of Harry’s allies and “werewolves.”

His attention wandered, so he was the first one to see Snape enter the small antechamber where Harry and Paton were holding their discussion.

Just as he did, Harry shook his head and said, “No, I’m not sure the werewolves are safe, but I have to invite them anyway.”

Loud enough to be heard.

Loud enough to make Snape’s face darken.

Draco grinned—well, he could pretend that it was a frown later, if he really needed to spare Harry’s feelings that much—and stepped out of the way.

“I see we have entered a regressive stage, Harry,” Snape drawled to his back. “You said that you would not put yourself in danger any more without thinking, and now you have done so? How very unlike you, not to keep your promises.”

Harry just turned around and glanced at Snape in distraction, exactly as if he’d been interrupted in the midst of something more important. And that’s really the way he might think of it, Draco thought. Harry had to play politics right now. If Snape insisted on being inconvenient while that was happening, then he would get pushed aside until Harry was better able to deal with personal matters.

“I’m not putting myself in much danger now that it’s not the full moon and I’m able to use my magic,” Harry said. “One of the werewolves the Department killed was Loki’s mate. Our contact in the Ministry told me that that means Loki’s on the vengeance path. I don’t know if I can talk him out of it, but possibly I can still soften this somehow, and keep it from all-out war between wizards and werewolves. Thus the alliance meeting.”

“You should not go,” said Snape. “It is dangerous.”
Harry snorted. “I’m holding the meeting in the Forbidden Forest—choosing the ground. We’re going to be surrounded by centaurs and Many snakes, and my human allies besides. Loki is the one who should be wary.”

“You should not—“

“We discussed that already, how my life isn’t fair and I shouldn’t have had to bear the burdens I had to and on and on,” said Harry, and turned away from Snape, his straight back and set shoulders dismissals if Draco had ever seen them. “I am going to. And if you don’t want to be another of those unfair burdens piled on my shoulders, then don’t interfere.”

Snape’s mouth snapped shut. Harry was already talking to Paton again, something about how whether any of the Opallines would be attending the meeting. He knew they had suffered loss in the wake of Acies’s breath, and—

“Do not be silly,” said Paton gently. “Our family will recover, and tomorrow will be the funeral for our dead. We must look to the living, and celebrate the dead, not mourn them overlong. I will come to the meeting, or Calibrid will. My children will be able to spare us by then.”

Harry nodded. “Thank you. This is going to be different than the meeting that I held on the spring equinox. That was a chance to give people a good look at me, and let them decide if I’m worth following.” He cocked his head, eyes narrowed. “This is to give those wizards and magical creatures who’ve already decided to follow me a chance to work together, and see what it really means to fight beside a vates.”

“I understand,” said Paton. “I assure you that neither my daughter nor I would have trouble with that. Calibrid is ready and willing to accept anyone who does not despise her, and I am the one who taught her.” His smile flashed with open pride for a moment. Draco wondered what he would have to do to get Lucius to show that kind of pride in him in public.

“Thank you—“

Only then did Snape stalk out of the room. Draco hesitated, then followed him, catching up with him in the hallway. Snape whirled on him, then lowered his wand with a low curse of the non-magical kind.

“Why must he do this?” Snape whispered, all but snarling. “He knows I wish to help him, and yet he insults and dismisses me.”

Draco blinked, honestly surprised. He thinks this is about Harry not having enough compassion? He studied Snape’s slumped shoulders. “Because you’re being a prat,” he said at last. “Telling him nothing, but demanding his attention. He can’t help you. He certainly can’t force you to tell him what’s bothering you. Or, rather, he won’t. But the vast part of this is your own fault, sir.”

Snape was giving him the snarling look of a wounded animal. Draco decided it might be for the best to back off now and let Harry figure out the best way to deal with his guardian later.

Then again, he thought as he ducked back into the room where Harry was still speaking with Paton, considering how irrational all the people taking care of Harry tend to be, Lucius as a father isn’t too bad at all.

******

Lucius was sipping tea and reading yet another account of fools trying to discredit Harry in the *Daily Prophet* when phoenix song chimed above his wrist. He turned his attention to it after a good minute had passed and the person speaking to him had seen the folly of interrupting Lucius Malfoy at breakfast.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Lucius.”

He raised his eyebrows. Harry’s voice, but tempered and cooled, with a tone he had never heard in it before. If Harry had been a new-forged blade when he went to the Sanctuary, now he sounded like one ready for use.

“Harry,” he said, his eyes straying to the paper again. The photograph on the front page was one taken almost two years ago, when Harry went up against dragons in the First Task of the Triwizard Tournament. He was riding a broom, dodging and swooping among the huge bodies, looking as if he had never known fear in his life. “What brings you back to us so soon?”

“News of trouble on the Isle of Man,” said Harry. “And news of other troubles after that, once I arrived here. I am going to hold a meeting in the Forbidden Forest, in the same clearing where I met you for the Christmas celebration the year before last. I think
it’s time that humans and magical creatures should meet and discuss what our alliance and what our revolution entails.”

Lucius sat up straighter. Oh, he could not deny that he had not dreamed of this day since he had realized what Harry’s power might mean, and that abandoning Voldemort was a feasible choice. But he had never imagined it would arrive so soon. Harry was not ready, that much was obvious from the way he handled himself, and then he’d retreated into a place full of Light wizards. Lucius had thought the boy would be even more Light when he came back, and would need a few encounters with reality to show him the fascination of politics.

“Revolution?” he questioned delicately.

“Our world can’t stay the way it is,” said Harry. His words reminded Lucius so strongly of a speech he’d heard the Dark Lord give more than once that shivers ran down his spine and through his Dark Mark. “It’s going to slaughter many people on either side if it does.” Well, the Dark Lord had referred only to purebloods, but he had said much the same thing. “I don’t want that to happen. And I’ve realized that there are some hypocrisies in my behavior towards others that I want to correct. Will you agree to come with me and meet centaurs and werewolves face to face?”

Lucius smiled, toyed with the idea of telling Harry that working beside werewolves was less repulsive than the thought of working beside Mudbloods, and then decided to be diplomatic. “Yes, I will. And Narcissa will, as well.”

“Narcissa will what?” his wife asked, coming into the kitchen. A house elf appeared and handed her a steaming cup of tea, which she immediately took and started sipping. Lucius admired the way her blonde hair coiled around her neck for a moment. Narcissa rarely appeared less than perfectly poised, but her early-morning relaxation was lovely in its own way.

“Tell her that she’s welcome, of course,” said Harry, and Narcissa’s eyes widened.

“I will,” said Lucius, and then said his farewells and gave the spell up. He leaned across the table to take his wife’s hand, raising it to his lips. “Our vates has come back,” he murmured into her fingers. “What do you say to meeting with centaurs and werewolves in the middle of a Forbidden Forest clearing, while Harry stands over us and tries to convince us all to get along?”

Narcissa gave him a very faint smile. “I say that I shall have to find an appropriate gown to wear.”

********

Hawthorn could not deny that the sound of phoenix song above her wrist lifted up her heart. “Harry,” she murmured, even before the voice of the other person could begin talking.

Silence met her, which concerned her until she realized it was the silence of shock. Hawthorn laughed softly, and that prompted Harry to speak.

“How did you realize it was me?”

“I had a dream,” said Hawthorn, and wandered over to look out the window of the Garden. They’d had rainy and sunny bouts of weather alternating for the past few days, and the plants she had transferred into this small side bed were doing wonderfully. Her eyes lingered near a hawthorn bush growing protectively over a clump of dragonsbane and a set of small pansies. She was able to smile and feel an ache in her chest instead of simply feeling the ache. “A lot of dreams, the past few days. I dreamed that you would come back, and soon.”

“Tell me.”

And Harry did. Hawthorn listened, and agreed that it was serious, but the hope went on living inside her. She agreed to attend the alliance meeting, of course, and then her wrist went silent, and left her to go on peering out the window at her plants.
An alliance meeting. One held only because the world is becoming so dangerous that Harry cannot afford to have those who follow him separated by ridiculous prejudices any longer.

But a meeting that addresses wounds that should have been healed long since, and breaches we need to repair. We cannot be divided against ourselves and yet endure. And our enemies could divide us, if they continue to pile on the fear talk against werewolves, and the Dark purebloods continue uninterrupted in our prejudice against Mudbloods.

She turned away from the window. This past month had been a time of retreat for her, of remembering her daughter and her husband and mourning what had been. We thought, and we rested.

Now we live.

******

Adalrico looked up from playing with his younger daughter. Marian was making a concentrated effort to grab hold of a jeweled bauble he dangled on a string for her, but he didn’t think that was what had distracted him from her scrunched-up little face and whimpers of frustration.

Then he heard the sound again, and realized it was phoenix song coming from just above his left wrist. He picked up Marian, gave her the bauble to quiet her, and asked, “Hello?”

“Greetings, Adalrico.”

He sat up straighter, even though there was no way Harry could see him. He was conscious of having something to prove to this man, at least in his own mind. Harry didn’t know, of course, that Adalrico had wearied during the final days of the siege and wanted to use Darker magic on the Death Eaters than Harry would permit. Millicent had been the one to remind him of family duty, that the Bulstrodes were Harry’s formal allies and ought never to betray him in such a way. Adalrico had thought about it often since then, and had been ashamed that it was his heir reprimanding him instead of the other way around.

“Harry,” he murmured. “What is the matter?”

“Dragons, and werewolves, mostly,” said Harry, his voice grim and wry. “But a dash of Ministry politics, and no doubt prophecy, as that seems to trouble me at every moment of my life. But for right now, an alliance meeting I want to hold in the Forbidden Forest tomorrow, with most of my allies, human and nonhuman, who agree to come. It will be in the clearing where you once met me for Christmas. Will you attend?”

Adalrico nodded, then remembered that the communication spell didn’t convey gestures, only voices, and said, “Of course. Will Elfrida and my heir be welcome to attend?” Marian fussed and said, “Da!” as if she knew that meant leaving her with a friend of the family, and Adalrico jogged her on his knee to shush her. She could stay at home and be happy there. He was still wary about risking his younger daughter in public yet, especially since Starrise might have a grudge against him for killing first one of their favored daughters and then her twin brother this spring.

“Of course,” Harry replied. “I am gathering everyone who will agree to come. And if someone won’t—” Adalrico could hear the shrug in his voice. “I suspect that will reveal who isn’t comfortable around magical creatures, and that in and of itself will tell me something about them.”

Adalrico laughed. “Very well. What time will the meeting begin?”

“You’ll want to arrive in the afternoon,” said Harry, voice serious now. “I suspect that the centaurs will get there even earlier than that.”

“Very well,” Adalrico said, and cut the spell, and then scooped up Marian and went to tell Elfrida. His wife had recently got used to leaving their daughter alone long enough to go back to work in Gringotts. He didn’t think she would object to leaving Marian with her sister, either.

Marian wriggled and fussed. “Da! Magic!” Now she was trying to grab his wand from his pocket.

“You’re not old enough yet,” Adalrico told her.

******
Henrietta looked up when the communication spell rang out. She knew it was the communication spell, despite the abundance of strange objects in her quarters. She’d spent enough time rustling around yesterday, poking and prodding and casting spells to be sure that none of the former occupant’s possessions did anything odd. It was almost blinding to be surrounded by Gryffindor colors—this had been Minerva McGonagall’s room for twenty years—but she supposed she’d get used to it.

“Hello?” she asked.

“Henrietta?”

Harry’s voice. Henrietta told herself that it was not dignified for a Bulstrode to smile like her favorite person in the world had just walked into the room. The man had put her under Unbreakable Vows and smashed the last of her pride. Really, she was supposed to hate him.

But she didn’t. Harry was legitimately stronger than she was, in more than just magic—the only person Henrietta had ever been able to say that about.

“Harry,” she said. “What brings you back so early?”

“Alliance meeting in the Forbidden Forest tomorrow,” said Harry. “I need you to attend, unless you’re averse to magical creatures.”

Henrietta smiled and glanced down at the pamphlet that lay on the desk, advertising the Augurey sanctuary Harry had had her give some money to fund and find. “Not anymore,” she said.

“Good. Now, as you’re approaching from the north, you’ll notice a clearing not far away from the path. You should be able to see it clearly. Other people will be there already; I’ve asked Hawthorn and Adalrico to arrive early.”

“Harry,” she interrupted then, thinking she should correct a misconception, “I won’t be approaching from the north. I’ll be approaching from the south.”

She heard the frown in his voice. “Why? You’re flying?”

“No.” Henrietta sat back and sprang her surprise. “Because I have a teaching post at Hogwarts now, so I’ll just walk from there.”

A long, stunned silence, and then Harry said, “But—what post did McGonagall hire you for?”

“Transfiguration,” Henrietta said smugly, shaking her hair over her shoulders. “I’ve been studying it for months, thinking that she might need someone to help her with it this year. She did manage to jury-rig it last year, but I know a lot of people were unhappy with that, especially the parents of the students in the NEWT Transfiguration classes. I knew she could use an extra pair of hands.”

“But your daughter—“

“Is no longer here,” Henrietta pointed out smoothly. “You arranged for her to have private lesson with that tutor in France, remember?” She knew Edith had begged Harry to go to France almost the moment her mother came to the castle during the battle, technically keeping the word of her Vows by not seeing Edith face-to-face. And now she was gone, and Henrietta was free to be near her young Lord. Far too many assassination attempts had happened on Hogwarts’s grounds. She was here to make sure they became a thing of the past.

“That’s true,” Harry murmured, sounding as if he were thinking deeply. “But you aren’t teaching under your own name? I think Pharos Starrise would raise a stink about a Bulstrode professor.”

“No. My name is Hilda Belluspersona.” Henrietta lifted her head and examined herself in the mirror on the opposite wall. “You’d be surprised. I look much younger, and my eyes are blue now.”

“And your name means beautiful disguise,” Harry muttered. “And you still think someone won’t figure it out?”

“None of us can help what our names are,” Henrietta said mildly.

Harry sighed. “Coming from the south, then, you’ll take the path on the way in, and you should look for a twisted tree. Or just
wait for the centaurs. I was at Hogwarts this morning, to speak with their leader. They should find you and guide you in.”

“Of course, Harry.” Henrietta hummed happily under her breath as their communication spell finished.

Really, it’s not the done thing for a Lord who treats his companions decently to go off at the shake of a Kneazle’s tail, she thought, as she got up and once more examined her face in the mirror. I am so glad he’s back.

******

Ignifer did not know what time it was, only that, after last night, it was far too early. She was never drinking butterbeer again. She buried her head under the pillows and ignored the chiming.

Then she heard someone say, “Hello, Harry.”

Panicking, Ignifer sat up, and then groaned and grabbed her head as the light and noise outside her blanket cocoon assaulted her. She massaged her temples and moaned, all the while squinting frantically, to see if her vates was really going to see her in this state.

All she saw was Honoria sitting on the end of the bed, smirking at her wickedly as she spoke into her wrist. “An alliance meeting? Of course. And you don’t need to speak to Ignifer, I’ll tell her.” A pause, during which Harry’s voice emerged too low for Ignifer to hear, and Honoria said, “Oh, but it’s no trouble, Harry, really. She’s sitting no more than four feet away from me, after all.”

Ignifer made a grab for her. Her head pounded so hard she not only lost her balance, but fell full-length to sprawl on the bed. Honoria leaped away and danced gleefully around the room.

“You ought to see her,” she went on, unhelpfully, to Harry. “Her hair’s all a tangle, and she looks as though someone slammed her across the face with a crowbar, and she looks so thoroughly shagged, you have no idea—”

Ignifer snarled, and flames curled around her. Honoria squeaked in mock fright before conjuring the illusion of a bucket of water to tip on Ignifer’s head. She was good enough at tactile glamours that it really felt like ice water, damn her.

“Tomorrow in the Forbidden Forest, centaurs will guide us in,” said Honoria. “Of course. I understand, Harry. Thank you!” She ended the communication spell as Ignifer called fire into her hand and tossed it forward in a miniature fireball. All of Ignifer’s walls and most of the furniture were spelled to resist flame magic, after numerous almost-accidents, but Honoria wasn’t. She changed into her sea-mew Animagus form instead, and cackled triumphantly as she soared above the ball.

Ignifer scowled as the other witch dived and turned around the room, laughing loudly enough to make her headache worse. She liked Honoria, really she did, and the sex was fantastic, but there were times she resented taking up with a master illusionist who was also a bloody Animagus with a ridiculous sense of humor, and this was one of those times.

******

Thomas Rhangnara was deeply concerned. In front of him sprawled several Daily Prophet articles from various days during the last month and a half. The later ones were more and more wildly fantastic, and reported events that contradicted the reports of the earlier ones, during which they’d said, accurately, that Harry mercy-killed children during the Battle of Hogwarts and lured Voldemort into a trap. The later ones stated that he’d murdered children, and that he hadn’t lured Voldemort into a trap so much as done it to show off his skills.

Obviously, this was the result of a lack of proper research. Thomas was writing the Prophet’s editors with the information that they would need to correct the problem and print a retraction. He was sure they would be grateful for the help.

His wrist sang. Thomas looked at it with awe. He always enjoyed the moments most before a new communication began, because it could be anyone on the other side. Perhaps Voldemort had even figured out a way to talk to them. “Hello?” he asked eagerly.

“Hello, Thomas.”

Harry. Thomas barely managed to restrain a sigh of satisfaction. Now Harry was back in the world, and the Prophet would be even swifter to print the retraction. Of course they wouldn’t want a wizard of Harry’s power on their tails. And Thomas could tell Harry all about his news.

“Guess what’s going to happen in a few weeks, Harry?” he asked eagerly.
“I don’t know, Thomas.” Harry sounded almost like Priscilla and his children, Thomas thought, willing to listen if a little puzzled. That was a good thing. That meant he didn’t have to be afraid that he was using up the vates’s valuable time by burbling along. If Harry was annoyed and needed to talk about something else, then surely he would ask Thomas to stop and let him get to the point.

“We’re releasing the news about GUTOEKOM,” said Thomas, and looked proudly at the other pile of paper on the end of his desk, which was corrected and uncorrected proofs for the report. “We were going to let it out earlier, of course, but we made a few new discoveries, and found a few mistakes we needed to correct. For example, did you know that the Dark Lord Fallen was Muggleborn?”

“What?” Harry asked in shock. “No, he wasn’t. He was the bastard son of a pureblood family, and he hated Muggleborns, just like Voldemort does.”

“I don’t care what he said,” Thomas said. “People lie about themselves, especially Dark Lords.” He gave a little shrug. He had never seen the point of lying himself. Research proceeded more easily where truth was involved. “He was Muggleborn. He just tried to cover that up by proclaiming himself the son of an illustrious heritage. Of course, the pureblood family he said he came from, the Princes, denied it, but they were proud enough that they weren’t going to admit to a bastard, so the denial was just what everyone expected from them.”

“So that means that old myth about no Muggleborns being powerful enough to be Lords and Ladies really is a myth,” Harry mused.

“Exactly!” Thomas beamed, glad he saw the importance. “And we’ve looked into more about how magic interacts with bloodline. There’s fascinating evidence that how the mother feels about the child in her womb can affect how much magic they’re born with. That would explain why so many pureblood children born after a husband cheated on his wife were Squibs. And of course almost any child that comes from a raped witch is a Squib. There’s not enough evidence to say that this happens all the time yet, but it’s one of those factors that Petrovitch identified, and which has borne fruit.” He reached over and shuffled through some of the papers, looking for something else inspiring to tell Harry. “Oh! And of course there’s Muggleborn or Muggle blood in most of the pureblood lines.”

It sounded as if Harry had choked. “Do tell,” he said faintly.

“Oh, yes,” Thomas said, nodding rapidly. “The Blacks, in particular. When they interbred too closely, Squibs started being born. Then a few of the Black women sought out Muggle or Muggleborn lovers and had children they dearly wished wouldn’t be Squibs—the power of a mother wishing, you know—and some of them weren’t and regenerated the line. And that’s to say nothing of what was going on in the Malfoy line.” Harry definitely choked this time, but he sounded all right, so Thomas rambled on. “There were a few generations where neither the men nor the women could stay in bed with their lawfully wedded spouses. And of course they hid things, but if they had a child, they usually brought it back into the family.” Thomas chuckled, because he thought this was amusing. “There’s a high chance that Abraxas Malfoy himself was the bastard child of his father and a Muggleborn woman, you know.”

Harry sounded as if he were wheezing.

“I can’t wait to publish this,” Thomas ended happily. “People will have to listen, and stop being idiots. Now, what did you want to talk to me about?”

Harry gave him the directions for the alliance meeting, the time, and how to reach it. He sounded breathless as he did it. Thomas frowned. He didn’t want their vates to get sick. “Try to get some rest and heal that cold you have, Harry,” he advised him kindly. “Get your partner to rub your back.”

“Right,” Harry said faintly. “I’ll do that.”

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Owen tapped his fingers idly against the side of his leg. Harry had just contacted him and asked if he and Michael would consider attending the alliance meeting in the Forbidden Forest. And of course Owen had said yes. He and Michael were both the sworn companions of their vates, and one did that kind of thing when one was a sworn companion.

It did mean that events were running faster and further than they had predicted when they thought Harry would be in the Sanctuary for two months. And Owen wondered if their mother was yet recovered enough from grief for their father for he and Michael to take up their duties of guarding and defending Harry again. There was no question that they would be attending
Hogwarts in the autumn for their seventh and final year, but that was the autumn.

He looked across the room, where Medusa sat with Michael, playing a game of chess. Michael caught his eye and nodded very slightly, his way of saying that he thought their mother was fine.

Owen loved his brother, but he did not always trust his judgment. Owen was the one who had become head of the family when their father Charles died, and not only because he was their father’s magical heir and had always been the more responsible, guiding and protecting his younger twin. Michael also had a tendency to get so wrapped up in arcane trivialities that he missed the larger picture. Owen hadn’t been surprised at all when, as they sat under the Sorting Hat a few days after the Midsummer battle, the Hat had placed Michael firmly in Ravenclaw, while it had sent him to Slytherin.

And he thought that Michael had certain—personal—reasons for wanting to see Harry, and specifically Harry’s partner Draco Malfoy, again that made him likely to rush.

Owen studied his mother’s face. Medusa Rosier-Henlin, once Medusa Bulstrode, had aged since her husband’s death, but now she looked like a queen instead of the young princess she had always appeared when their father was alive. She played with more quiet intensity than she had been used to showing when she danced around Michael with a skillet, but was that a bad thing? Owen thought not. And the way she laughed, if more subdued than before, was at least animated enough to count as laughter. And she no longer spent any days lying in bed, as she had at first.

Medusa turned her head then, and caught his gaze. Owen started to flush and duck his head, but Medusa held his gaze straight on, challenging him, and then sat back, indicating the chess game was done.

“I’ll have you know, Owen Rosier-Henlin,” she said, adopting the tone that always made Owen feel about five years old, “that I have been managing for myself far longer than you boys have been alive.”

Owen nodded unwillingly. What little he knew about the Bulstrode family indicated they hadn’t been—close.

“I can manage without you,” said Medusa. “Your father wouldn’t want me to shut myself up in a tomb, and I’m not going to.” She looked sternly back and forth between them. “And you have a stronger allegiance than to me.” Her gaze fell on Owen’s left forearm, cut with the lightning bolt mark that marked his oath-vow to Harry. “Go and serve your vates, your Lord. I demand that of you, as your mother and as an older witch whom you respect.” She stood.

“But what are you going to do, shut up here all day?” Owen had to ask. Medusa had been a witch whose life was wrapped up in her husband and children. It was hard to imagine her here alone.

“I didn’t say I would stay shut up here,” Medusa almost snapped. “And—” She hesitated a long moment, then shook her head. “At first I wasn’t sure,” she murmured. “And then I couldn’t bear to mention it, because it seemed like so little compensation after such a crushing blow. And then I thought how horrible it was that your father wasn’t alive to see this. But I’m recovered from that now. I have to go on.” She drew her wand and tapped herself. “Coarguo!”

Owen blinked. He knew the spell—one often used at Durmstrang to dispel glamours and reveal the presence of dangerous spells in a room. He didn’t know why his mother would be using it on herself.

The blue mist he was familiar with swirled around Medusa, and then stormed away, forming a shadow in the air. Owen squinted. There was his mother.

And there was a smaller shadow within hers, resting in her belly.

Owen turned and stared at her.

Medusa’s smile was bitter. “I conceived not long before your father went to the Midsummer battle,” she murmured. “And so long after we’d given up hope of having another child.” She bowed her head. “But it doesn’t matter that Charles won’t be here to see her, because he won’t, and I have to accept that. I’ll be sure to tell her tales of her father, so that she will know he was brave, and would have loved her.”

Michael was the first to hug their mother, which was appropriate, as he’d always been closer to her. Medusa hugged him, and then she began to shake, and then the tears came.

Owen stood and went over to them a moment later, hoping, fiercely, that the war would not claim his mother and his infant sister as sacrifices.
Harry arrived at the clearing in the Forbidden Forest with his magic held sternly under wraps and the taste of ashes in his mouth. He and Snape had had another argument over his coming here. It had started out with Snape trying to reason with him, which Harry supposed was a positive sign, and then degenerated into Snape ordering him not to go. Harry had answered that with the sneer it deserved.

_I don’t want more bad blood between us, damn it!_ he thought, running his hand over his scar. _I don’t want any bad blood at all. I want to be able to trust him, to rely on him, to help heal him. But if he won’t do that right now, then he won’t do that right now. At least it seems that Joseph is having something of an effect on him._

He pushed thoughts of Snape into the Occlumency pools and held out his arm to Draco. Draco grinned slightly and interwove his arm with Harry’s. It had been his idea that Harry muffler his magic and go in like that, to see what the expressions on his allies’ faces would be when he released it. Harry had wanted to oppose him, but it was a move that made tactical sense. There still might be wizards here—Harry was sure Lucius was one—who had remaining prejudices against the magical creatures, or who thought they might be able to control him. A sudden show of magic would set them off balance, and warn them that he was no one’s pawn.

_Not anymore._

He swept into the clearing with Draco, coming in beneath two trees with arched branches. The loose circle around the glade, wizards neatly arranged on one side, and magical creatures—including, Harry saw with relief, a shimmer that was probably Dobby—on the other, turned towards him.

Harry let the bindings on his magic go.

Lucius saw Harry, and felt his magic tighten a circle of buzzing pain around his head, and was suddenly carried back more than twenty years, to a much darker night than this. He was young, and looking to carve his own path in the world, and meeting the Dark Lord for the first time.

Voldemort had come in with his magic shielded, just as Harry had done, but even more anonymous in the sea of black cloaks and white masks. Then he had released it. And Lucius had understood in a moment why wizards could be unconsciously compelled to follow Lords and Ladies, even the ones who seemed destined to lose their wars.

The magic was life. It flowed everywhere, like dark water, and whispered of change and adoration of that change. It whispered of being in control, instead of helplessly swept away by traditions and Muggle-lovers. Lucius had been dazed, dazzled, awed. Not even Dumbledore was that strong, with that sense of sheer, vital springtime and renewal to his magic.

And the Dark Lord had been sane then. He wasn’t exactly _charismatic_, but he didn’t need to be. He was fascinating, which was better. Steeped in Dark magic, in old studies, in old secrets, he reeked of ancient knowledge, and he told the truth in a fervent voice, and his magic pulled at them all as the moon pulled at the tide.

The records said Death Eaters had followed Tom Riddle because he was a power-crazed madman, and they had been mad, too, and wanted to share in that power. Lucius knew some who had fit that description—Evan Rosier for the former, Bellatrix Black Lestrange for the second. But more of them yet had bowed their necks because of something impossible to explain unless one was close to Voldemort and had at least the potential of being loyal to him. They were his because they could sense that this was someone who could change the world as an earthquake would—a storm in a human being. And they could commune with that power as they never could with an ordinary storm.

Lucius had thought he was giving that up when he swore allegiance to Harry. He did not really regret it, not when Voldemort had returned as the mad thing he was. There were subtler pleasures to be had, like making a young Lord dance to his tune.

Now he felt it again.

Harry’s magic was painful, but it commanded Lucius’s attention like a blade against his throat. He was _awake_, for the first time in a decade. His nerves balanced on the edge of a knife. He breathed, and felt the breath sting in his lungs, and relished it. He knew he was in the presence of a leader ready to go to war.
That was what Harry was, no matter what he claimed.

Harry locked his gaze on Lucius’s from across the clearing, and inclined his head. His green eyes were visible from that distance, thanks to the dark green robes that Draco had probably persuaded him to wear, and his hair was bound back from his forehead, as much as it could be, with a silver band that was probably another of Draco’s touches. His scar slashed across his brow, vivid as any normal lightning bolt in the sky.

Lucius told himself that Malfoys did not fall to one knee for anyone born a Potter. But he gave a deeper bow than he ever had before.

And Harry accepted it without the flicker of an eye.

Lucius fought the urge to stamp a foot in delight, to cast a curse, to turn and kiss Narcissa. Things were beginning, things were beginning again, and he was in the middle of them.

And this time, his leader was not mad.

He could fall, though.

Lucius suddenly had a vested, personal interest, one that had nothing to do with Harry’s importance to Draco or the future of his family, in stopping that from happening.

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Ignifer blinked. If someone had told her, a year ago, that she would be appreciating the effect of Lord-level power washing over her, she would have told them they were mad. She did not appreciate being controlled, not since her father. She had endured sixteen years of exile from her family, and an infertility curse, rather than give in and do what he wanted.

But now she felt the potential to command lapping on her arms, curling around her throat, sniffing at her as if to assess what she could do and what part she could play in the war.

It was—not unpleasant.

Ignifer studied Harry with narrowed eyes. There is nothing that says he cannot make a wrong decision. There is nothing that says he cannot fall, or that he will be as good a leader in this as in anything else.

But belonging is nice.

A hand squeezed her own. Ignifer turned her head and saw Honoria beside her, eyes bright with mischief—and, more, understanding. Her illusions created a dog with Ignifer’s yellow eyes on one shoulder, rolling over, showing its belly, and begging to be petted. Ignifer snorted and looked away in disdain.

She did let her hand squeeze back on Honoria’s, though.

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Henrietta swept the clearing with a proud glance. It was perfectly obvious to her what effect Harry’s magic was having on all the people around her, and also perfectly obvious that some of those people had not been convinced, before, that following Harry was the best thing to do.

Idiots. Really. Did they think that a wizard capable of making me want to follow him was a weakling?

Perhaps not a weakling, she thought, taking in the complex expressions on so many faces, but certainly not this overwhelming presence he was now. They had sometimes seen a child, an abused one. They had sometimes seen one who risked his life for no real reason, particularly where Evan Rosier was concerned. And they had sometimes seen a hero, as on Midwinter, but not someone particularly human, particularly easy to relate to.

Here was someone who had settled into his magic, and would use it to defend himself if he had to.

And use it to defend others, too.
They understand now, Henrietta thought, as she watched Lucius dip his head in a deep bow and Laura Gloryflower nod slowly, as though seeing Harry was not her child to protect. It is better to be within his circle than without. He will not hesitate to protect them as fiercely as he protects himself.

And now, there is no doubt that he can do it.

Henrietta settled back, with her arms casually folded, and smiled, and smiled.

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The first thing Harry noticed was that the werewolves weren’t there yet. He had received a notice from Wilmot that they would be attending, but he had also told himself that he wasn’t going to wait on Loki, and that was true. It was already early evening, the sun just beginning its western descent. He at once began his speech.

“My friend, my ally, I would like to make this a formal alliance,” he said. “I would like to know that I can take everyone here into my trust and faith, and treat you all as confidants in the matter of my plans. Therefore, I am asking everyone here who has not actually sworn an oath to me to do so. And I will swear one back to you.”

“The terms of the alliance?” That was John Smythe-Blyton, Tybalt Starrise’s joined partner. Harry noticed that his eyes were slightly shadowed. Perhaps he thought the risks Tybalt had taken without any formal oath were already severe enough, without adding that binding into it.

“Welcome is one of the first and foremost principles.” Harry shifted his weight. On Draco’s advice, he’d prepared the speech, but it still felt false to use it. He wanted to speak his mind without caring what effect the words had, because if someone truly hated what he was saying, then why would they want to join the alliance anyway?

But he knew he had to be political, measured, diplomatic. He’d argued with Snape and had him stay behind because he was convinced that Snape couldn’t be any of those things.

I don’t want to sacrifice who I am by becoming political, though, he thought, lifting his head. And it would be so easy to do. I’ll have to keep an eye on myself.

“We’ll welcome those who use both Light and Dark magic.” Harry looked at Thomas Rhangnara, then Laura Gloryflower. “Those who have committed crimes and sincerely repented.” A glance at the former Death Eaters in the group. “Both humans and magical creatures.” He let his gaze slide over to the centaurs. A large male Harry knew as Bone folded his arms and nodded, as though to signal his people’s commitment to the alliance. “Muggleborns, and halfbloods, and purebloods, and Squibs.” Calibrid Opalline—whom Harry suspected had in part attended because her father was intent on getting her to think about something beyond all the wounded and dead in the house—held her head back and smiled faintly when a few gazes turned to her. She didn’t look as though she would back down if anyone tried to tell her off for being a Squib. Harry just hoped the rest had the same impression of her. “There’s no place for prejudices here.”

“And I suppose that you expect us to free all our house elves tomorrow?” That was Lucius, recovering from the shock he’d showed when Harry first entered the clearing, and returning to his usual bored, haughty tone.

“That may restrict the first principle. I would not let someone into the alliance who seemed likely to hurt all the others already here. But we won’t simply dismiss someone out of hand because she carries the werewolf curse or because he had a Muggle for a parent. There are plenty of sectors of wizarding society who do.”

“If we look over recent wizarding history, it seems to me that our greatest sin is not thinking. Sometimes, as with the Ministry of late, we allow fear to control our actions. Other times, we’re so concerned over status that we don’t see that we’re losing true power. And at still others, we’ve forgotten history, and we prefer to hide from it when reminded.” He nodded at the centaurs, but he was thinking about the Grand Unified Theory as well, and the absolute chaos that Thomas’s theory was going to cause when his group published it. Harry found that he was glad, chaos or not. It would at least force people to consider. Lucius was likely entirely ignorant of the possible Muggleborn heritage in his own family, and thus felt free to despise them without pause. Confronted with it, he could try to hide his head in the sand, but Harry wouldn’t allow that, and he didn’t think Draco and Narcissa would, either. “If you become part of this alliance, you are going to have to step away from that all-too-common strategy. You don’t need to like everyone else in the alliance, but you need to fight beside them. You’ll also need to examine your
own actions, and their consequences. No blind vengeance-taking will be part of this, of course, but it’s not the only part.”

“And yet you still don’t necessarily want us to free our house elves?” Adalrico sounded as if he were having a little trouble understanding the contradiction.

With a small smile, Harry shook his head. “No. Think, argue, debate, question. Those are what I want you to do. But you haven’t sworn to help the house elves achieve freedom. I have.”

He turned towards the shimmer that was Dobby. A pair of large golden eyes formed in the mist and looked out at him.

“I have sworn that,” said Harry, “and it’s time for me to stop living in the midst of hypocrisy. I am _vates_. I have cast my own cleaning charms for the past year, but I’ve still lived on house elf labor, eating food they prepared in Hogwarts. I am going to stop that now. I promise you, Dobby, and if any others of your kindred were free yet, I would promise them as well.” He held up his hand, and the ring Draco had given him on Walpurgis Night flashed. “I will never live by house elf labor again. I am going to see what food is available in Hogsmeade, and have it sent by owl to the castle. And when I live somewhere else, I plan to do the same thing.”

The people all around the circle were staring at him, except the Many, who made small hissing noises as they talked about their own important matters, and the centaurs, who stamped a few hooves gravely in approval. Dobby’s golden eyes blinked.

“I have been waiting for that,” he said at last, in a voice like eerie flute music.

Harry nodded. “Yes. It’s to my discredit that I’ve waited so long. But it’s sworn now.” He turned to Lucius and Adalrico, though he spoke to the whole circle if they wanted to listen. “That is the kind of thing I would like to see happen everywhere. Not at once. I am not going to force anyone to free their house elves. But I will bargain where I can.”

“Not everyone will be able to do what you do,” Hawthorn told him. Her face was pale. Harry wondered if she had not anticipated his making such a large change in the way he lived his own life. “Some people can’t afford it.”

Harry nodded again. “I know that. That means that solution won’t work for everyone. But I _can_ afford it.” The thought of the Black fortune, just lying around in its vaults and not being used for anything _productive_, bothered him. Rather like the way I now _think about my magic, I suppose_. “And I’m the one who has reason to swear that oath, and try to smooth out the contradictions in the life I lead.”

“So,” said Owen, sounding as if he were trying to bring them all back to the main point of the meeting. “Welcome and thinking. What else?”

“A willingness to rise,” Harry said. “Against falsehood, against stupidity, against preconceptions. My first target is the Ministry and the way it treats werewolves, because I think it the most urgent cause right now. They are dying in the streets. I am going to be trying my hand at inventing a cure for lycanthropy.” He had his dreams to thank for that, he thought. Sometimes his dreaming mind knew what he needed before he himself did. “I’ll also offer my protection to any werewolf that wants it. And, of course, any werewolf who wants to can join the alliance, as long as he or she agrees to swearing to all the other principles.”

“I am glad to hear you say that,” said a voice from the opposite side of the clearing Harry had entered on.

_Loki_. Harry turned on one heel, magic up and ready to defend if necessary. But Loki simply appeared, walking at the head of a file of werewolves, many more than Harry had seen accompany him before. Harry narrowed his eyes, noticing his allies’ tension as people kept piling up behind Loki. There were perhaps forty men and women there. In the back, Harry thought he’d caught a glimpse of Remus.

_All of his pack?_

He looked at Loki then, and the accusation he wanted to speak stuck in his throat. Loki’s face had lost the calm, amused look it had worn most of the times Harry had seen him in the past. He appeared to have lost weight. His eyes were fiercely amber, burning as if the full moon had been yesterday instead of a few days ago, and hunger appeared to have sharpened his cheekbone and his fangs.

“What is the meaning of this, Loki?” Harry asked quietly.

“Did you mean what you said?” Loki asked, and the tone was sharp enough that Harry saw a few of his allies stir and reach for their wands. “The werewolves who agree to your principles can have your protection?”
“I meant it,” Harry said, lifting his head. He wondered if Loki was going to challenge him in public, accuse him of not doing enough for his pack. If he did, then Harry was ready to meet that challenge.

But Loki only nodded, and then gestured. His pack flowed forward around him. More than one wand rose then, but no one fired a curse. Harry commended his allies on their self-control as the werewolves filled the clearing, the empty space between the side of the wizards and the side of the magical creatures. That was rather appropriate, now that Harry thought about it.

Loki tilted his head back and began to wail. That was the only way Harry could describe his howl. It was a sound of deep loss and grief, where every werewolf’s howl he had heard before was wild and rage-filled. The pack threw their heads back, too, and responded in perfect time, their voices intermingling until Harry could hear one of his allies screaming, as if to drown out the noise.

It ceased in an instant, and Loki said, “It is enough. I signal from the path alone, and the pack takes another. It is done. Done, and done, and thrice done.” His voice shook with power on those last words.

Cold, fierce white light filled the whole of the clearing—the light of the full moon, Harry thought. He started to gather his magic, just in case the werewolves had discovered a spell that allowed them to transform without the moon in the sky, but then he realized the light was occurring in thin streams only. It connected the werewolves in a shining web that bound them to Loki, to a flickering line on his hair that Harry thought looked like a crown.

Then the crown whipped from Loki’s head towards him. Harry had time for a startled duck before it settled around his neck like a torque. The Many snake, coiled just under it, hissed at it.

“I give my pack into your protection, vates,” Loki said. “They have suffered enough. Two dead, and one imprisoned, and that is enough. They are yours to defend, yours to keep.”

“I cannot wear a web,” Harry said. “I am vates.”

Loki’s face lit with a wistful smile. “Does every leader wear a web?” he countered. “No, vates. They are tied together because they are pack, and they look to you as alpha now. That is all. I simply chose to surrender my position to you rather than to some youngster looking to start a fight.”

Harry swallowed. He wasn’t sure this was much better. The light around his throat felt as cold as any actual band of metal, any bond. “And why would you do that?”

“The ways of an accepted pack are tied to debts and bonds,” said Loki, lowering his head slightly. “But the greatest of the bonds is the mate-bond. I hunt for Gudrun. I shall visit each of her three killers on each of the three full moons upcoming. I shall make sure they do not look human when I am done.” Fading sunlight flashed off his teeth.

“That will make things worse for your werewolves!” Harry took a step forward, barely noticing how the pack swayed in the wake of his anger. “Don’t you care about that?”

“Gudrun is dead,” said Loki, calmly, simply. “That puts an automatic limit to the number of things I care about. But feel free to tell anyone who asks that I am separated from my pack, vates. That is true. I am not fit for the responsibility of leading them when I am consumed with vengeance, and the path I walk now is only wide enough for one, not all of them. So I put them where they will be protected, and pursue my own path.” He lifted a hand and folded three fingers down. “August, September, October. Those are the months I shall hunt. And then comes November, and comes the last debt to be paid. We share something with you wizards, you see, Harry.” His teeth flashed in a mocking smile now. “Last time pays for all.”

Harry would have reached out for him, tried to hold him still, convince him not to go, but Loki vanished, wrapped in magic that made him invisible to any senses. Harry reached out anyway. Now that Loki had given up his leadership, he ought not to be able to use pack magic anymore, if Harry understood the concept.

“How do you—”

Harry looked down. A young woman with long, ragged dark hair was rising on her knees, putting out a hand towards him. She shook her head. “He invokes a willing sacrifice,” she said. “He will pay for all in November, but until then, he cannot be stopped. He walks alone, and hunts alone, and you cannot sense him—more even than if he still had the pack magic.”

Harry cursed under his breath, and reined in both the anger and his sloshing magic. “What’s your name?” he asked.
“Camellia.” She tilted her head to regard him, wary, one eye peering up through the strands of hair.

“Do you want to be here?” he asked. “Actually bound to me? I’m not even a werewolf.”

“We aren’t bound in the way you think we are,” she told him. “We can disobey you, and certainly think our own thoughts. But we rely on you for protection, and in return, we will protect you. We will attack your enemies, and help your friends, and—” She hesitated for a long moment, as if it hurt to think in human terms, then finished. “And swear to be part of your alliance.”

Harry nodded. “Very well, then.” He looked up and around at his allies, human and centaur and Many snake and other. “If you consent to be a part of this alliance, which I am going to call the Alliance of Sun and Shadow because of the mingled Light and Dark nature of it, then I will ask you to speak these words. I won’t use blood, because I know that blood oaths offend the principles of some of those here.” Not to mention that there are old myths about what a werewolf’s blood can do to non-werewolves.

He saw most of the people present nodding, or stamping their hooves. Harry translated the words into Parseltongue, and the hive tangled around each other in enthusiasm.

“You know that we will swear to the one who saved our children from being bound,” they told him.

Harry nodded, and began to recite, trying to tell himself that the words did not sound pretentious, that this needed to be said.

“I swear to be part of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow until I can in good conscience be part of it no longer. I swear to hold loyalty and allegiance to my allies, no matter who they are, no matter how much magic they have, no matter what kind of magic they use.” He heard Draco’s voice from beside him, strong and clear and confident, and the centaurs’ voices, a rumbling basso that shook the ground. “I swear to hold the space of my own mind sacred, to make decisions as best as I can based on thought instead of reaction, to test my own beliefs until they shatter or until they prove themselves solid. I swear not to let fear rule me. I swear to walk among interacting freedoms, to study the impact of my own free will on others’, and to think of the consequences of my actions.”

He wondered if anyone noticed that he’d chosen to base his oaths on the legendary virtues of the four Hogwarts Houses, or at least one for each House: Hufflepuff loyalty, Ravenclaw intelligence, Gryffindor courage, and Slytherin self-consideration. Draco was shooting him a sly smile that said he’d noticed, but, of course, Harry had talked over this oath with Draco beforehand.

A few of his allies blinked around in the wake of the oath, and one of the werewolves ventured, “I expected magic to bind us.”

“This doesn’t have the compulsion factor of an Unbreakable Vow,” Harry told him. He was trying to avoid looking towards Remus. He just—couldn’t deal with him right now. “I do expect you to keep it. If you betray the alliance to its enemies, I will drain your magic.” He didn’t add much force to the threat. The threat by itself should be enough. “If you feel that you can no longer follow its principles, I expect you to tell me and withdraw, not deceive me.”

Some of his allies still blinked. Harry stifled an impatient sigh. Don’t they understand? This has to be something they freely choose or not at all.

“The first strike is against the Ministry,” he said. “I will call on you as I need you.” He bowed his head. “Thank you for coming here tonight.”

As the meeting began to break up, Harry turned to the werewolves. They were the largest problem. He knew where he would take them to shelter them—the Black houses, obedient only to him while Regulus was gone and guarded behind powerful wards. But, Merlin, another complication.

Seeing the hesitancy in their eyes, though, he reminded himself that he wasn’t the only person affected here, and managed to offer them a smile of welcome.

“The first place I’ll take you is called Copleby-by-the-Sea,” he announced. “It’s in Cornwall, on the coast of the Atlantic, and the cliffs above it are dramatic. If you’ll picture gray cliffs in your head, falling sheerly to the sea…”

He could almost feel their attention centering on him as he spoke, testing his strength, learning how to regard him. There was the same sensation from many of the other eyes in the clearing. And, of course, there was Remus, and Loki running wild.

Harry could feel the challenges that would be coming.
He braced himself to meet them.

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Chapter Eight: Theory, Meet Practice

Draco came down the main staircase in Coblly-by-the-Sea feeling as if someone had run a hand through all his hair and made it stand on end. He hadn’t slept well. It wasn’t the bare stone room or the unfamiliar bed, thick with hastily dusted curtains, that had hampered that. The smells, of all things, had got to him. Draco preferred the heavy rose-smell that hung around Harry, at least to his nose, to the scents of salt and spray. The heavy booming of the waves as they struck the cliff the house was carved into hadn’t helped, either.

He paused when he reached the bottom of the staircase. It opened into a wide room, like the one where they had celebrated Christmas though several floors higher, with windows that gazed out on the ocean. There were several stone pillars scattered throughout it, which Draco thought were meant to serve as perches for owls, or plinths for objects now missing. Otherwise, the room was bare and comfortless.

And Harry stood by one of the windows, in the same clothes he’d worn last night, staring out expectantly.

“Harry.”

Harry started and looked over his shoulder. “Oh, hullo, Draco.”

One of us has to say it. Draco remained silent, waiting. But Harry only turned around again and stared back out the window, as if he didn’t notice the tension in the air. A moment later, he exclaimed and held out his arm.

A barn owl, looking as ruffled as Draco felt, clung to his jumper when Harry pulled his arm back inside. He smiled as his Levitation Charm pulled the letter from its leg, even though the owl hooted nervously and shifted from talon to talon at the nearness of the invisible magic. Harry unrolled the letter via a complicated process half-magic and half-hand, and which Draco couldn’t see well from this angle. He took a step nearer just as Harry let the letter roll shut and grinned up at him.

“She’ll do it,” he told Draco.

Draco blinked a bit, then said, in a tone meant to remind Harry that he didn’t have a bloody clue what he was talking about, “Who will do what?”

“Skeeter is going to arrange to hold a public interview with me,” said Harry, “at the Ministry. She won’t tell anyone until a few minutes before, so our audience will be whoever’s there at the time. That ought to provide a nicely varied set of ears. And of course I’ll be taking Veritaserum in front of everyone, too.” He looked around in distraction. “I had parchment and a quill right here, I could swear that I did. I have to write her back and let her know that half past ten will be fine.”

“I know you have an amulet you can use to summon her,” Draco said, frowning. “Why didn’t you just use that?”

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“Because then she would have had to fly or Apparate here, and talk to me about the plan, and then go arrange matters,” said Harry. He murmured something Draco thought was “Accio parchment!”, and a folded scroll came flying over to him. He snatched it, badly unsettling the owl, which fluttered away to wait on the windowsill until he was done. “This way, she could just stay in London and arrange things immediately. And we can have the interview more quickly.” He gave Draco another smile that might have melted Draco’s defenses if he weren’t so concerned. “Skeeter’s smart. She’ll know who to contact.”

Draco wondered how to put this politely, and finally said, “Harry.”

“Hmmm?” Harry was holding the parchment flat with the stump of his left wrist, while scribbling the message rapidly with his right hand. Draco narrowed his eyes. That’s another thing that he was going to work on, too, getting his hand back. I know that he broke one curse on his wrist, but then he never tried to break anything else. Combined with what he just did, that’s not a good sign.

“What did you go to sleep last night?”

Harry looked up with wide eyes, arrested for a moment, and then blinked. “Um. No.” He lifted his left shoulder in a shrug. He was already writing again. “I forgot?”
“We’ve talked about this,” said Draco, feeling a stir of disgust in his belly. He really didn’t like scolding Harry to do elementary things like eat and sleep. If nothing else, they made him sound like a parent, and he wanted to be Harry’s partner, not his parent. Offering comfort when Harry was in trouble was one thing, but by now, he should know better than to run himself into the ground. “You need to sleep, no matter how exciting the day was.”

“I literally couldn’t,” Harry said, with a lightness that made Draco grit his teeth. “I have too many plans.” He finished the letter and strode across the room to the barn owl, securing the message to its leg. The owl hooted, and Harry reached into his robe pocket, holding out what looked like a crumbling piece of toast. The owl ate a few bites before it launched itself out the window again, already more dignified than when it’d arrived. “And I was getting to know the werewolves. There are all sorts of things about accepted werewolf packs I never knew.” He spun around, resting with his elbows on the stone, and grinned at Draco. The gray light through the window made his face appear to glow with an unhealthy pallor. “Did you know they prefer to sleep all in one big tumble? A literal puppy-pile. And they know exactly where every member of the pack is, physically, in the room at all times. They can’t really surprise each other, but they keep trying.”

Draco scowled. Bloody werewolves. He’d managed to forget about them, actually, for one blissful moment. Only half the pack was here; Harry had sent the other twenty, with Lupin, to stay in Grimmauld Place. He’d explained to Draco that he didn’t trust Wayhouse’s temper, and he didn’t trust werewolves to be in Silver-Mirror and around the sun-pool and the wind-pool without falling in—or possibly turning the painting into which they’d tricked the many-legged creature around.

“You should still have slept, Harry.” He worked to shear any trace of whining off his tone, and found that he’d succeeded. He sounded quiet, calm, distant, with just a hint of adult condemnation. Like Narcissa, really.

But I still don’t want to sound like a parent!

“One night isn’t going to kill me,” Harry said cheerfully, walking past him. Draco could hear a faint buzz, in addition to smelling the roses. Harry’s magic was working to keep him at this level of alertness, it seemed. “Come on, Draco, Camellia’s making breakfast.”

Draco followed him, eyes narrowed on his partner’s back. Harry had promised that he would continue to work on his healing simultaneously with everything else once they were back in the world, and Draco had believed him. But now he wasn’t doing it. Draco hated those signs, and before he would see Harry exhaust himself as he had in those days just after the Midsummer battle, he would lock Harry in a room, cast a sleeping spell on him, and then stand outside the room with his wand out so that neither werewolves nor Snape could disturb him.

He’s going to miss things, if he wants to think of it purely in terms of the war effort. Tired eyes see less than alert ones do. I suppose I should be grateful that he’s making time to eat breakfast, but I’m not. He should be able to take care of himself and still accomplish the majority of what he wants. I know he has the determination to do it. But he’s neglecting his sleep just to do a little more. He’d probably whine that that’s more useful.

Draco wondered, with a sudden, sharp pang that seemed to center in his stomach, if Harry still derived the majority of his pleasure from being “useful.” The way he had talked about the Black fortunes last night, shortly before Draco had gone to bed and assumed that Harry had as well, certainly signaled that.

The value of him is not just in what he can do.

But confronting Harry about that would make him sound still more like a parent, and would probably get him nowhere. Harry knew some really good arguments now, from spending time in the Sanctuary with Seers who could make anything sound reasonable. Besides, Draco suspected that the best way to win him was by rational argument. So he would watch, collect evidence that refusing to attend to himself was impairing Harry’s judgment, and present it to him.

I have the right to push. I told Harry I would. But sometimes you don’t learn anything by pushing, and have to wait for the right time. Draco smirked as they entered the kitchen, wondering if Harry assumed the lack of pushing meant that Draco had given up. Ha. Not bloody likely.

“Good morning, Camellia.”

Draco glanced up in shock at the cheerful tone in Harry’s voice. He hadn’t thought he was on that friendly a basis with any of the werewolves last night. But the young woman with ragged dark hair—Draco wrinkled his nose; didn’t any of them bathe?—who was flipping something dark brown in a pan turned around with a nod.
“Good morning, Harry,” she said. “Breakfast will be ready in a moment, if you’d like to sit down.” She nodded again, this time at a table miraculously free of dust. Draco sat down gingerly anyway. The chairs were made of stone, and looked solid, but this had been a Black house. Nasty practical jokes could still be lurking in the furniture.

He watched Camellia cook for a moment. There was a tea-kettle singing nearby, and she reached for it with her free hand, pouring tea into several cups waiting on the counter. Then Harry’s magic wafted the cups over to them. It was an impressive feat of dexterity on her part, Draco supposed, but—

“Why aren’t you just using your magic to cook?” he asked, as he sipped his tea. It didn’t have enough milk, and he muttered that to Harry, who raised an eyebrow and opened the door of a cupboard standing in the far wall. Draco was reassured to note the preservation spell on the crock of milk that came floating out. Of course, Pettigrew and Regulus Black had been living here, so the food wouldn’t be that old. “Why do things the Muggle way?” he asked the werewolf.

She caught the thing she was flipping in the pan, and glanced back at him with a small smile. “Because I am a Muggle,” she said. “Or, well, I was born that way. The only magic I have is my gift.”

Gift—she means lycanthropy. Draco felt faintly sick. He sipped his tea and said nothing. It was one thing to listen to Harry’s speeches on irrational prejudices and think smugly that he knew better, that he would never do some of the stupid things the Ministry had done. It was another to sit in a house that had belonged to his ancestors and realize there were Muggles rattling around in it. Or werewolves who thought of their curse as a gift. Draco wondered what his mother would say.

Then he shook his head. She was at the meeting last night. She heard Harry announce his intentions to take them to Cobley-by-the-Sea. If she cared about having Muggles and werewolves running around here, she would have said something.

“Muggle,” he went back to Camellia, as she turned around with the pan. Draco thought the food in it looked like a cross between toast and pancakes. At least it smelled good, and she was scraping it onto a plate. “How old were you when you were bitten?”

Camellia gave him a funny stare. “Less than a year old,” she said. “My parents went to Scotland on holiday with me and encountered a werewolf. It killed my mother, but my father survived and got us back to London.”

Draco choked on his tea. “I—you can’t survive that,” he said, when he had his breath back. “Children that young can’t survive a bite.” He noticed Harry watching him with amusement from across the table, but he ignored him. Children that young didn’t survive, damn it.

Camellia smirked at him. “I did,” she said. “My father didn’t know what in the world to do with me, especially when I started changing. Luckily, he had a friend who had a friend who knew the London pack, and Loki came and adopted me.”

Draco didn’t know what to say, so he added milk to his tea and waited for Camellia to finish preparing their breakfast. It was pancakes, he saw when their plates were finally piled. Camellia sat down on the other side of the table and began to talk to Harry about the upcoming interview. Apparently, he was going into the Ministry with werewolves as guards.

And then Draco choked on his pancakes as much as he had choked on his tea.

“Harry,” he said, breaking in. He noticed the irritated look Camellia gave him, but he ignored it. What did he care what a Muggle werewolf thought? “You’re going to take Veritaserum?”

Harry blinked and pushed his glasses up on his nose. “Yes?” he said, making it almost a question. “Skeeter said that she could get me some—or rather, that she has a contact in the Ministry who can procure some. There have been enough lies in the Prophet about me that I thought I should counter them somehow. If I’m under Veritaserum, they’ll have to accept certain things as the truth.”

Draco shook his head tightly. For all his knowledge of history, I don’t think that he imagines how it will look if he takes Veritaserum. “Harry, criminals take Veritaserum. If you drink it, you’ll be showing them that you think of yourself as guilty.”

Harry sighed. “Draco, criminals take it to prove their innocence. Unless it’s forced on them, which the Ministry has rules against, then no one who wants to lie is going to take it.”

“That’s not the point.” Draco could feel agitation roiling in his mind, combining with the political instincts that his father—and his mother, he could acknowledge now—had taken some effort to hammer into him. “You shouldn’t have to take it for them to believe you. Your word ought to be enough, Harry.”
“It ought to be enough,” said Harry with infuriating patience. “But it isn’t. I’ve been gone too long. There’s not been a fresh interview with me to counteract the circling lies. They’ll need the truth straight from my own mouth before they start to believe me.” He took another sip of his tea, as if he believed that should have clinched his point. Camellia sat back with her own tea and looked from one to the other of them as if watching a duel. Draco spared a moment to scowl at her. She offered him a wide, sharp-toothed grin.

Harry turned back to Camellia. His pancakes were still mostly uneaten, Draco saw. “Now, who do you think would be the best second werewolf to come with us? Someone who’s a wizard, to balance you? Or someone who looks like a werewolf, to counter the idea that all accepted werewolves will go wild and run through the streets and bite anyone who looks at them sideways?”

“Is going in with werewolves visible wise at all?” Draco interrupted. “I don’t think so, not with the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts so important to the Ministry.”

“Even they are still operating inside the bounds of law,” Harry said. “They had to claim that the werewolves they killed were going to attack them. They’re still worried about what the public thinks. That’s why this is going to be as public as possible.”

Draco made himself sit still for a long moment, while Harry and Camellia spoke and settled on a werewolf named Rose as a good companion. Then he stood. “Harry, can I speak to you?”

Harry turned to him. “Of course—”

“In private.”

Harry blinked a bit, but stood. Draco supposed that since he would have granted one of the werewolves the same privilege, he had no qualms about granting it to Draco. “Of course. Excuse us, Camellia,” he added over his shoulder. Draco saw the werewolf wave a hand in casual acceptance, but she watched them all the way out of the room.

Draco waited until they were in the room where Harry had sent the owl off again, and then turned to face him. “A privacy ward, if you please,” he said. He listened to his own voice. It was cool and strong, and didn’t sound anything like a parent’s. If anything, he was a political ally of Harry’s, and Harry had to listen to him because he would have listened to Lucius or Narcissa in the same position.

“Draco, I’m sure that—”

“Camellia might overhear something,” Draco cut in, keeping his voice polite. “You know what keen ears werewolves have.”

Harry studied his face, directly enough that Draco thought he might have used a touch of Legilimency, and then nodded and raised the privacy ward, a sparkling curve of white light that isolated them just as it had when Harry spoke to Wilmot in the Ministry. Then he leaned back on the wall, folding on the arms, and stared at Draco.

“You don’t need to do this,” Draco said, making sure to keep his voice constrained enough that he didn’t seem as if his temper were going to explode at any moment. “You really don’t, Harry. I applaud the idea of a public interview, and I applaud the idea of doing it through Skeeter, and so suddenly that no one will have any time to set up an ambush. But you don’t need to take Veritaserum, and you don’t need to take werewolves along.”

Harry nodded slowly, as though considering it. “And what would you suggest that I do instead?”

That was more progress than Draco had hoped for. “Trust in your magic,” he urged softly, taking a step closer to his partner. Harry watched him and weighed his words, and that was the best thing he had done today—or since last night, because he had been awake for more than twenty-four hours. Draco stamped down his irritation. “You shocked everyone in the alliance last night, Harry, and a good part of it came from that initial explosion of magic and the clothes you wore.” He noticed that Harry had removed the silver band from his forehead, but still wore the dark green robes.

“Well, we can find him others for this interview. You’re a powerful wizard. That means more than you might think it does, to so many people. Didn’t you see the expressions on their faces last night? How they longed to be close to you?” That had been an occasion for more than one moment of smugness from Draco. A few of the younger members of the alliance, in particular Calibrid Opalline, had looked at Harry with more than mere yearning for magic in their eyes.

“Of course I did,” said Harry, sounding faintly surprised. “But mere magic isn’t going to change those opinions circulating in the Daily Prophet, Draco. If it could have, then they wouldn’t have started.”
“You weren’t here,” said Draco. “You said that yourself. And you didn’t have all the webs off your magic then.”

“If I keep using it as a weapon, the shock value won’t last long,” said Harry. “I can’t depend it on it forever.”

Draco bit his tongue, deciding that Harry wouldn’t want to hear the old tales of how Lords and Ladies had kept many people panting after their magic for years. He hated being called a Lord, and that was a resistance that had remained, despite everything else he was doing to integrate himself into politics. “That’s true,” said Draco. “But you can go in, composed and calm and saying that you have just as much right as anyone else to be judged fairly—without Veritaserum. Don’t make this into a trial, Harry. It’s going to be hard enough without that.”

Harry smiled and clapped him on the shoulder. “I promise that I’m only using Veritaserum because I think it’s the best choice, Draco.”

“You said that you could depend on me to tell you when you were making the wrong decisions.” Draco stared into his eyes. “And now you are. Listen to me, Harry, please. This could set a precedent, too. What if others want to question you under Veritaserum?”

“I can make the decision,” said Harry, and dropped the privacy ward, and smiled at Draco, and went away to talk to Camellia again.

Draco stood where he was for a moment, pulling his breaths in smoothly through his nose, a relaxation technique his mother had taught him. Then he went to select his own robes. He would look immaculate. He would wield the power of perception that he knew Harry despised.

Someone who will be there should.

*

Skeeter had chosen to stage the interview in a main corridor of the Ministry—the one that led to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, in fact. There was no way that anyone could miss it. Daily Prophet banners covered the walls, and two photographers hovered ostentatiously in the way. Skeeter herself sat in one of a pair of chairs, her notebook held firmly in her hands and a smile covering her face. Draco thought the smile looked like a shark’s.

Harry had at least changed into different clothes, simple dark robes, for his appearance here. Camellia and Rose walked to either side of him, their nostrils flared as they apparently sniffed for threats. Draco was at Harry’s right shoulder. He had his hand on his wand, and he intended to keep it there.

Harry let the control on his magic gradually slip as he neared the chair in front of Skeeter. She turned towards him first, and the shark’s smile widened. Draco had heard that being near magic this strong sometimes made wizards and witches dream of what they could accomplish with it. She was one of them, then, which didn’t surprise Draco at all.

He took up his position behind Harry’s chair as Harry sat down, all poise and confidence. That was good, but Draco could see curious stares from the Ministry workers who had formed an impromptu crowd, their stares growing sharper as they recognized both Skeeter and Harry, and winced. We should have come with a larger entourage. If Harry had just waited and let us inform more people, we could have had my father here at least, and Mrs. Parkinson—no, I don’t think Harry would have let her come into the Ministry, when they have spells to track werewolves. Well, Mr. Bulstrode, then. And Owen and Michael should be here.

Harry had had Owen and Michael stay behind at Hogwarts, the excuse being that they were obviously uncomfortable around werewolves and he had to see to the comfort of the pack that night. Draco had thought nothing of it at the time. Now he wondered if it was Harry’s training acting against his political instincts again, shoving aside the temptation to show off his sworn companions in public.

This has to stop. I can see that I’ll have an even heavier task than I estimated at first.

“Thank you for attending this meeting, vates,” said Skeeter, loud enough to be heard over the murmurings of the Ministry workers. “I’d like to ask you a few questions, if you don’t mind. Our Prophet readers have been so curious about where you’ve been this last month!”

Harry smiled. “I’d be happy to tell you,” he said. “But first, Mrs. Skeeter, I think there was a condition of this interview we agreed to, and that you’re forgetting?”
“Of course, how stupid of me,” Skeeter said, with a chuckle, and then fumbled in her purse for what turned out to be a clear vial of Veritaserum. Draco was sourly pleased to see that the smile on her face dimmed a bit. *She doesn’t think this is a good idea any more than I do.*

Harry opened the vial and looked around at the crowd with an open, pleasant face. “I am taking Veritaserum because there have been some questions about my truthfulness, particularly given what I said in the last days before I left,” he said. “This will prove that I have nothing to hide.” He lifted the vial and touched three drops of the potion to his tongue. The crowd’s murmuring increased. Draco listened to the cadences of their words, and decided that they were reluctantly impressed.

He shook his head. *This will end badly, I know it. And you do have things to hide, Harry.*

Harry swallowed the Veritaserum, and then smiled and looked up at Skeeter. “Whenever you’re ready, ma’am,” he murmured.

“Thank you, Harry.” Skeeter’s quill rapped her notebook for a moment, and then she began the questioning. At least Draco could be sure that she’d chosen the questions carefully. “Where did you go this summer? There were so many rumors…”

“To stay with the Seers,” said Harry. “They see the present, and souls. They have a Sanctuary I’ve been invited to visit before, and I finally decided to accept the invitation.”

Skeeter tilted her head to the side. “And that’s the place that you began your training to defeat You-Know-Who?”

*Harry’s cover story, to content Whitestag and her group. Draco frowned. I hope the Veritaserum doesn’t make him betray that that was a sham.*

“I did that, too,” said Harry agreeably, and entirely truthfully, Draco realized. Harry could manipulate Veritaserum, at least, as he had done when the Ministry arrested Snape for trying to kill Minister Fudge. It had something to do with being an Occlumens. “I researched various kinds of magic that will be useful in the war. And I worked on myself as hard as I could. When I went to the Sanctuary, I was in no fit state to defend the wizarding world. Now, I hope I can safely say I am.”

“Fascinating,” said Skeeter, and scribbled rapidly. “Now, can you tell us what that magic is? Or would it be too dangerous to say?”

*Good way to work against the Veritaserum, Draco thought, and gave her a slow nod he doubted she noticed. That will let Harry give an answer that’s still truthful.*

“Too dangerous to say.” Harry smiled and waved a hand self-deprecatingly. “And the details would probably be boring to anyone who wasn’t studying it,” he added. “I’ve got a bit of the Ravenclaw in me, I’m afraid.”

That won a few chuckles. Draco gazed at Harry. *If he could only do this as the normal wizard he deserves to be treated as, then what an impression he would make!*

“And what would you say to the rumors that started to circulate a few days after your departure?” Skeeter asked, looking up. “About your murdering a dozen children in front of Hogwarts?”

“I mercy-killed them,” said Harry, his voice filled with relief, and abruptly, Draco understood why he’d wanted the Veritaserum. This was the only way that might convince the parents of the dead children, and their sympathizers, that he wasn’t lying. “Voldemort”—people flinched like dry grass with a wind traveling through it “—had them in a Life-Web. That spell constrains the victims to obey the holder in whatever way he commands. He can make them die, commit suicide, murder others, become wounded. And he can stop the effects of any spell on them, once he notices it.”

Draco hoped he was the only one to see Harry’s hand clench into a fist on the arm of the chair. His voice stayed steady, though, as if he’d long prepared for the telling of this story. “The Life-Web was to make me give up my own life. I hung there, suspended between the screams of the dying behind me and the screams of the wounded in front of me, and he told me that if I came to him and surrendered, then he would free them.”

Harry gave a dry, bitter chuckle. “Not true, of course. He has lied every time he’s faced me. He had no reason to let them go. And Voldemort was so sure that I’d ultimately have to sacrifice my life—after some pleasurable moments for him, of course—that he didn’t think I’d kill them, and he didn’t notice the spell in time to stop it. They died, and then I was free to go and help the others.”

Skeeter bowed her head in the wake of that statement, and for a moment, silence spread. Draco could see most of the people
around them staring with wide eyes. *That has to content them, doesn’t it?* he thought. *They’re thinking about how horrible a choice that is and how they couldn’t make it, that’s plain.*

It immediately became obvious that one person there wasn’t, though.

“Do you regret it at all?” someone demanded, and then the same person elbowed several people aside rapidly and moved forward. “Or has it just become a pretty story for you to tell, to try to keep yourself out of justified trouble?”

Draco snarled a bit when he saw the big man, and realized who he must be. *Philip Willoughby. And he’s a Muggle, so he’s not feeling Harry’s magic at all, and thus he’s not impressed. Fuck.*

“I regret it every day.” Harry’s voice was deep and steady, and, of course, absolutely truthful. “I nearly gave myself up during the siege because I couldn’t live with the guilt. But doing so would have meant condemning others who relied on me. Ultimately, I chose the living over the dead.”

Draco winced. *And this is why he should not have taken Veritaserum. Damn it all, Harry.*

“My daughter is not gone,” said Philip. “She is alive in me, still, and she would have wanted me to fight for her. She might have lived if you had gone down to Voldemort and *let* her live.”

“He would not have kept his promise,” Harry said.

“You only *believe* that,” said Willoughby, and though his voice was stern Draco saw tears gathering at the corners of his eyes. He wondered what living in the midst of grief for an only child, reminding oneself of it each and every day, would do to a Muggle. He knew they were more mentally fragile than wizards. “You don’t *know.* That Veritaserum can only extract what you believe to be the truth of the matter, not what actually is.”

Harry leaned forward, concentrating solely on Willoughby. “Mr. Willoughby, I am sorry for your loss,” he said. “But I cannot bring your daughter back. I don’t know what to do to make the loss of Alexandra up to you.”

“Stand trial,” Willoughby snarled back. “You committed a war crime, the torture and murder of a dozen children.”

“I did not torture them—“ Harry began.

“Allowed them to be tortured, because you did not act sooner!” Willoughby came another step forward, until he was almost level with Skeeter’s chair, and Draco heard low growls begin in Camellia’s and Rose’s throats. “I believe, Mr. Potter, as you don’t, obviously, that the person who sees the problem should solve it, if he has the ability to do so. You had the ability. You lacked only the will.”

Draco saw Harry flinch, a movement that seemed to start in his bones. Harry, of course, did believe that, and to hear one of his own principles flung in his face had to hurt.

He didn’t hear Harry’s reply, though, because, unlike his partner, he did not consider Willoughby to be the center of existence and the only one worth paying attention to. He turned his head as a flicker of movement off to the side caught his eye, and saw someone edging forward through the crowd, his hand on something in his pocket.

*A wand?* Draco gripped his own wand. *Draw it, then.* He readied himself to throw up a Shield Charm, though he was cautious enough to wait until he saw the spell. As Moody had taught them, some spells could make shields explode, doing more damage to the defenders than the attackers.

He studied the attacker, meanwhile. He was nothing remarkable, just a fairly thin man in the robes of a Ministry flunky. He didn’t appear nervous, but rather resigned. His intent gaze on Harry could have been hero-worship, or attempting to memorize his expression to report it back to an employer. Perhaps he was a spy, and not someone who meant to attack after all.

Then his hand whipped out of his pocket, and it wasn’t a spell he threw, but something small and round, coin-like, arcing through the air and straight for Harry, over the shoulder of the oblivious werewolf on the left.

Draco made a quick decision. The coin might make a shield explode, for all he knew, but it was likely to do more damage to Harry’s skin. *Protego!* he shouted, the spell almost instinctive after practicing it for so long in the dueling club, and the air around him and Harry turned silver and tightened.
Harry twisted around, shouting his own Shield Charm, which linked with Draco’s. Draco watched the coin slam into the barrier and then bounce off, rolling back to land halfway between the attacker and the chairs.

The man’s eyes widened, and he swallowed, then stumbled backwards.

Harry tightened and raised the barriers a moment before a wave of concussive force sprang out of the coin, heading straight for them. A time-delayed spell, Draco thought, even as he went to his knees and felt his *Protego* crack. A second shock wave came at him, and he was faced with the choice between maintaining the shield and having the effort hurt him, or letting it go and trying to protect Harry from the new attack he feared was coming.

He dropped it as the third blow struck, trusting in Harry to protect him, and then raised his head. Sure enough, a second wizard had dashed up behind the first one, and was chanting something Draco couldn’t hear in the startled shouts and screams. The coin *he* held shot up into the air, obviously trying to float over the top of the linked Shield Charms.

Draco aimed his wand at the coin. “*Conversio!*” he shouted.

The coin turned and snapped in the other direction—briefly. Then it slowed again, and Draco could feel the force of the other wizard’s magic, pushing against his, trying to direct the coin at him. He gritted his teeth and fought his way to one knee, his mind racing as he tried to think of what spell he could use to strike back, without requiring Harry to drop the Shield Charms.

Harry’s magic was crowding the room like a new-grown field of roses, but Draco knew he would think of defense first. He wasn’t even sure if Harry had noticed the second coin, and he didn’t dare turn his head to check. This stranger was nearly as strong as he was, and the fight took all his concentration. The coin dipped as the stranger’s spells varied, and Draco kept re-casting his *Conversio*. The coin wavered nearer and nearer to them, though.

Draco growled under his breath. The werewolves were shifting around him, but he didn’t know if they could get out of the Shield Charms—and if they could, they would probably trigger a panic as soon as they tried to bite someone. No, he had to handle this himself.

He dropped the *Conversio*, as though he’d grown too exhausted to maintain it any longer. The wizard shouted in triumph, and the coin flew at Draco, like a stone from a slingshot.

Draco lifted his wand so that it was pointing straight at the coin through the gap, and snapped, “*Aboleo!*” putting all his conviction into the word. This was a spell that was supposed to stop not only an object but also the magic on it—if the wizard casting it was strong enough.

The coin self-destructed, spinning apart in shards of wood and flame, which made Draco suspect that it had had a time-delayed fire spell on it. Draco saw his opponent’s eyes widen, and then narrow. He grabbed the first attacker by the arm and shook his head, and they turned, dodging away down the corridor.

Draco turned and checked that Harry was all right. He was fine, and the last shock wave that came from the coin on the floor was considerably weaker. Harry dropped the Shield Charms and gestured at the coin. Since the spell he used was wandless and non-verbal, Draco didn’t know what it was, but the coin shivered, and then lost any sense of magic whatsoever.

Draco grabbed Harry’s shoulder. “We can still catch them, if we hurry!” he shouted, gesturing with his head in the direction the wizards had gone.

Then he saw there was no need for them to hurry. Camellia had already jumped over the coin and the heads of several of the people in the crowd, landing smoothly on the floor beyond. She took off down the corridor in a hunching run. Draco grinned. He supposed there were some good things about having a werewolf on one’s side.

But Camellia hadn’t turned the corner before someone shouted, “*Comperio lupum!*” and a blinding blue glow formed around her body. She whimpered and slid to a stop, putting a hand up to shield her face. Two witches in what looked vaguely like Auror robes shoved forward through the crowd, heading for her.

“She’s a werewolf,” said the taller one. Draco saw that she had a badge on her robes that depicted a severed wolf’s head. “It’s illegal for her to be in the Ministry, and without either a collar or a keeper with her. We’re going to——“

“You’re not going to harm her.”

Draco started as ice slid along the walls next to him. He turned, and Harry was stepping towards the witches, who must be from
the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts, his eyes wide and his hand out. His magic had sharpened into a low, concentrated glow around him, more full of darkness and flames than actual light. Draco gave a faint, sharp smile. *If he had gone in like this in the first place, then I don’t think anyone would have tried to attack him. Maybe next time he’ll listen to me. It’s better to intimidate your enemies than make them think you’re conciliatory.*

“Even you can’t disobey the law,” the shorter witch said, in a soothing tone. “We know who you are, *vates*, but she was running wild, and obviously going to hurt two innocent wizards—“

“Who just tried to kill me,” said Harry.

There was a sudden and awkward silence. Draco looked around the crowd. Most of them were watching cautiously; events had happened too fast for them to catch up. The witches from the Department had paled a bit. Harry had his head up and tilted slightly, and Draco didn’t think it was a coincidence that his hair had shifted enough to let everyone see his lightning bolt scar.

“Unless, of course, that make them innocent by definition,” Harry continued, his voice deep and poisonously polite. “Unless the *vates* is exempt from protection, and anyone who tries to kill him is a hero.”

“No one means that.” The shorter witch put out a hand, then winced and snatched it back. Draco didn’t blame her. The air in Harry’s immediate vicinity had chilled so much that it hurt to stand near him. “But—well, she might have bitten them.”

“And that would have done nothing, this far from the full moon,” said Harry. “She was trying to protect me. She is sworn to me.” He pivoted back to face Skeeter. “I would have been able to tell you about the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, if we had not been interrupted,” he said. “This is an alliance that anyone can join, if they will come to me and promise to swear its oath and obey its principles. We welcome anyone who wishes to join—Muggleborn, Squib, centaur, merfolk, pureblood, Dark wizard, Light wizard, *werewolf*.” He nodded at Camellia, who had crept back towards him, and Rose, who was showing her teeth as if she couldn’t stop herself. “And they will not be attacking anyone any more. Loki has gone rogue, and may, but his pack has sworn peace with anyone who swears peace with them. They will defend me, however, as I will defend them.”

Skeeter wrote quickly, then stood. Draco could almost see her bouncing up and down, no doubt in a frenzy to get back and report this to the *Daily Prophet* before some other newspaper could bring the story out. “Thank you, *vates*, you’ve been most informative,” she babbled, and then dashed out.

Harry snorted and turned back to face the Department witches. “Aren’t you going to help me hunt?” he demanded.

They stirred and led the way reluctantly down the hall. Draco shook his head. “I don’t think we’re going to find them,” he muttered to Harry.

“You may also tell your readers,” Harry went on, turning back to Skeeter, “that Loki, the werewolf leader who was sending threatening letters to Wizengamot Elders and attacking them, has now given his pack into my protection. These are two members of it, Camellia and Rose.” He gestured to the two werewolves. He seemed oblivious to how many people promptly inched away, but Draco guessed he had, in truth, noticed. “They will not be attacking anyone any more. Loki has gone rogue, and may, but his pack has sworn peace with anyone who swears peace with them. They will defend me, however, as I will defend them.”

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“I know,” said Harry, with a long-suffering sigh. “They’ll be gone by now. But we have one possible clue.” He held out his hand, and Draco saw the first wooden coin there. It was stamped with the image of a winged horse, body arched as though in flight. “If we can figure out what this means, we’ll have a good start on figuring out who they are.”

Draco nodded, reassured. The flying horse could mean a number of things, but not *anything*.

“What bothers me more,” Harry continued, “is how they knew.”

Draco had to think about that, but then he felt something ugly twist in his chest. “Skeeter set this up so quickly,” he said. “So how did they, whoever they are, manage to coordinate an assassination attempt, or a warning—” he wasn’t sure the assassins had seriously thought they could take a wizard of Harry’s power “—so quickly?”

“Exactly,” said Harry. “Someone told them. But who?”
Draco paused. He didn’t want to say what he was thinking, but he had to. “The werewolves knew,” he observed at last.

“I know.” It was obvious what an effort it cost Harry to say those words, Veritaserum or not. He sighed. “Believe me, Draco, I’m aware of that. And some of the things you said made me think that you were right and I was wrong about how to handle this interview. It didn’t go the way I hoped. I’ll have to listen to you more closely next time.”

A warm glow grew in Draco’s chest to replace the ugly thing. He touched Harry’s hand. “I’m glad that you’re still here to listen to me next time,” he whispered.

Harry smiled at him, and then of course the Muggle had to cut in and ruin everything.

“Mr. Potter. I have not finished talking to you.” Willoughby was folding his arms across his chest and scowling at Harry.

Harry gave him the same kind of disinterested glance he’d given Snape. “Mr. Willoughby, you can always write me if you’d like to continue this conversation. Right now, I’ve just had my life threatened, and the freedom of one of my people equally threatened. I hope you understand why I’m not in the mood for debate. I mercy-killed your daughter. That’s the end of it.”

He turned away, and Draco bit his lip to keep from cheering at the expression on the Muggle’s face before he hurried after Harry.

I think he must have learned after all. It takes a while to get him to think about himself, but not as long as it once would have. This is wonderful. For one thing, I can push and get better results than if he were utterly resistant to it, or just ignoring me.

~*~*~*~*

Interlude: The Daily Prophet, August 5th, 1996

The Daily Prophet August 5th, 1996

INTERVIEW OF THE DAY:

HARRY VATES: LEADER OF THE ALLIANCE OF SUN AND SHADOW

By: Rita Skeeter

In a startling development, Harry, the vates by his own choice, the Boy-Who-Lived by virtue of his having toppled You-Know-Who from power in the First War, the legal heir of the Black line by the choice of Regulus Black, and the Young Hero by popular acclaim, has not only returned to the wizarding world, but granted this reporter an exclusive interview today, in which he revealed his future plans for the war against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

We met in the corridor of the Ministry of Magic which leads to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement—rather a fitting place, given the aura of justice that surrounded Harry as he strode to take his seat. He has just turned sixteen; his birthday is the thirty-first of July. But he wears the expression of a wizard much more mature than his years, as well as stronger and more confident.

Even more surprisingly, he chose to conduct this interview entirely under Veritaserum. He wished the wizarding world to know that what he said today was the absolute truth, he explained.

I thanked him for his courtesy in allowing me to interview him, and led off with a question emphasizing the curiosity of our readers as to his whereabouts for the last month. He wore a faint smile when he regarded me, and answered—truthfully, of course.

He said that he had been at a Sanctuary of Seers who can see the present and souls. Rather a frightening place to this reporter, but he spoke as if he went there daily. In Harry’s words, he “finally decided to accept the invitation.”

Since the last story of the Young Hero’s whereabouts involved him going to train and learn how to defeat You-Know-Who, I asked him about that. Harry’s response was frank and cordial.

“I researched various kinds of magic that will be useful in the war. And I worked on myself as hard as I could. When I went to the Sanctuary, I was in no fit state to defend the wizarding world. Now, I hope I can safely say I am.”

Given that the vates has already flown against dragons and stopped them from attacking students in the school, freed South African hive cobras and centaurs from their wrongfully imposed webs, helped in the deposing of former Minister Cornelius
Fudge, lost his left hand in You-Know-Who’s return, battled the wild Dark at Midwinter last year—at the cost of his own bonded phoenix—freed Durmstrang from the mad hold of Bellatrix Lestrange, held a vernal equinox alliance meeting for anyone interested in seeing and assessing him, lured You-Know-Who into a trap that wound up cutting a hole in his magical core, and planned and led the Battle of Hogwarts, this reporter had to wonder what state he thought would be a fit one in which to defend the wizarding world.

“Now, can you tell us what that magic is?” I asked, even mindful of the informed curiosity of Prophet readers. “Or would it be too dangerous to say?”

Harry demurred on that one, indicating that the danger factor was indeed high. Besides, he added, “And the details would probably be boring to anyone wasn’t studying it. I’ve got a bit of the Ravenclaw in me, I’m afraid.”

It is this reporter’s opinion that he has more than a bit of every House in him, if his genius for battle, his loyalty to his allies, and his courage under curses are all observed. And, of course, there is the fact that he has the Malfoy magical heir, son of a very old Slytherin pureblood family and his joined partner-to-be, constantly at his side. Young Draco stood behind his chair, and observed me in ways that I don’t mind saying sent shivers up my spine. Merciless grace is in him already, if I may be permitted to quote my own description of Lucius Malfoy from more than a decade ago.

Of course, inevitably, less pleasant matters came up. I had to ask him about the rumors of his murdering a dozen children in the Battle of Hogwarts. Harry’s answer was flavored with both Veritaserum and his own bitter regret.

“I mercy-killed them,” he said, in a voice with the strain and the grief obvious. “You-Know-Who [he of course used his name, but this reporter understands the true sensitivities of Prophet readers] had them in a Life-Web. That spell constrains the victims to obey the holder in whatever way he commands. He can make them die, commit suicide, murder others, become wounded. And he can stop the effects of any spell on them, once he notices it.”

Independent research on the Life-Web done by this reporter corroborates Harry’s words. In fact, the Life-Web can also be used to drive its victims insane. It gives its caster absolute control over the victims’ lives and minds. And it cannot be broken by anyone but the caster.

Harry continued with his harrowing account of what it was like during the moments when You-Know-Who held the battle—not the Battle of Hogwarts, but the assault made thirteen days previous, on the eighth of June—in suspense. “The Life-Web was to make me give up my own life. I hung there, suspended between the screams of the dying behind me and the screams of the wounded in front of me, and he told me that if I came to him and surrendered, then he would free them.”

He chuckled then, but it was obvious to this reporter that he found no humor in the statements. “Not true, of course. He has lied every time he’s faced me. He had no reason to let them go. And so, because I was pressed for time and I couldn’t think of any better course, I used a heart attack spell on the children. You-Know-Who was so sure that I’d ultimately have to sacrifice my life—after some pleasurable moments for him, of course—that he didn’t think I’d kill them, and he didn’t notice the spell in time to stop it. They died, and then I was free to go and help the others.”

That is the truth that every Prophet reader has been wanting to know for the last month: harsh, bare, unadorned.

Of course, a grieving parent could not be expected to accept this, and one of them did not. Philip Willoughby, 34, the Muggle father of the first-year Ravenclaw Alexandra Willoughby, one of Harry’s victims, appeared then, and accused Harry of telling a “pretty story.”

Harry admitted to suffering guilt, no matter how necessary his decision may have been. “I regret it every day,” he told Mr. Willoughby. He even talked about being willing to commit suicide during the siege. He concluded that, “Ultimately, I chose the living over the dead.”

Mr. Willoughby, understandably, was less than impressed with this, and a brief argument followed, with both debaters staunchly defending their own positions. Then there came an attempt on Harry’s life. Wooden coins with time-delayed spells on them were flung at both Harry, the two women who had come with him, and his partner Draco Malfoy by attackers unknown.

Harry raised a Shield Charm to link with his partner’s coolly and confidently. It’s obvious that he’s weathered assassination attempts like this before. With the coins destroyed, the attackers fled. One of Harry’s allies moved to go after the threat to her vates, springing over the heads of those present with more-than-mortal grace and speed. As it turned out, she is a werewolf, but perfectly obedient to Harry, part of the newly-organized Alliance of Sun and Shadow.

Two members of the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts, however, cast a werewolf-finding spell on
Harry’s ally and attempted to take her into custody. This prevented her from finding and dragging back the attackers. It is possible that the Department witches feared for the lives of the attackers, but this reporter wonders why they did not seem to fear for the innocent lives that the attackers could have cost when they launched their offensive.

Harry coldly forbade them to take his ally into custody. As she had bitten no one, and it is not near the full moon, he maintained, there was no danger from her.

And it was then that he revealed his new alliance, which, for the first time, has a formal oath and a name, and has granted him another title.

“This is an alliance that anyone can join, if they will come to me and promise to swear its oath and obey its principles. We welcome anyone who wishes to join—Muggleborn, Squib, centaur, merfolk, pureblood, Dark wizard, Light wizard, werewolf.” With these words, he nodded to both his companions, making it obvious that both of them were werewolves, and had behaved themselves perfectly until the assassination attempt. “And we require our members to think past their fear, rather than stop someone going in pursuit of would-be assassins.” A bit of a slap at the Department, there, but his anger was up and surging, his magic filling the corridor, and of course our Boy-Who-Lived has always been a bit angry when someone attacks his allies.

“You may also tell your readers,” he continued, “that Loki, the werewolf leader who was sending threatening letters to Wizengamot Elders and attacking them, has now given his pack into my protection. These are two members of it, Camellia and Rose. They will not be attacking anyone any more. Loki has gone rogue, and may, but his pack has sworn peace with anyone who swears peace with them. They will defend me, however, as I will defend them.”

He turned and left then, seeming oblivious to how changed the world is in his wake. But then, another defining trait of the Young Hero so far has been his modesty.

Harry vates has returned to the wizarding world with a vengeance, but his mission is guided by a sense of justice, an alliance devoted to inclusion, and principles that seem to rely on rising above fear. I trust that all Prophet readers are looking forward to what will happen now as much as I am, and are as thankful to have such a brave, determined young man dedicated to protecting us from You-Know-Who.

—*—*—*—*—

Chapter Nine: Three Arguments, Two Discussions, and One Early Morning

“Good—“ Draco paused when he stepped around the corner into Regulus’s study and saw Harry sitting at a desk covered with paper. Harry glanced at him from the corner of his eye and saw him standing there, staring rather obviously. Harry wondered why for a moment, but Draco said nothing, and he could be overcome by the oddest things at the oddest times.

At the moment, he was more interested in looking through the Blacks’ collection of law books. Though they’d been assembled for a horrible purpose—some of Regulus’s ancestors had wanted to bring back Muggle-hunting, and had looked into Ministry laws to find a loophole that would let them justify it—they were impressively comprehensive. If Harry could find legal means to fight the Ministry’s anti-werewolf laws, he would find them here.

“What are you doing?”

And Draco’s voice had that odd edge again. Harry sat back and smiled at him. Draco didn’t seem inclined to leave him alone until he did. “Looking for loopholes that will prove the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts is illegal,” he explained.

“Really.”

Harry frowned and cocked his head. Draco’s voice had gone cool, and lost all traces of curiosity. But if he didn’t want to know what I’m doing, why did he ask?

“Yes,” Harry said. “It turned out that Fudge did stupid things out of fear. He passed laws right under Dumbledore’s nose, for instance. Other than his kidnapping of me, that’s the kind of thing that got him subjected to a vote of no confidence. I think it’s at least possible that Amelia Bones made the same kind of mistakes when she organized this Department. I want to expose them.” He shut the book in front of him and dragged the next one towards him. Ministry Edicts Relating to Other Species, 1600-1785: A —Ad. It at least looked promising, Harry thought.

“Hmmm.” Draco continued to stand there, even though Harry had thought he would leave when he realized Harry’s subject
matter was so boring. “And what were you going to do if you found this information?”

“Start compiling it, of course,” said Harry, digging through the tome. Hermione had had a nice little spell last year that would mark every occurrence of a certain word in a book; she’d used it when revising for OWL’s. Harry regretted now that he’d never asked her to teach it to him, and that he didn’t know whether she’d found it in the library or modified an existing spell. He resolved to write her and ask her to teach it to him. “And then start contacting people in the Ministry who could help me—lean on a few people, and ask the proper questions. I don’t want a legal battle if I can avoid one. Making the Wizengamot reconsider their actions will serve just fine.”

“When were you planning to go to bed?”

“Hmmm,” it was Harry’s turn to say, as he halted on a page covered with a description of a law relating to vampire restrictions. It had something to do with collars. It would take him a while to untangle the complicated legal language, but perhaps he could use it as a precedent when talking about werewolves and these collars the Department evidently wanted them to wear. “Soon.”

Draco drew his wand and whispered a spell under his breath. Harry ignored him, knowing Draco wouldn’t do anything to hurt him.

He had to pay attention when all the books on the desk, including the one he was reading, lifted in the air and then came back down on the surface with a colossal thump, though. Harry turned around, his mouth already open to utter an angry shout.

“I am sick and tired of this, Harry,” said Draco, in a voice that could cut glass, stepping forward. “You are slipping again. You are ignoring your promises again. You made a stupid decision by not going to bed last night, and you’re about to make it again. I won’t let you.”

“My magic can keep me alert,” Harry argued, pushing his fringe out of his eyes. He knew what weariness felt like. This wasn’t weariness. His magic, now that it was free, obeyed him much more thoroughly than it ever had before, and that included eating the poisons that Harry knew could build up in his body after skipping too much sleep. “I’m fine. I don’t need to—”

“If you say you don’t need to sleep I am going to smack you,” said Draco, in such a conversational tone that Harry only realized what he’d said a moment later. He blinked and opened his mouth to retort, and once again Draco got there first. “Your magic can’t keep you alert enough. Shall I tell you what failures of alertness I’ve observed in you today?”

“You might as well,” Harry said, leaning back with a scowl and folding his arms over his chest. “Since you’re about to do it anyway.”

Draco’s lip curled and his eyes glittered, but his tone was once more cuttingly polite. “You didn’t notice the attackers edging around to the side during your meeting with Skeeter. You especially didn’t notice the second one. I saw the look of surprise on your face when I told you about him.”

“I was focusing on Willoughby,” Harry said.

“You don’t normally focus on anyone that much,” Draco said. “You’ve saved your own life before because you saw something out of the corner of your eye. And not noticing the second coin, once the attack had already begun and you should have been paying attention to everything around you? That was pure carelessness, Harry.”

Harry lowered his eyes, feeling an unhappy squirming sensation in his stomach. “I was lucky you were there,” he said quietly. “I already admitted that you were right, Draco. What more do you want from me?”

“Not this,” Draco said, and he sounded angry now. “Nothing like this. I don’t like being your keeper, Harry. I’m supposed to be your partner, your equal. And when I see you not even noticing that Camellia tried to talk to you earlier, and nearly dropping the sugar bowl because you forgot about it before it reached the table, and snapping at Rose for an innocent joke—”

“It was at your expense, Draco!” Harry exclaimed. Rose had made a remark about how one could solve all the wizarding world’s problems by making it legal to hunt snotty little purebloods, since they were the one prey everyone else could agree on.

“I could have handled it myself, you twit,” Draco said. “You’re losing control of your emotions, which always happens when you haven’t had enough sleep. And what happens if you do that with your magic free of all its restraints now? What kind of accidents is it going to cause?”

Harry felt as if someone had jammed a shard of glass into his stomach. He tried to speak, swallowed, and then shook his head.
Draco folded his arms and tapped the fingers of his left hand against his elbow. Harry blinked as he seemed to see a faint aura of white light surrounding the fingers. He touched his forehead.

*Am I coming down with something? Seeing some magic that Draco’s about to perform?* He had seen that happen in the Sanctuary, shadows of wizards anticipating what spell their enemy was going to cast next by a glimpse of light around their hands.

Then he sighed as he realized what it probably was. *Lack of sleep. Draco’s right. The magic can only do so much to help me stay awake. I’m going to start seeing little things like that.*

“Do you understand me now?” Draco asked, his voice softer than before. “I don’t like fighting with you, Harry. But I hate scolding you even more. You’re supposed to be better than this. You’re not allowed to neglect your health and yourself for anyone else any more. You promised me that. We agreed.”

*I’ve got to live simultaneously.* Harry cast a longing glance at the Black legal books, but, in the end, he had to nod.

“Good,” said Draco, relief entering his voice. “Because I really do hate this, you know. Yelling at you isn’t pleasant, and knowing that if I don’t do it, no one else will, is even less pleasant. I can’t wait until you and Snape reconcile again, so that someone else can handle that part of it. He *likes* shouting at you.” He unfolded his arms and held out his hand to Harry. “*So. Ready to go to bed?*”

“I suppose so,” Harry said. “*But it’s only nine.*” He knew he was whining, but he couldn’t help it.

Draco stared at him, then waved his wand and whispered, “*Tempus.*” The time that appeared was clearly past midnight. He looked at Harry with one eyebrow raised.

Harry frowned and performed his own *Tempus*. The time that appeared was five minutes after nine. Then it wavered and showed the same as Draco’s numbers. Then it wavered back and settled on ten something. The second pair of numbers was too blurred for Harry to make out.

“Our magic’s gone wonky, you arse,” said Draco, voice deep with affection. “*Not a surprise, when you’ve been awake for almost forty hours. Come on.*” He tugged, and Harry let him lead him to his bedroom, or the room he’d planned on using for a bedroom. The sheets on the bed hadn’t been disturbed, so far, though Draco cleaned them with a dusting charm now.

“I can get into my pyjamas on my own,” Harry said with great dignity, while he struggled to open his trunk. His magic seemed to be leaving him now, as if it could sense that he was about to sleep and didn’t need it to support him any longer. He yawned, hard enough to hurt his jaw, and his hand fumbled at the trunk’s lid and missed.

“Alohomora,” Draco intoned, and the trunk lid flipped up. “*That would be because I slept last night,*” he added.

“Shutup,” Harry muttered, and tugged out his pyjamas. “*But I can get into them on my own, so you can go to bed now,*” he added.

“Nonsense,” said Draco amicably. “*We don’t want you falling and cracking your head open on the floor, do we?*”

There was some more arguing, all of which completely failed to make any impact on Draco, and somehow Harry found himself helped out of his robes, his shirt, and his trousers, and into his pyjamas. He couldn’t be sure that Draco didn’t stare at him fixedly, at some point or another, but he was too tired to notice if it really happened. He crawled into bed, and the sheets falling on top of him were among the best things he’d ever felt.

Draco tugged his glasses off, and Harry shut his eyes. He had an unexpected moment of clarity in the midst of all the drowsiness.

*He’s right. What happened today should never have happened. And especially not if it affects my magic. I’m depending on that to protect my allies and make the difference in my alliance’s success. What happened today can’t be repeated.*

*And if that means waiting a few nights to do legal research, or not getting everything I want to done immediately, then I suppose that’s what has to be done. I’m good at accepting the limitations of other people’s wills. I can accept the limitations of my own body, surely.*

He sighed, and then he was asleep.

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He woke surrounded in warmth. Harry opened his eyes and scowled at the ceiling. He was lying on his back, and he knew from the heat against his side that Draco lay next to him, arms tangled with his, uttering the short little snores that he would deny he gave.

_He didn’t go back to his own bed. He stayed with me. Prat._

He stirred, and that was enough to wake Draco up. Draco opened one eye and regarded him from beneath a strand of blond hair that sweat had plastered to his nose. “Going somewhere?” he asked.

“To the loo,” Harry pointed out. “I didn’t even brush my teeth last night.” His mouth felt all fuzzy, in confirmation of that.

Draco cocked his head, and the strand slid away from his nose, falling back to join the rest of his hair. “You’re irritated at me again,” he said. “For making you go to bed? Because I’m not going to apologize for that, Harry. If anything, you should be apologizing for making it necessary.” He looked haughty.

“Not that,” said Harry. “It’s just—you didn’t have to stay here and sleep with me, you know.”

Draco chuckled.

Harry frowned. That wasn’t the reaction he would have expected. “What?” he asked.

Draco sat up and stretched. Harry’s eyes widened. He could see part of the reason he had been so warm now, sheets and his pyjamas and Draco’s closeness aside. Draco was naked from the waist up.

And it was—it was distracting. Harry could feel his cheeks growing even warmer from the rush of blood. He looked away. Draco laughed again, and then he moved around in front of Harry, kneeling on the blankets and deliberately showing himself off. He was pale, but not as pale as Harry would have expected. He’d stayed long enough in the sun at the Sanctuary to tan a little, it seemed. And not all of his hair was glued to his skin by sweat, some of it stood out and away from his skin, and his chest rose and fell lightly with his breathing—

_Stop it._ Harry shook his head. He had very important things to do and think about, things that—

Draco reached out and put his hands on Harry’s shoulders. Harry could feel the touch even through the layer of cloth that separated them. Of course, the layer of cloth wasn’t all that thick.

“I believed you when you told me that you intended to keep living in the midst of all this war and revolution,” Draco murmured into his ear. “I still believe you. That means I think you’ve healed enough to push, Harry. And when I push, I do ask for things that I want. No, I know I didn’t need to stay here. I wanted to. And I’ll be asking for a little more from now on. Your allies are important, the werewolves are important, Snape’s important, all the people you want to save are important. But so am I.” He dipped his head and caught Harry’s lips in a kiss.

That in itself wasn’t unusual. The speed with which he managed to deepen the kiss was, and so was the way he pushed Harry back to lie against the pillows. Harry could hear his own breathing for a moment, erratic and loud, and then the thudding of blood in his ears entirely took over from that.

He wasn’t panicking, not exactly, perhaps because Draco had taken him so entirely by surprise. He was feeling as if he wanted to touch Draco, and feeling, now, the lack of a left hand so that he could do so easily on that side, and feeling the sharp spike of pleasure that he’d learned to associate with kissing Draco when he wasn’t relaxed, and feeling embarrassment that he’d succumbed to this so easily, and feeling—

“You always think too much,” Draco pointed out, drawing back from the kiss, and ghosted his fingers over the side of Harry’s neck.

Harry scowled at him again, as best as he could when he kept squirming. “Don’t you dare,” he said.

Draco smiled innocently at him, and then his fingers gave a hard stroke, not exactly a pinch, at that spot Harry often cursed him for finding. Bloody _hell_, did it have to feel so _good_?

And once again, what hit him wasn’t exactly panic. Every time he started to panic, another emotion surged up and drowned that one. Right now, embarrassment was strongest. He was _moaning_, and wasn’t that undignified, and shouldn’t he be going out and
saving the world instead of lying here tangled with Draco?

“Still thinking too much,” Draco told him, and leaned over as if he would go after that spot with his tongue and teeth.

Indignant, Harry took revenge. Draco’s ears were sensitive, he knew that, and one of them was passing right near his mouth now. He blew into it, and Draco started, pausing long enough for Harry to pull himself up on the pillows and latch his mouth onto the lobe.

_Ha!_ he thought triumphantly as Draco began to squirm and moan in turn. _Let’s see who’s turning who on now!_

He pushed, aided by his Levitation Charm, and Draco draped half-on, half-off his chest, allowing him to sit up. Harry managed to keep licking and biting at Draco’s ear, and now Draco was _squealing_, which Harry was sure he’d never done.

And now it was recklessness drowning him, the same kind of recklessness he felt when he was chasing the Snitch in and out between the stands, seeing it flickering and diving just ahead of him, _knowing_ it would smack home into his palm in the next moment, _knowing_ that the way he knew that sliding his hand down Draco’s chest and pressing firmly on his groin was the right thing to do.

Draco made a sound that had no name and thrust wildly against his palm. Harry laughed, letting go of his ear to do it.

Then he made himself leap from the bed, say brightly, “That was a wonderful beginning to the morning. thank you,” and walk to the loo. It was an uncomfortable walk, but not long, and he made do. Then he shut the door behind him, put up a ward that Draco couldn’t undo, and turned on the shower. There was still no panic, because this time determination was gripping him.

_If he gets to push, so do I._

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“Well,” said Camellia, flinging her hair over her shoulder and frowning at Harry, “it seems to me that what you really need is most of your allies in one place.”

“That would make sense, yes,” said Harry, cradling his cup of tea against his cheek. He heard Draco enter the kitchen with a few sharp steps. Merrily, he ignored him, smiling at Camellia. “But I could just call another alliance meeting if that was really all I wanted. And there are people I left out last time, because they’re not a formal part of the alliance, whom I’d like to see now. My brother, for example. And I’d like to contact other werewolf packs in London. Would they come, do you think?”

“Not to a formal alliance meeting,” said Camellia. “Loki’s—solitary path was a shock for all of us, and so was his decision to make you our alpha. They’re not quite ready to accept you as a leader, I think. And the alphas might be wary that you’re trying to take their places.”

Harry nodded. Draco sat down with a thump. “Good morning,” Harry told him, without turning to look at him.

Draco muttered something about it being a good morning if Harry thought it was, of course, and something else that seemed to include the word “wanker.” Harry pretended not to hear. “So we need a less formal atmosphere,” he told Camellia. “Something that will encourage people to come and relax—and perhaps see that we’re slowly getting used to each other, after Loki’s unexpected little gesture.”

Camellia nodded. “That would be a good idea, yes. Unfortunately, I don’t know how—“

“A festival.”

Harry glanced at Draco. “Pardon?”

“A festival,” Draco said, slathering marmalade over his toast as if the toast were about to run away. “A festival to celebrate your turning sixteen. A lot of the purebloods have them, you know, even when they’re not magical heirs.” Harry snorted at the thought of putting together a party that included Voldemort, and Draco gave him a faint half-smile that eased the lines of frustration lingering around his mouth. “It would give us an excuse to have a party, and to invite anyone you like. The festivals are traditionally supposed to be as big as possible, you know, to accommodate everyone seeing the almost-adult heir in all his glory.”

“I’m not a pureblood,” Harry muttered, scowling as he remembered Draco’s own confirmation festival and how out of place he’d felt there.
“That’s our excuse for inviting anyone you like,” Draco told him, sucking marmalade off the heel of his hand in a manner that made Harry have to look away, “instead of having to send the invitations to a select number of pureblood families.”

Harry hesitated. He had to admit the idea had merit. The formal alliance meetings always lent themselves to an air of solemnity, whether it was on the vernal equinox or at night in the middle of the Forbidden Forest, and he hadn’t had the chance to say everything he wanted the other night, caught off-balance as he was by Loki’s sudden gesture. This would be more of a boundary-crossing.

“Plus,” Draco said, again seeming to read his mind, as he had about Voldemort, “it gives you a chance to show off.”

Harry scowled at him. “The way that you wanted me to show off yesterday?”

“Yes,” said Draco, unabashed. “The way that might have intimidated your enemies out of trying to hurt you.”

Harry sighed and stood up. Draco stood to follow him, but Harry shook his head. “Give me a moment to think in private, please.”

“Of course,” Draco said, voice softer than Harry had heard it in some time, and sat down. Camellia gave him a keen glance, as much to say that werewolves would probably be following along whether Harry wanted them to or not, and then settled back in her own chair and turned to talk to Draco. Draco answered her with an edge to his tone. Harry knew he still wasn’t entirely comfortable around werewolves. And why should he be? He’d been raised to consider them despicable halfbreeds at best, and dangerous beasts most of the time.

Harry paced into the middle of Regulus’s study. The pile of legal books he’d left there last night caught his eye, but he shook his head and turned his back on them, shutting and warding the door so that no one could come in and ask him what was wrong. He bowed his head and let his chin rest on his chest.

Here was one of those decisions he had known he would have to make eventually, but which he had dreaded making. There were arguments waiting on both sides of the path. If he passed this point, he was passing a crossroads, and he wouldn’t find it easy to reverse himself and make a different decision the next time it came up.

He didn’t want to intimidate people. He had never wanted to. And if he went around using his magic and his political power and his money to get his own way, then he was acting against one of the principles he’d sworn to in the Alliance of Sun and Shadow. He was making people fear instead of think. He thought of the way Amelia Bones had cowered in her office, and winced. He didn’t want people to be afraid of him. He actually preferred Willoughby’s attitude to that, or the way that the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts had reacted at first. They might dismiss him or sneer at him, but at least they weren’t shaking in their boots at the mere thought of him.

But he knew Draco was right. If he showed exactly what he was capable of, then it might keep assassins from tackling him; they’d be too wary. And that would, in turn, spare the lives of those around him, who were not about to back away now. And he could guard the werewolves better if he showed that he was not to be fucked with. Obstacles would melt away in front of him easily.

Too easily.

A few years ago, the decision would have been easy—lives were more important than his own personal preferences—but he’d sacrificed lives for lives since then, and known what it was like for the wild Dark to make him try to abandon his principles for the sake of sparing lives, and now it wasn’t easy.

I suppose I should thank my mother again, for training me to make everything so difficult, he thought wryly, and wiped his hand across his eyes.

In the end, he made his decision, because he had to. In at least one important way, this festival was like the alliance meeting. No one could be forced to attend. Motives as diverse as curiosity and greed would guide them in. Harry would make it clear who and what he was at that festival. That was not the same thing as pouring his power over the rooftops and demanding that everyone bow to him.

And, sooner or later, didn’t he have to start respecting the decisions of other people in the alliance to agree to its principles? He could not smother his magic and avoid their fear forever. Some people would always fear him no matter how gently he held himself, and others would be fearless in the face of any provocation. He had to assume that his allies had some courage.
As usual, the moment he chose a course, ideas for making the best of that course flooded in. Harry stood up and strode with a determined step to the door. He’d hold the festival five days from today, or a bit longer if it took him longer to send out invitations, gather food, and arrange other matters.

And he wouldn’t be idle in the remaining time, either. There were three things in particular he would like to do today.

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“Professor Snape, sir.”

Snape turned with a snap. He had lost himself in a haze of brewing, the last day. Dragonfire burns needed constant care, which was a good thing. It kept him from thinking.

Harry’s life had been threatened, and he was not there.

Harry had confronted werewolves, and he was not there.

Harry had werewolves living with him, and he was not there. He was put down like a useless trunk, once used to carry its master’s most prized possessions, now tucked away in a closet until the next time it was needed.

He was aware that the comparison was unfair even as he made it. That only made him hate matters more.

And now Harry stood in the door of his lab, his head cocked to one side as though he were trying to decide whether the best course was to come inside or invite Snape out.

“Say what you came to say and be done with it,” Snape told him. He was proud to hear his voice sound almost like its normal self. It helped that last night’s dream had only contained a mild torture scenario, nothing too overwhelming.

Harry nodded. “Very well, sir. I’d like you to stay in Cobley-by-the-Sea with me for the rest of the summer. I don’t know if you can control yourself, though. There are werewolves there, half of Loki’s pack. And in five days, I’m having a festival that will include more of them, perhaps as many as a hundred. So I’ll understand if you don’t want to come because of that.”

Snape stared at him. Harry went on standing there, quietly, his eyes expectant, as if he hadn’t asked the impossible.

“You want me there,” Snape said at last.

Harry nodded again.

“Why?”

Harry blinked. “Because, sir,” he said, as if it were self-evident, “I missed you.”

Snape had to turn away and put down the vial he was holding. It clinked too hard, and a fine crack appeared in the glass. Snape busied himself repairing it, all the while feeling his skin crawl on the back of his neck.

Vulnerable, vulnerable, too fucking vulnerable, and the only thing he could find to be grateful for was that it was Harry standing there, not Harry and someone else.

“And Draco told me a bit about the festival,” Harry went on. “I’ll be adapting the tradition, not following it precisely, but it’s still usual to have a parent there. You’re my father in all but blood, sir.”

Snape’s free hand closed into a fist. That only filled him all the more with a sense of stinging shame, that he’d said to Joseph the other day that Harry was not his son, and how could he think so? He had been thinking of family by birth and blood. Since he’d dreamed so much of his mother and the days when his mother’s word ruled his life, that was understandable. But now Harry was here, and Snape had to remember, as if he were capable of forgetting for long, that Harry did not care all that much about birth and blood.

The shame only coiled and turned into anger, though, the self-satisfied, self-sustaining bitterness that had fed him for so long. He offered a hard shoulder to the world, and it stung him, and so he stung it in turn, and that resulted in more stinging. It was the way he lived.
“And if I do not want to come?” he asked at last, the rasp in his voice audible.

Harry paused. When his next words came staggering out, Snape knew the pause had been one of shock, not of planning. “Then I’ll—accept that, sir.”

**He’s hurt.** Snape gained the courage to look up and see the way that Harry’s eyes had widened. He stood perfectly motionless, in the manner of someone trying to hide a wound before an enemy.

Oddly—or perhaps not so oddly, given that he was, now, not the only vulnerable one in the room—that struck through to Snape as nothing had in weeks. He could see the future as it would be if this continued, and it was not a pleasant vision.

Harry would continue trying. He did not know what giving up meant, and Snape meant too much to him now for Harry to yield him easily. But if Snape gave no quarter, went on sneering and acting as though Harry meant nothing to him, then Harry would eventually draw away. He would become more distant, and that would involve less direct pain and more indirect, the same kind Snape had suffered when Harry was angry at him over bringing his parents and Dumbledore to trial. And the more time passed, the more Snape himself would consider the chasm unbridgeable, and so he would not try, and so Harry would have less reason to try, and so Snape would feel further pushed away.

Did he want to live through something like that again, and this time with the knowledge that he had not done this for Harry’s protection, but to protect himself?

At the same time, he did not know how he could go among werewolves, even for Harry. And he did not know when the next good chance might come for trying to rid himself of this fear.

It went against everything he was to attend this festival. It was a test of courage, and he was no Gryffindor. It was a means of getting close to Harry again, and he was rapidly proving that he was no parent. It was opening himself up to further pain, and he was not a weakling.

But—

Things had already changed. What Snape had engaged in was a desperate attempt to put things back the way they were, and he knew that was not going to work. He had sneered at those in the past who had attempted it, including James Potter, when he heard that the man had retreated from Auror work rather than face the fact that he’d used the Unforgivables.

He could stand to live with hatred and contempt from the outside world. He did not think he could stand to live with how much he would despise himself if he acted so irrationally.

He looked up to see that Harry was backing out of the room, his gaze on the floor. And, for the first time in what felt like similar weeks, a surge of emotion that wasn’t for himself ran through him.

**He has endured too much pain already, too much surrender of every important adult in his life. I do not want him to endure this.**

“Harry,” he said softly.

Harry paused, but didn’t look up at him. His head was turned to the side, listening, but ready to accept a refusal.

“I will attend.”

Harry lifted his head and looked up at him.

What he saw in Harry’s face gave Snape the first joy he had felt since he arrived at the Sanctuary.

******

Connor turned away from the duel when he felt someone press against Lux Aeterna’s wards, which meant Peter got in a spell that knocked him from his feet. Connor groaned as he stood up slowly, rubbing the side of his head. He’d hit the wall hard. “Not funny,” he complained.

“It would certainly not be funny if someone did that to you in the middle of a real duel,” Peter snapped. Connor eyed him warily. Sometimes he got more like Snape than Connor was comfortable with. “You must always keep your eyes on the eyes and wand of your opponent, Connor. It is the only thing that will save your life most of the time. Is that understood?”
“Yes,” said Connor quickly. “It’s just—someone is pressing against the wards.” He concentrated a little harder, letting the wards talk to him in their very odd mixture of images and impressions of a magical signature. He blinked. “It’s Harry.”

Peter had opened his mouth again, probably to give him a lecture about how fighting in the midst of wards was no excuse to let himself be distracted, but now he blinked and said, “Harry?”

Connor nodded and ran along the corridor to the entrance hall, dropping the wards as he did so. Despite the fact that he knew something bad must have happened for Harry to return so early—it couldn’t be that he’d heard what was happening to Connor, because Connor hadn’t sent him any of his letters—he found his eagerness soaring at the thought of seeing his brother.

I can’t wait to see what he’s like now, he thought, as he jumped over the last five steps in the main staircase and heard Peter shout sternly at him for catching the banister and using it to swing himself around. Is he all healed? Will he have a different personality? Will he be more like Ron? Or will he be like Hermione because he studied all summer?

The doors of the entrance hall opened just as he reached them. Harry stood there, wearing casual robes and blazing with power.

“Connor?” he asked, moments before his brother caught him up in an embrace so tight he lost all his air. The hug sent them staggering several steps, until they sat down in the mud. Connor did not care.

“Harry,” he muttered, clinging tight. The satisfaction had given place to more complex emotions, including a rush of relaxation that seemed to loosen all the permanently stiff muscles in his back and neck. His older brother was back. Harry would protect him and make him feel better. He always did.

Harry looped his arm around his brother’s shoulders and hugged back, then looked up with a smile. “Hello, Peter,” he said.

“Harry.”

Connor slipped out of the way, and Harry stepped forward and hugged Peter. Connor told himself firmly that honorable Gryffindors did not feel envious of others. He didn’t feel jealous of the way that Peter watched Harry, with soft eyes he’d never shown Connor. He didn’t.

I could always go to the Burrow if I wanted someone to look at me like that, he reminded himself.

“What brings you back from the Sanctuary before the end of August?” Peter asked.

Harry grinned wryly. “Organizing alliances. You haven’t read the Prophet the last few days?”

Peter shook his head. “We found the articles too upsetting,” he said, and reached out and put a casual hand on Connor’s shoulder. Connor felt his envy die. “The articles about the werewolves, especially.”

Harry nodded, eyes rapidly scanning Peter’s face. “Yes, I can imagine,” he muttered. “Well. I came to invite you to a festival that I’m going to hold at Cobley-by-the-Sea in five days, to celebrate the fact that I’m sixteen and Black heir, basically.” He looked at Connor. “It should be your festival, too.”

Connor shook his head, feeling very adult. “No, go on,” he said generously. “I’ve had loads of birthdays I could feel proud of. You were made to feel—differently. Besides, I’m not Black heir.”

Harry flashed him a smile and started to say something, but Peter interrupted then. “Harry,” he said softly. “I do have a favor to ask you.”

Harry faced him and raised his eyebrows. “Oh?”

Peter nodded. “I’d like to take Connor and stay with you for the rest of the summer. Someone sent a Portkey by owl that would have taken Connor and tried to transport him—elsewhere. And there has been someone testing the wards.” His voice lowered. “I thought it might have been Remus. He did write Connor, once.”

Harry’s face changed at once. Connor supposed it might have scared someone else, but it only fascinated him. He watched as Harry lifted his head and narrowed his eyes, hunting. A wind of pink and green specks lashed around him and traveled away, circling Lux Aeterna’s wards. Connor felt Harry’s magic on them as a faint, tickling pressure, a sniffing hound.
The wind came back to Harry just after it had reached the place where the stranger had pressed. Harry closed his eyes, then snapped them open and nodded at Peter. “Yes,” he said tightly. “Come with me at once.”

“I need to pack!” Connor protested. There was no way that he was leaving Lux Aeterna without his Nimbus, protective older brother or not.

“I’ll stay here while you do it.” Harry folded his arms in his “I’m your older brother, don’t argue with me” pose. Connor was tempted to remind him that he was only older by fifteen minutes, but Peter got there first.

“Who was it?” he demanded.

“Evan Rosier,” Harry said.

Connor felt his enthusiasm for staying at Lux Aeterna diminish. The prospect of being in the same tightly-warded house as Harry suddenly looked brilliant.

******

Remus felt badly out of sorts, and out of place. Oh, he’d been in Number Twelve Grimmauld Place before; that was the whole reason Harry had asked him to remain here with this half of the pack, while he took the rest of Remus’s packmates to Cobley-by-the-Sea.

No. Not the whole of the reason.

And that was precisely it. Harry had avoided looking at Remus on the night of the alliance meeting, and hadn’t firecalled or owled him at all yesterday. Remus had been looking forward to it. He wanted to see Harry again, so that he could explain some things that Harry might have misunderstood.

Remus had known of Loki’s plans to give the pack into Harry’s protection since a few days before he did it. He approved. Harry could and would protect them, and when he was surrounded by accepted werewolves, unavoidably exposed to their culture, then they could tell him the truth without betraying mysteries that no outsiders should know. That he was just a wizard and not a werewolf didn’t matter any longer, not with him acting as alpha. Remus had assumed he would help to ease the transition, since he’d been part of both Harry’s life and the pack’s.

Instead, there was silence for a day.

But now Remus smelled powerful magic. He put down the book he’d been reading and stepped out of the library, turning his head back and forth. He knew Harry had arrived, but he was surprised no one else had come and told him. The others were mostly still cautious around Harry, and not sure whether he deserved to be their alpha, even though they trusted Loki’s judgment and knew he could not stay. Vengeance for a mate was more important than anything else. But Harry was—well, a wizard, and they had all seen him threaten Loki in the Ministry a few days before he left.

Remus understood in a moment, though. Harry stood at the end of the hallway, regarding Remus without any expression at all. His magic billowed around him, and Remus could hear the portrait of Sirius’s mother in the hallway below starting a crooning song in praise of his strength.

“The wards on this house are keyed to me,” Harry said, answering Remus’s silent question. “They won’t alert anyone I’m coming if I don’t want them to.”

Remus nodded, and stepped out of the way, letting Harry walk into the library. It was more like stalk, actually. Remus sniffed cautiously. Harry didn’t smell angry, though he walked that way. He was—determined. Like an alpha having to discipline a subordinate who had been causing rows.

Harry turned around in the middle of the library, and faced Remus again. His stare was disquieting. Remus turned his head gently to the side, to avoid meeting the aggressive gaze of his alpha.

“I came to invite you and the rest of the pack to a festival I’m holding in five days, to celebrate my being Black heir and the pack coming together,” Harry said.

“Oh.” Remus shifted his weight. “And that is the only reason?”
“No.” Harry’s voice went blunt as a hammer. “It’s also to inform you that I love you, but I don’t trust you. I will never trust you again, unless you prove that you can be trusted.”

Remus blinked and glanced up, shaken at a level he hadn’t known existed in himself. Of course, Loki had never expressed distrust of him. He didn’t have to, when he’d done the work of convincing Remus of the rightness of his goals himself. “I won’t betray the pack, Harry. You know that.”

“Someone betrayed my location to two would-be assassins yesterday,” said Harry. And waited.

Remus stared at him.

“Camellia and the rest of them all knew,” Harry said. “I know that they could have firecalled Grimmauld Place; I gave them permission to, after all. And if someone here knew, and someone here wrote a letter…” He let his voice trail off. Then he shrugged.

Remus snarled. “I would never do such a thing. Never!”

Harry tilted his head, his eyes locked on Remus’s. Remus didn’t look away this time, and didn’t care if it was a challenge. He felt more like a wizard than a werewolf right now. Harry was accusing him of betrayal, and it wasn’t true.

“A Legimens can tell when someone is lying,” said Harry. “So, now I know you didn’t. This time.”

“And it would never happen,” Remus insisted, feeling his outrage grow. The Sanctuary had helped him accept some of his emotions. The pack had helped him accept many more. He no longer felt apologetic for any anger he discovered inside himself, as he would have two years ago, fearing the explosion of beast-like rage that haunted most werewolves bitten as children. “What makes you think it would?”

Harry’s eyes hardened again. “Because of the way that you changed your mind about your principles, in such a fundamental way, and never had the courtesy to tell me?” he said softly. “Because of the fact that you suspected, beforehand, things like Loki’s pack biting a Wizengamot member and Loki coming to Hogwarts to threaten Snape and Draco—”

“I did not have prior knowledge of that,” said Remus. “Loki wouldn’t have asked me to choose between loyalties like that. He kept it from me.”

“You were willing to attack innocent people, bend their free wills, and you didn’t tell me,” said Harry. Remus fought the urge to back up a step. While the Sanctuary had helped him become more self-confident, it seemed to have made Harry colder. His magic smelled like winter now, and Remus could almost feel an icy, intelligent mind watching him eagerly, waiting for its master’s signal to spring. “You sent post to Connor trying to change his mind. You gave Loki knowledge about me without my consent. Did you know that he considered biting me, Remus? Would you have bitten me, if he asked you to?”

Remus shook his head, but not in denial. He didn’t know. He’d trusted Loki not to put him in that position. No one could have anticipated Gudrun’s murder, and the way that Harry had turned out not to care as much about the rights of werewolves as Remus had thought he did.

“We’ve been ignored for so long,” he told Harry. The feeling of winter in the air increased. “Wizards didn’t pay attention to us. You were a wizard—sworn to help us, but still. You have all sorts of unconscious prejudices in favor of your own kind, Harry. We couldn’t trust we’d break through to you if we just talked and waited. We’ve been doing that for decades, and the anti-werewolf laws just got worse instead of better. And it’s a betrayal of our culture to talk to outsiders about it, unless they’ve accepted the gift themselves. Do you see? It was an unfortunate combination of circumstances, but there you are.”

“You started feeling that anything was justified, because you’d been pushed aside and ignored for so long.” Harry’s voice was flat.

Remus glanced up, relieved. “Yes! Exactly. You can only do that to people for so long before you have a revolution, you know.”

Harry’s eyes changed again, growing weary. Remus felt the icy claws of his magic retract, and relaxed a little.

“What I can’t forget, Remus,” said Harry quietly, “is that other people don’t stop suffering just because you are. Pain doesn’t take turns, doesn’t play favorites. By the very nature of my commitment to the vates path, I can’t enable a werewolf revolution that increases the total amount of pain in the world just to lessen or make up for werewolf pain—and especially not one that rides on vengeance.”
Remus drew in a sharp breath. “But so much of our culture rides on that, Harry—“

“And I’m not going to make you change it,” Harry said. “I will tell you that, since you’re sworn to be part of my alliance now, you’ll have to step out of it before you can take mindless vengeance. And that will deprive you of my protection. Think before acting, Remus.”

Remus felt lost again. Why couldn’t Harry understand? The suffering of the werewolves had gone ignored the longest. Muggleborns at least had a champion in Dumbledore. Harry himself had aided other magical creatures. But werewolves would have no one unless they forced the matter—and then when they did, Harry refused to offer whole-hearted support.

Remus had assumed that, since he was both wizard and werewolf, with a good experience of both cultures in his robe pockets, but with ultimate loyalties to the pack, he would be able to make Harry see sense. It seemed that attempt was doomed to falter.

“If you would just trust me—“ he tried.

“Not until you prove you can be trusted,” said Harry.

“What would do that for you?” Remus asked desperately. This wasn’t only a champion for his pack; this was the boy he had helped raise and still loved, James’s son, Sirius’s godson. It was so hard to see him standing here, cold, unforgiving, ruthless.

“I can’t give you a single test,” said Harry. “If you want to reconcile with me, Remus, you’ll meet me halfway, and believe me, I’ll notice when that starts happening. So far, you just want concessions. It’s not acceptable. If you don’t want to attend the festival, don’t.” He turned and walked out of the library, Apparating between one step and the next.

Remus sat down and put his head in his hands.

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Chapter Ten: Mysterious Enemies

“And you think that we’ll be able to get all the food we need from Muggle shops?” Camellia’s eyes were wide and disbelieving.

Harry shrugged. “Rose assured me that we would.” Rose had been born Muggle, too, he’d discovered, but she’d grown up in the Muggle world, and had been nineteen when she was bitten. She was sure that she knew her way among the shops of London. Her mate, Bavaros, a wizard, was going with her anyway, to change some of Harry’s Galleons to Muggle money in Diagon Alley, and because he generally seemed to disapprove of Rose venturing into non-magical places without someone to protect her. Camellia had told Harry that he still secretly believed Rose would go running back to her family, given half a chance, even though her family had tossed her out, unable to deal with what she was.

That was one thing Harry had learned already: not to interfere in a werewolf’s mating bond. There were several mated pairs in the pack, and they acted as if they loved and as if they hated each other at the same time, one moment mouthing each other’s chins, the next moment knocking each other to the ground in a snapping, snarling whirlwind. Harry might have spoken with Bavaros if he was Rose’s husband, using it both as a way to get to know a new ally and to ease his fears, but since he was Rose’s mate, Camellia had explained, Harry would only have made him more paranoid.

“Next, invitations,” Harry said, turning with a nod to Trumpetflower, the werewolf he’d put in charge of those.

“Most of the pack leaders you owled have responded,” the young woman said, as she spread the letters over the kitchen table. She was the answer to Draco’s question about whether werewolves ever bathed, Harry thought in distant amusement. Her hair was long and brown and straight and perfectly clean, and she had nails that looked as if she cared for hands for a living. “Tiger didn’t, but he wouldn’t have anyway; he doesn’t communicate with wizards. Yuna is busy overseeing a newly mated pair in her pack and can’t come. Liberty distrusts you.” She looked up, blinking. “But the others all will attend the festival. Seventeen pack leaders out of twenty is not bad, Wild.”

Harry grimaced. The werewolves had started calling him Wild. He’d asked why, and received a surprised look from Trumpetflower, and a, “That’s the way you smell,” from Camellia. That wouldn’t have been so bad, but now they were using it like a title.

Harry had more important things to worry about, though, so he chose not to pursue it for right now. “Most of them know about the danger the Department presents?”
Trumpetflower nodded. “They’ll be staying close to home when the full moon comes. Of course, we can’t tell where the Department plans to strike next. We were an obvious choice, since we were Loki’s pack, but now?” She shook her head, and Harry saw the worry she was valiantly trying to mask in her eyes. Everything about her screamed “sheltered pureblood,” though Harry didn’t know her original name or family. “Perhaps they’ll come after us again.”

“They had best not,” said Harry mildly, and a half-open cupboard lit as if it were turned to gold. Camellia leaned forward, bathing in the smell of the magic, while Trumpetflower gave him a small smile.

“We trust you to protect us, Wild,” she said softly. “But it’s frightening, knowing that we could be killed at any time they find us in wolf form.” She shuddered and hugged herself, her eyes shadowed. “Not to mention the new laws.”

Harry took a deep breath so that nothing more violent would happen than a wind flying around the room. “Those also displease me,” he said.

What the Department witches had hinted at in the corridors of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement had become “official” law the next day. Werewolves going out in public were supposed to wear collars at all times and carry registration papers with them, just in case anyone else had a question about who they were. The collars, the smug Daily Prophet reporter named Gina de Rousseau had explained, were intended strictly as a means of identification and not magical restriction.

Harry did not care. Even if it had been necessary for the Ministry to identity werewolves on sight, and he did not believe it was, why choose collars? That was done for no other purpose than degrading them. He had written to Scrimgeour when the news came out, a simple letter. Had he known about this the day that Harry visited him?

No response had come. Harry didn’t know if that meant that Scrimgeour’s post was watched so closely that the Minister didn’t dare risk writing to him, or if someone had intercepted his message. He was leaning towards interception, since the Minister hadn’t communicated with him in any other way, either.

He’s probably upset, too, Harry thought, with me as well as with Amelia Bones or whoever else pushed this idiotic law into effect. I brought werewolves into the Ministry. I’m pushing.

He intended to keep on pushing. He’d asked a few of the werewolves to look through the Black law books while he spoke with his allies and made other arrangements for the festival, and they’d turned up a tiny loophole that Harry hadn’t known existed. It was a way to interfere in the Ministry that was on the up and up, because, of course, the old pureblood families had bullied the Wizengamot into making some special dispensations just for them while they still had the power.

There were times that Harry knew he really had to thank Regulus for making him Black heir, and this was one of them.

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The man who opened the door stared hard at Harry. Harry stared back. He was flat-eyed and blank-faced, though Harry knew this particular blankness probably hid cunning and not stupidity. In other words, he looked rather like his son, Marcus, who had been Captain of the Slytherin Quidditch team for the first three years Harry had been at Hogwarts.

“Mr. Flint, sir?” he asked. “Aurelius Flint?”

“Harry vates,” said the man, without a trace of a smile, and stepped out of the way. “For what reason has someone so great come to visit my office?”

Harry took the hint and stepped inside; he had got through the wand checkpoint with Erica’s help again, arriving at the time he knew she worked, but it would look rather strange for him to be visiting a minor flunky in the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures. “A talk, that’s all,” he said. “Marcus commended you to me once. Said you’d been a great Quidditch player in your day, and we might have a thing or two in common.”

He sat down in the chair in front of the desk. Aurelius Flint sat down behind it, his large, clear eyes still fixed on Harry. “I was never a Seeker,” he replied. “But I played Beater, yes.”

Harry nodded. “So that’s one thing in common,” he said. He reached into his robe pocket and pulled out the image of the seal he’d copied, carefully, from the image on the page of the legal book. It was the Black family crest, but in place of the motto Toujours pur, it carried the words Amicitia percutere. Aurelius picked it up and examined it for a moment without any sign of recognition.
Harry was watching, though, and saw his cheeks flush faintly.

A moment later, he lowered the seal to the desk and nodded. “Yes,” he said. “The one who works in this office does indeed accept the obligation to serve the Black family, vates. And you are the legal heir of the Blacks, correct?”

“And acting head, while Regulus Black is recovering from a wound he took from an attempt on his life,” said Harry. It was the first time he’d had to use the cover story, since few people outside of his small circle of allies cared where Regulus had gone. “Therefore, I am asking you to perform a small service for me.”

Aurelius nodded, as though he had such requests asked of him all the time. “What is it?”

“There were new werewolf laws just announced to the public,” Harry said, taking the image of the seal back. “To make them wear collars and carry identification. I want to know who proposed them.”

“Amelia Bones,” Aurelius said, looking relieved to be discharged of the obligation so easily.

“How sure are you of that information?” Harry asked. If it really and truly was her, without a doubt, he would accept that, but he no longer thought the terrified woman he’d seen on the second of August was entirely in control of herself. If someone was behind the scenes, pressuring her, he wanted to know who it was.

Aurelius hesitated.

Harry nodded. “That’s right. There are other players now—the other Department Heads, the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts, and doubtless people I don’t know of. I want you to find out where this particular idea originated, or at least come as close as you can. Amelia Bones was the mouthpiece, but I don’t think she was the brain that thought it up.”

Aurelius extended his hand across the desk. Harry watched him curiously, until he heard the man say, in a deep voice with a hint of a shake to it, “I formally request and require to be relieved of this obligation. I will owe you a debt if you will release me—two debts, the original obligation plus the one I owe to your goodness. I will pay those debts gladly. But I ask to be relieved of this.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed, this time fixed on the way that the man’s cheeks had turned pale. He knows, or at least suspects, who proposed those new laws.

And he’s terrified.

He had to move carefully, that much was clear. Harry had come to Aurelius Flint only because he had the office with the old dispensation pinned on it to oblige the person who worked in it to serve the Black line, but perhaps Aurelius, himself, as a person, was more connected than that. Lucius Malfoy might know.

Harry nodded as though he had considered the matter and made up his mind. Aurelius closed his eyes, his hand falling to the desk. Harry had his eyes fastened on his fingers, though, and noticed the way two of them curved and pointed down.

Towards the floor? Someone in the office below is listening to us?

No, perhaps below in the Ministry.

Once he thought about it, of course, Harry could only come up with one candidate for Aurelius’s terror. The Department of Mysteries. The Unspeakables. And their offices were on a level below the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures.

Harry nodded again, more firmly this time. Aurelius caught his eye and retracted his fingers into a fist. Then he sat back, calm and imperturbable once more, and looked at into Harry’s face.

“And what do you want of me?” he asked.

“I’d like a list of every law on the books that affects werewolves,” Harry said. “Since you work in this Department, I think you can provide that for me easily.”

Aurelius nodded.
“And for my second request…” Harry cocked his head and stood. “I think I’ll keep that in abeyance for right now.”

The man looked briefly sour, no doubt wanting to pay off both his debts right away, but stood to show Harry to the door. As he opened it for him, he stooped close to Harry, long enough, to whisper, “Be careful,” in a voice Harry thought he would never have heard if not for his magic.

Harry caught Aurelius’s eye and moved his head in a tiny nod. Aurelius seemed satisfied as he shut the door behind him.

Harry wrapped his Complete Vanishing spell around him and began to move rapidly in the direction of the lifts. He’d come alone, because secrecy, in this case, was more important than impressing anyone. Now he wanted to get out of the Ministry as soon as possible. The Department of Mysteries studied magic at its deepest levels, and magical artifacts that did Merlin-knew-what. They might, for all Harry knew, be perfectly aware of his presence here, with undetectable wards that saw everything. Aurelius had certainly acted as if that were the case.

But I don’t understand why they’d be pushing for more laws against werewolves. Why? What would the point of it be?

He reached the lifts and pressed the button that would summon one. As he stood waiting for it, he heard footsteps, light and swift and almost silent, the steps of an experienced hunter or spy, coming up the corridor from behind him.

He turned. A wizard in a shimmering gray cloak that cast back the light was gliding down the hallway. If Harry hadn’t known to expect something like that from the footsteps, he might not ever have seen him.

Or her. The cloak was so muffling that it gave no hint of body shape.

The Unspeakables already figured out that I spoke with Aurelius, it seems.

Harry’s lift arrived then, with a melodic voice on it announcing, “Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures.” As the doors opened, Harry saw the Unspeakable’s head turn and orient on him.

He walked into the lift, confident that his spell would protect him from being sensed; that was what it was designed to do, after all. A moment later, the Unspeakable walked in after him.

Harry pushed the button for the Atrium. The Unspeakable did nothing, simply standing there with head and shoulders bowed in his gray cloak, like an old man. Harry didn’t think he could be, not with the way he moved, but it did effectively keep anyone from seeing his face.

The lift began to rattle downwards. Harry waited, his hand resting lightly on his chest. His magic, contained by the spell around him, hummed and buzzed. The Unspeakable still did nothing. Harry wondered if he really had any idea where Harry was, or simply knew that someone invisible on the lift going down would have to be him. Strange that he hadn’t lunged and tried to grab me when I pushed the button for the Atrium.

“The Atrium,” the voice sang as they reached that level, and the doors opened. A moment later, the Unspeakable moved to stand in front of them.

So that’s how he thinks he’ll capture me. Harry knew he could ram into the man and the Complete Vanishing spell would prevent him from feeling anything, but knocking him backwards would alert any of the Unspeakables waiting on this level.

Standing in the lift and being captured was not an option either, however. Besides, Harry’s blood was up, and after these new werewolf laws and what he’d just learned from Aurelius Flint, he wasn’t content to appear and explain matters to his enemies.

They’re playing. What kind of game, I don’t know yet. But let’s show them what waits on the opposite side of the board.

He let the Extabesco plene go. The Unspeakable immediately swayed towards him, reaching out a gloved hand. He still said nothing. Harry supposed the silence was meant to unnerve his victim.

His hand flashed. He was carrying something small and silver in it, probably a magical artifact.

Harry had no intention of flinging magic directly at the artifact, which looked like a collar of some kind. With his luck, it would reflect at him or be absorbed. He shook his fringe back from his lightning bolt scar, instead, and opened his mouth in a loud, shocked wail.
The Unspeakable jerked back at the sound. Harry ducked under his arm and emerged into the Atrium, crying, “Help! Oh, help!”

He heard footsteps heading for him almost at once. And, sure enough, the first person to round the corner was Erica, the wand registration witch, lunging through the gates and towards the lifts. She saw him, and her eyes widened as she also saw the Unspeakable.

Harry felt a surge of vicious satisfaction. *They want to do things in secret? Let’s drag them into the public eye, and see what they think when they’re accused of trying to kidnap the Boy-Who-Lived.*

“Harry!” Erica exclaimed. “Are you all right?”

Harry saw the flash of another gray cloak as an Unspeakable loomed behind her, too. More footsteps were pounding, and while some of them might be visitors or Ministry personnel who would help, others were almost surely reinforcements from the Department of Mysteries. Harry suspected there wasn’t much they wouldn’t try to do to insure that this stayed secret.

He flung out his hand, whispering, “*Exsculpo,*” a spell of his own creation. The hand reaching for Erica’s shoulder disappeared, erased from existence. The Unspeakable gave a shocked wail of his—her—own, and Erica whipped around and saw her. She raised her wand as Harry reached her side, eyes narrowed.

“*Stupefy!*” she yelled, and the beam of red light struck the Unspeakable, who lay still. Erica giggled nervously.

Other gray cloaks were flashing from the corners of Harry’s eyes now, and he suspected the Unspeakables had mostly cleared this floor, though they’d left Erica so anyone just arriving would see nothing obviously wrong. He grasped Erica’s hand and began pulling her hard through the gates. Erica was more than willing to come with him, though she looked back now and then as Harry started her towards the fountain.

“Who are they?” she asked.

“Unspeakables,” said Harry, and saw Erica’s face drain of color. He nodded at her. “I’m afraid that I’ve just got you sacked from the Ministry,” he said. “How would you like a new job?”

“Wand-checking is really all I know how to do—” Erica babbled as she finally began to run on her own, heading for the lift that would take them up to the decrepit telephone box and the alley.

“You can do that for me,” Harry breathed. “And a few other things, too.” He had seen, though Erica hadn’t, the gray cloak trailing in front of them, trying to block their access to the telephone box. He would have to risk his magic in a moment.

Then the Unspeakable revealed himself, flicking out a red shell that Harry was more than familiar with. A Still-Beetle shell, it would imprison him, and his magic, if it managed to touch him; they were used for confining Lord-level wizards accused of crimes.

Harry thought of Doncan, and the Opallines, and the fire-blacked stone on which Gollrish Y Thie stood, and opened his mouth. Intense white heat roared forth from it, a concentrated blast, taking and melting the shell in mid-air.

The heat also flew at the Unspeakable, who lifted his hand. A silver ring sparking on his finger caught in the light and gleamed, absorbing the flame into it. Then he drew out a tiny glass sphere, filled with what looked, to Harry’s speed-confused eyes, like a rose, and gave it a delicate flick towards Harry.

Harry could feel its magic as it flew, throbbing through the air with a power to rival his own. He didn’t dare touch it. He grabbed Erica’s arm, spinning her safely behind him, and did something he hadn’t done in more than a month, opening the conduit of his *absorbere* gift inside him as wide as it would go.

The magic that rushed down his “gullet” was a much more pleasant meal than the tainted magic of the Death Eaters or Voldemort. It rang with power, though, and Harry shuddered as he was forced to gulp hastily, draining in a few seconds what he would ordinarily have taken minutes to swallow. He could already sense the sphere had something to do with time.

*Nasty things they study in the Department of Mysteries.*

The sphere landed on the floor in front of him and shattered, drained of magic. The Unspeakable made a sound for the first time, a snarl.
Harry lifted his eyes. He was shuddering with the effort of containing the magic, which rampaged back and forth through him, more sentient than the power he dealt with usually. That came of being confined under pressure in such a tiny space, he thought. He felt wild and sweet in a way that usually only the phoenix song made him feel, and it was an effort to speak, instead of sing or roar.

“Move.”

The Unspeakable was not stupid, whatever else might be said about him. He moved. Harry grabbed Erica’s hand and pulled her behind him. He could no longer hear the other Unspeakables’ footsteps. He supposed they were afraid of being drained of their magic, or at least of having their artifacts drained, if they came anywhere near him.

He pushed Erica into the lift and turned to watch the Unspeakables. The nearest one stood with arms folded, or so Harry assumed from the slight shift in the cloak, surveying him.

*Calm,* Harry noted. *They’re not very worried about what I’m going to do when I get out of here, then. They probably think they can counter any publicity about this, and of course no one in the Ministry is going to dare to speak up in support of me, not if they’re all as terrified as Aurelius.*

A second Unspeakable stepped up beside the one who’d tossed the sphere as the lift began to rattle and move. He carried what looked like a Pensieve, shimmering with a blue liquid rather than a silver. The first man pressed his gloved fingers into the liquid and tossed it towards the lift. Harry watched warily as it spattered, uselessly, far below.

“*Obliviate,*” the Unspeakable intoned casually.

Beside Harry, Erica gave a little gasp and shudder, and then said, in a dazed voice, “What? Where am I? What happened?”

Harry could feel the powerful compulsion to forget burrowing into his own brain, tearing at him with jagged teeth. He brought up his Occlumency shields, but the compulsion ate right through them. He snarled and brought his magic and his will up in defense, fighting as he had fought when Dumbledore tried to compel him in the past.

The spell shattered so suddenly that Harry sagged to his knees. He shook his head and braced his hand on the floor of the lift, pushing himself back upright. He looked down into the hooded faces of the Unspeakables, watching calmly as the lift went up, and up.

*With artifacts like that, who else can they touch?* Harry thought. *Anyone in the Ministry, certainly. Scrimgeour. Aurelius. Percy. And Merlin knows who they might go after outside the Ministry. What do the Unspeakables do? Important Ministry business. So important that, of course, if they do need to Obliviate their victims later, that’s accepted as the normal order of things.*

He shuddered. The Ministry had another cancer inside it, then, one that hadn’t revealed itself until now. The Department of Mysteries was stirring. At least some of the Unspeakables wanted to have werewolves as isolated from the rest of wizarding society as possible.

*Why?*

Harry smiled grimly. He didn’t know yet. He would find out. But going to the papers might not be the best course after all. If the Unspeakables hadn’t cleared the Atrium and destroyed the memory of his only witness, then yes. But with only him to claim the truth of the story, and with the Unspeakables holding so many other lives in their hands, and with the currently broiling, brewing nature of the public mind as concerned the Boy-Who-Lived, trying to expose them to more than his allies right now would be suicide.

He was not panicking, though, as he once would have when reminded that the Unspeakables could hurt so many people at so many different times and with magical artifacts whose nature he didn’t yet know. The Unspeakables would be fools to start hurting people simply because they could. Their whole power was in remaining undetectable, and in advancing whatever mysterious, no pun intended, goals their Department held. They must believe that Harry had figured out their power and would enter a stalemate with them for the sake of the innocent, even as he stared into every shadow and wondered which ones they cast. They wouldn’t want to give him an excuse to swoop down on them with magical claws extended.

If they had done this before he went to the Sanctuary, their reading of him might even have been accurate.

Now, though, it wasn’t. Harry fully intended to use his magic, though they wouldn’t know it until it was too late.
“You haven’t answered me,” said Erica, a bit of a whine in her voice as the lift finally lurched to a stop. “What am I—“ And then she gasped and looked down to see his lightning bolt scar. “Harry?”

Harry gripped her hand tightly. “Yes,” he said. “I’m sorry, Erica, but I rescued you from powerful enemies who just Obliviated you, and I’m afraid your job at the Ministry’s gone. Do you trust me to take care of you?”

Erica nodded eagerly, looking close to swooning. “Who were they?”

“Tell you when we’re safe,” said Harry, and, pulling her close to him the moment they stepped out into the graffiti-covered alley, Apparated.

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“Sir?” Harry asked, peering around the door into the room of Copley-by-the-Sea Snape had taken as his lab. “Can I have a word with you?”

Snape turned from stirring a bubbling purple potion and nodded. “Of course, Harry. A moment.” He tapped the cauldron with his wand, uttering a spell to preserve the potion in its present state, and then came to sit in one of the solid, comfortable chairs in the center of the room.

Harry let himself collapse into the other one. He’d just come back from the Ministry, and settled Erica into one of the numerous unused rooms of the house. He’d reassured Draco and Camellia that he was having Aurelius Flint look up all the anti-werewolf laws currently on the books, but told them nothing about the attack by the Unspeakables yet. There was something he wanted to do first, before he had to deal with all the shouting and sworn oaths of vengeance.

“You have a Pensieve, sir?” he asked.

Snape’s eyes narrowed minutely. “Of course.”

Harry sighed. “Can I use it?”

Snape nodded, his eyes still on Harry as he stood up, moved over to a cabinet on the far wall, and unlocked it. Harry watched him back, as placidly as he could when he’d just had someone trying to capture him. Snape had been acting more like his normal self in the last day, especially because he’d avoided werewolves entirely. Harry didn’t want to upset his equilibrium too much. Besides, he wasn’t frightened. Just really, really angry.

Snape brought the Pensieve over and set it down in front of him. Harry hesitated for a moment, then held out his hand and murmured, “Accio wand.” He wasn’t actually sure how to get the memories from his head into a Pensieve without a wand.

The length of cypress came flying through Snape’s half-open door and settled into his fingers. Harry gave a satisfied little grunt and then touched it to his temple, recalling the Unspeakable attack in all the details he could. In moments, strands of silvery thought began to unloop from the skin, and he moved his wand over to drop them into the Pensieve. It didn’t take long, and he sat back with a little sigh. At least now he had one record of what had happened to him, just in case something else happened to him, and he would make more.

“May I?” Snape asked, indicating the Pensieve.

“If you promise not to destroy the room when you’re done,” said Harry evenly.

Snape raised an eyebrow, murmured, “I promise,” and then bowed his head so that he could plunge his face into the Pensieve. Harry rose and began to pace back and forth, swearing aloud and in his head, his hand clasped around his stump behind his back.

I’m going to have to dig deeper with this than I ever meant to, he thought. I thought it was ordinary human fear that was guiding the anti-werewolf laws. And I thought that I could remove a few key players from positions of power in the Ministry and be done with most of the force behind their legal campaign against werewolves. This—this goes deeper. Much deeper. Literally.

The most damaging part about this right now is the lack of information. I need to know as much about the Department of Mysteries as I can. I’ll write to Lucius Malfoy and ask him about that, as well as about Aurelius Flint. He thrives on the corruption in the Ministry, Merlin knows, and if anyone can locate a corrupt Unspeakable or someone willing to talk about the Department for money, he can.
But I also need to dig in and be prepared to defend my allies against any attacks. I need to have as many advantages on my side as I can.

And I also need to be ready to take the offensive. The release of the Grand Unified Theory is coming soon, and the anti-werewolf laws are rolling forward, and I don’t think the stalemate between Scrimgeour and the Department Heads can last forever. And sooner or later, Willoughby is going to get someone to listen to him about this stupid trial, if only as a means of stopping me. And I need to know what Whitestag’s doing. And school’s starting soon. And Merlin knows what the wizards in other countries watching this from the outside think.

He tried to slow his pacing, but it only went faster as new ideas exploded in his head like fireworks.

Most urgent, besides finding out as much about the Unspeakables as I can, is establishing a line of communication with Scrimgeour. Owl post doesn’t work, obviously. But—

Harry felt a shark’s smile widen across his mouth. *Fred and George, of course. No one’s going to think it strange they’re communicating with me, not when I gave them the money to open their joke shop. And Percy’s their brother. It’ll take a while to figure out how they’re not going to get caught, but that should do nicely.*

He laughed, and then heard the absolutely foul oath behind him, combined with the pressure of building magic.

He whirled around, and saw Snape pulling his head out of the Pensieve, his face darker than Harry had seen it since a werewolf from Loki’s pack had laid her teeth on his skin. He flung up a hand, and a bookshelf on the other side of the room juddered and started to pull itself free of the wall.

Harry shook his head and tugged on Snape’s magic with his *absorbere* gift, not swallowing it but catching his guardian’s attention. “You promised you wouldn’t destroy the room,” he pointed out.

“They—“ Snape began, and then snarled again. The air around him briefly grew a series of writhing claws.

Harry nodded. “I know. And I am going to *fight* them.”

Snape shook his head. “How?” He had obviously figured out the same problems with fighting the Department of Mysteries that Harry had.

“Information,” said Harry crisply. “From Lucius Malfoy, if I can, and establishing a line to Scrimgeour through Percy Weasley. And then I am going to figure out all the advantages I can, and I am going to *use* them.” He stretched out his hand and began folding his fingers down. “I’ve already started studying place magic, because Woodhouse can be an enormous resource for me if I only know how to use it. I’m going to join Connor in his lessons to become an Animagus. I have allies with capacities I’ve never called on, who can do things that I *know* they can do but have never delegated them into doing. I’m going to reach out and make contact with the enemies of my enemies. I’m going to start asking questions about my parents’ past, because I need to figure out what that prophecy that took Dumbledore means, and if my parents really defied him three times.” He folded down his thumb, and sighed in annoyance at running out of fingers. “And I am going to work on getting my left hand back.”

“What has changed?” Snape asked quietly.

“I’m tired,” Harry said honestly. “It’s also the werewolves and the vates path and the fact that I’ve already committed myself to revolution, of course, but this attack made me realize just how *sick and tired* I am of people threatening and attacking and trying to kill and capture and bind me.” He thought back to the compulsion of the *Obliviate* artifact the Unspeakable had used, and how it reminded him of ways that Dumbledore and Lily had tried to enslave him. “I’ve put up with it for too long. And I don’t think fighting to defend myself is wrong any more—and there are ways I can fight on the offensive against more people than Voldemort without utterly forgetting my morals.” He glanced over his shoulder at Snape. “You showed me that, sir, when you reminded me that I had to care more about the living than the dead. I’ll do what I need to do, and live with the consequences. And I won’t let them make me afraid.”

Snape’s eyes were fierce with pride. “This time, I actually believe that you might do it, Harry,” he said.

Harry gave a wry smile. He couldn’t deny that he’d struck out before when he’d felt backed into a corner, and then not followed up when his enemies stepped away, because it wouldn’t be right. But the image of the Unspeakables *Obliviating* Erica, so casually, and then watching as the lift rose and Harry escaped, confident that he could do nothing to fight them, not really, had *pissed him off.*
“You’re well if I leave you alone, sir?” he asked. Snape’s temper was still making his magic writhe and squirm.

Snape stared hard at him. “I promise I am not going to poison any werewolves,” he said.

Harry snapped his head down in a short bow, and then turned and headed for his room. He had quill and ink and parchment there. He would write down what he remembered of the attack as well, and then he would make a list of people he was going to delegate specific tasks to.

*It’s time, he thought, sorrow slipping down in him like rain across glass. I wish I could still do everything, and take on the responsibilities that should be mine, but I can’t, not anymore. If I try to fight on too many fronts, I’ll lose on all of them. So I’ll ask Hermione to do the legal research, and some members of the pack to help with feeling out other werewolves, and Honoria to lend me some of her illusions, and others to watch enemies of mine who need to be tracked, and Draco what luck he’s had with developing new spells, and Erica to help with guarding, and Peter to train me in Animagus abilities, and—*

His mind pulsed smoothly, seeing far ahead. Behind it all, like a mantra, hummed a single thought.

*I will not let them make me afraid.*

Intermission: Before the Darkness Cower

“Really, Severus, come along.” One elegant arch of Lucius Malfoy’s eyebrow, as much to say that he didn’t know what he was going to do with Severus if he couldn’t follow a simple instruction like that. “You wouldn’t want to keep your future Lord waiting, would you?”

Severus—who thought of himself as Snape in those moments when he could, determined to pound out both his mother’s surname and the name his mother had given him from his head—kept his face calm while Malfoy was looking, but allowed himself a sneer the moment he turned away again. Malfoy embodied all the reasons that Severus hated purebloods, even as he envied them. Casual grace, yes, with a promise of steel beneath, but little real strength. Lucius’s tactics lay in devastating remarks, in noting breaches of manners and making those who committed them feel like children, in facial expressions and soft, coaxing words. But he had taught Severus to feel magic, too, as pain, in the way that Malfoys did, and the first thing Severus had realized was that he was stronger than Lucius Malfoy.

*And only fools rely on raw strength,* his mother’s voice sang in his head.

Severus grimaced. It was always like that, a thought that might praise or steady him coiling around with a scorpion’s sting in its tail.

The tunnel widened ahead of them, and Malfoy made a pleased sound beneath his breath, then halted. Severus could see his nostrils flaring wide to sniff. He wondered that Malfoy would be so obvious about it. He himself had already smelled the odd scent flowing down the corridor: rich, dark, earthy, with the edge of a tang that Severus could only describe as night.

“Ah,” Malfoy said, and then raised a hand and motioned Severus forward, stalking softly forward himself.

Severus followed him. They were walking through the catacombs beneath a monastery so abandoned that Muggles didn’t even remember it had existed any more. Now and then they passed alcoves filled with bones. Severus had wondered at first that the Dark Lord chose to meet in a place like this, but Malfoy had explained it to him. The Death Eaters took their name, and the Dark Lord gave his word, as a promise of immortality. They were not, of course, afraid of death, and they would show it by standing among bones and skeletons.

Severus had kept, tightly clenched in the center of his own mind behind the Occlumency shields he had already learned, the treacherous thought that someone who sought immortality was, of course, afraid of death.

But he was not joining the Death Eaters because of any riches or glory or eternal life. He was joining because this was the one place in the world, as Malfoy had promised him, where he would be able to give his bitterness and hatred free reign. All of those people the Dark Lord would target—Mudbloods, Muggles, Light-devoted purebloods who would refuse to join him—were those who had places in the world, places that Severus was outcast from for one reason or another.

His hand tightened on his wand for a moment as he and Malfoy rounded a corner, and he remembered Tobias, his father. Tobias
and Eileen had been involved in a great gyre of self-hatred; Severus remembered first realizing from the time he was four that his parents had married each other in order to destroy each other more effectively. But Tobias had at least regarded his wife with eyes full of satisfaction. He understood her. She was a witch. He had not known how to regard Severus—born to a Muggle, and yet magically stronger than his mother was—and that had pushed Severus forever, if he ever would have thought of it, out of trying to live as a Muggle. He was the child of no world, not of two.

“Kneel.”

That was the only warning Malfoy gave him before he abruptly dropped to a knee. Severus had been ready, though. Malfoy was always pulling shit like this, trying to catch Severus off-guard and make him look bad. It was the way Malfoy reminded him that, however strong he was, he would always be a halfblood.

Severus’s knee touched the stone floor at the same moment Malfoy’s did, and he bowed his head. He had not seen into the room ahead of them yet, had not seen the Dark Lord sitting on his dark throne.

He found that he did not need to. The breathing darkness that surrounded him, the earthy scent, was enough to give away its owner’s personality. For Severus, it was like being in the belly of a beast. The beast lay licking its jaws contemplatively, while all around him great coils of strength stretched into the darkness. In a short time, it would arise and devour the world. For now, it was content to lie still and dream of its future conquests.

Severus had never been in the presence of someone so strong. Dumbledore was a Light Lord, yes, but he had long ago harnessed his power, and mostly used it to play silly games. Something about not intimidating people, and wanting them to see that not all Lords were evil, he had said the one time Severus asked.

This was someone whose strength Severus could join in and ride, and strike back with at the ones who had hurt him.

All those thoughts raced through his head in an instant, and then the Dark Lord’s voice spoke, high and cold and perfectly in tune with the fall and rise of the beast’s breathing. “Lucius. Leave us.”

“My lord,” Malfoy said, although Severus detected a faint hint of confusion in his voice. Severus did not dare to smile over that, but he pictured Malfoy as a beast dragging a wounded leg as he escaped, and that was enough.

And then Malfoy was gone, and he was alone in the room with the Dark Lord. Severus felt Voldemort turn his regard on him. It was not easy to bear. But Severus had not needed Lucius’s warnings for that. Rumors had traveled through Slytherin House ever since the Dark Lord’s sudden and spectacular appearance eight years ago. They had whispered that this was a real Dark Lord, one who made Grindelwald look like a whipped dog. A large part of Grindelwald’s strength had come from his allies, and from the Lightning Guard he hollowed out into mindless fighting automata and arranged about him. This Lord was a force to be reckoned with all by himself, either the most powerful wizard in the world or almost there, a Parselmouth, an absorbere, the last descendant of Salazar Slytherin himself.

All those features added enormously to the legend, Severus had to admit, and made it easier to know what place in life the Dark Lord would take up; continuing Salazar Slytherin’s work of eliminating Mudbloods was only fitting for a descendant of his. Slytherin had tried to make it happen by keeping Mudbloods from a wizarding education that would teach them to control their powers. Lord Voldemort was simply more…direct.

“I can feel your mind moving.”

The words were calmer and colder than the ones spoken to Malfoy. Severus had expected that, too.

“Rise.”

He stood, his eyes still carefully on the floor. He could see the bottom of a dark throne, now, the slick stone gleaming as if polished by blood. The only light in the chamber came from a group of torches arrayed about the circular walls. The light showed they were not actual torches, though. Their light was the color of death, pale white and constantly shifting, and Severus allowed himself a touch of wonder. He had heard the Dark Lord had rediscovered witchfire; he had not known he would ever see it.

The serpent wrapped three times around the throne lifted her head and hissed lazily at him. The Dark Lord laughed, and then
Severus listened to the breathless hissing in clinical detachment. Yes, he could see why this had captured Malfoy. Merlin knew why, but Lucius had a wild dream of becoming a Parselmouth someday.

“Why have you truly come to me?” the Dark Lord asked abruptly. “Nagini smells such bitterness in you as would become a wizard many times older than you are.”

Severus started to reply, but Voldemort cut him off before he could. “You may raise your eyes and look at me.”

Severus did that, cautiously. For one thing, meeting the eyes of a Lord-level wizard was almost never a good idea, even if he didn’t have the gift of compulsion the way both Dumbledore and the Dark Lord did. For another, he knew the Dark Lord was a Legilimens.

The Dark Lord’s face was wrapped and warped with shadows, the legacy, Severus knew, of long years of study in Dark magic outside of Britain. His eyes burned out of the middle of that, though, smoldering coals. Red. The force of his Legilimency reared out of them like the wolf from Norse mythology who was meant to eat the sun.

Severus had been prepared. As the Legilimency came at him, he flattened his Occlumency pools, shimmering silver shallows over the most important secrets he wanted to keep. He let the Dark Lord see everything else: the bitterness piled on bitterness that he endured when those who should have been his peers in Slytherin House discovered that he was a halfblood; the endless exploits and tricks and attempts to kill him that the Marauders engaged in; how every corner of their world granted him uneasy respect for his magical ability while putting barriers in the way of everything else; how even Professor Slughorn, his own Head of House and Potions instructor, had favored Lily Evans over him, Mudblood though she was and inferior student to Severus though she was, because she was pretty.

The dark tide sluiced over him, allowing him to somewhat study Voldemort as Voldemort studied him. Severus could feel hatred in it, and the thick film of long contact with magic based on blood and death, and the oil of indifference to suffering. The Dark Lord used pain and fear and hatred as tools to achieve his goals. He would not let himself be distracted by the chance to make someone suffer just a bit more. He could judge torture and murder to a nicety, and know when they would be effective and when they would not.

And, of course, the Dark Lord was letting him see all this, and he knew what Severus knew, and some of those impressions might be wrong. Severus accepted that. What mattered was the magic, and the knowledge. He had no doubt that the knowledge was real. The Dark Lord had been gathering support for eight years, and that support was moving faster and faster, as almost the whole of Slytherin House rippled with growing tendrils around its sixth- and seventh-year students, as the Dark pureblood families forsook their stubbornness and listened more closely. As an avalanche gathered more power the more it rolled, so the Dark Lord was very close to his first great rising.

“Well, well, Severus.”

Severus looked up. He had been lost in his own mental impressions of the Legilimency, and had not used his physical eyes in some moments. He found the Dark Lord regarding him with—

*Approval? Surely not. But he does seem to recognize something in me.*

“You are utterly willing, are you not?” The Dark Lord’s voice was soft with something that might have been amusement. Severus did not mind. Amusement was one of the mildest reactions he received. Besides, the Dark Lord could be amused and still let him torture and kill and strike and *use* the magic that flared so restlessly inside him. He nodded.

“Very well,” the Dark Lord said. “Your initiation will be a month from now, in the middle of that first great rising.”

Severus nodded again. Unspoken were the words that if he told anyone about this, he would be dead. Of course he would. He had come into a world where the realities were simple: life and death, blood and power.

But it was a world where he had a place, a defined relationship to all of them. He was contemptuous of life, unafraid of death, a means to release blood, and a possessor of power. He was here, and they were there, arrayed about him, in directions he knew precisely.

“You will be a valuable addition to my ranks,” the Dark Lord said softly. “You know by heart lessons that many of my Death Eaters must spend months or years learning.” A long pause, while Nagini sang a crooning song and laid her head in the Dark
Lord’s lap. “Your mother taught you well,” the Dark Lord finished at last.

Severus nodded again. Of course, he had not truly hoped to preserve his mother’s identity or teachings as a secret.

“You are dismissed,” the Dark Lord said. “I am pleased with you, Severus, very pleased.”

Severus bowed, and then turned and trekked out of the chamber. The passage was not long, and he had memorized all the ways that Malfoy brought him out of habit.

He had not spoken a single word in the entire audience with the Dark Lord, he realized, while for years he had tried to justify himself with words—in Slytherin House, to his father, with his professors. That, more than anything, told him that he had found a place where he belonged, and a perfect understanding with a man who would use him and discard him if he were useless—but who would also offer him the opportunity for revenge.

Severus was willing to be used, for that.

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Chapter Eleven: Unspeakables (and Slytherins) Play Chess

Snape came awake with a gasp that he could not control. At least the gasp was soundless, and he pinched his lips shut immediately after allowing that puff of diseased air to escape. Then he sat up, hand closing on the wand that lay close beside his head, and snapped, “Candela.”

The candle sitting on the table near his bed burst into flame. Snape studied his bedroom, or rather, the room Harry had given him, carefully in the wake of the dancing shadows. He could see nothing. The strangest sensation that he felt, now that he was awake, was the tingling of remembered pain in his left forearm, and a half-smothered desire to call himself “Severus.”

He sat back, slowly, against the pillow and closed his eyes. Just before he left Gollrish Y Thie to come to Cobley-by-the-Sea, Joseph had volunteered information, quite unexpectedly, on the dreams that the Sanctuary used to heal the minds of those who refused the Seers’ help.

“Usually, the dreams last only as long as the guest is in the Sanctuary.” Joseph had had his hands dancing over the powdered bicorn horn, powdering it further, and he hadn’t looked at Snape even when Snape stared at his back. “But then, most of our guests remain until the healing is complete. If he leaves before it is, then the dreams may pursue him, adding themselves to his mind until he faces and acknowledges the buried memories and problems the dreams want him to acknowledge.”

Snape laughed now, also soundlessly, and without amusement. *What other acknowledgment can I give? I paid my penance for that mistake, that choosing of Dark over Light. I carry his brand and will for the rest of my life, and I served Dumbledore’s cause until I saw how corrupt he was in his turn.*

But, of course, nothing would ever be enough to pay for his mistakes. Snape had known that when he saw the pity in Dumbledore’s eyes each time he returned from a spying mission to report, when he saw McGonagall watching him, when he saw the way his students shied away from him. It was the same as it had always been. Every time he reached out through the walls of bitterness, his hand was slapped away, and when he reacted with the defensive pride he had earned, then others accused him of unreasonable sarcasm or hatred.

*That is not true,* a voice that sounded suspiciously like Joseph’s informed him. *There is one exception. Harry.*

Snape caught his breath, then nodded shortly. Yes, very well, Harry was not one who slapped his hand away. And Snape had decided to face the dreams in the first place because of Harry, and he had come to live in a house full of werewolves because of Harry.

And, at the moment, Harry had far more to worry about than Snape did. The Unspeakables were no enemy to disregard.

Snape stood, gathered up a cloak from the corner of the room, and went to the door. He had known almost at once that it was still deep night; his years as a Death Eater gave him a sensitivity to the hours. He was not likely to meet anyone as he walked the halls of Cobley-by-the-Sea and thought, and that was exactly the way he liked it.

He stopped at Harry’s room first, of course. He was one of the few people who did not have to worry about the wards on the door, because Harry had tuned them to Snape so that he could bypass every one of them. He opened the door and looked in carefully,
forcing his eyes to see past the tricky shadows the moonlight through the open window wanted to impose on them.

Harry lay in a jumbled bundle in the middle of the bed that at first made no sense to Snape, until he realized that the bundle consisted of two boys coiled around each other. He snorted and eased the door shut. That occurrence had become more common than not of late. Draco spent almost every night in Harry’s bed rather than his own. Snape supposed that he did not mind that. If Harry had a nightmare—or, Merlin forbid it, a vision—then Draco would know at once, and could wake him up. If someone tried to attack Harry while he slept, Draco would be there to fight for him.

Of course, if Draco pushed too far and did something that panicked Harry unforgivably instead of amusing him, then Snape had his vengeance carefully prepared. One month of uncontrollably and wetly sneezing and vomiting every time he became aroused should make Draco reconsider before doing that again.

Snape eased into the kitchen and lit the candle waiting on the counter with a flicker of his wand, then drew out a kettle from the kitchen cupboard and set about making tea. He made the Muggle motions automatically, though he used his magic to prepare it. When he noticed, he scowled and made himself stop performing them.

Once, he had believed that he belonged nowhere, because there was nowhere a halfblood could belong. Then he’d accepted his place in the magical world, and that meant he struggled to reject everything that was Muggle about him.

From what he could remember, Dumbledore had once considered sending the Potters to live under Fidelius in the Muggle world itself, once Harry and his brother were marked. Snape was grateful that he had not. To have a son who thought of himself as part of that world would be intolerable.

A light step behind him warned him. He whirled about, wand raised, and just barely managed to keep from casting the curse on his lips. Amber eyes gleamed in the moonlight through the kitchen window, and a growl throbbed in the throat of the woman standing behind him.

She stopped, with a shake of her head, once she recognized him. “Professor Snape,” she said shortly.

Snape inclined his head coldly back to her, and held up the kettle. The woman nodded. “Yes, please,” she said, and then sat down on the other side of the table, still watching warily. All the werewolves, Snape knew, could smell his jumpiness around them, and this one—

Well, this one had a keen nose, and another reason altogether to want to avoid his curses. Besides, she was a Muggle. She knew she had no defense against his wand, other than a werewolf’s innate resistance to direct magic, and that meant nothing if Snape cut down the roof and let it fall on her. Snape had observed the pack when they did not know he was observing them, and noticed those who had no magic automatically kept their subservience around the ones who did, unless they were mated. Harry seemed to think that the pack functioned smoothly together, without hierarchies except for the distinction between packmate and alpha. Snape knew better.

*Power is always there, if one looks for it,* he thought, and waited until the kettle began to sing before turning again to face this werewolf, a young woman who called herself Camellia. He was gratified to see that she had her arms folded. It made her look more like a sulky teenager, though he assumed she was in her early twenties, and less like the monster he had glimpsed looming ahead in the darkness in the spring of his sixth year.

“You have not yet told Harry?” he asked silkily as he poured the tea into two separate cups.

“He hasn’t made a comment,” said Camellia, watching the tea as if she wanted to be sure that he would put no potion into it. Snape concealed his amusement. *If I wanted to do so, she would not see me do it.* “I assume that he knows and just doesn’t want to cause discord. I mean, how could he not know?”

“By that alone, you prove that you do not truly understand him,” Snape said coldly as he levitated Camellia’s cup across the table to her, and sat down on the far side with his. “If he knew, he would come to us and try to reason matters out. And he would feel far more anger for my sake than yours.”

Camellia pulled her lips back from her teeth without a sound. As the moon turned towards the dark, that was less of a threat than it might have been if it were swelling, but it was a threat all the same. The whole pack could smell his fear, Snape knew.

He controlled that fear now, though. He knew that he had to, if he wanted to live and work in the same place that Harry was living. And the knowledge of the poisons—three separate ones now, not just the silvery one he had invented when he was brewing those months after the attack outside Hogwarts—lying in his trunk upstairs was one of the major things enabling him to
control it.

“You are the one who does not understand what an alpha means to his pack,” the girl said, spitefully. “It doesn’t matter that he’s not a werewolf. He’s ours. Ours to protect, to love, to be led by, to guard. And he’s sworn himself to be more than that. You will die if you touch him with hostile intent. I need no magic, not even the full moon, to kill.” She lifted one hand as though to remind Snape of her more-than-mortal strength.

Again the terror tried to cry in him, and if he let it, the cry would turn to a remembered howl, the howl blowing down the tunnel out of the Shrieking Shack in the moments before James Potter had come hurtling towards him, shouting his name…

But he was master of that fear. He had subdued it so well for years that even Harry had never sensed it. Snape weighted it and threw it into an Occlumency pool, and said, “What you have yet to understand is that Harry must share himself with far more people than your pack. He is not just yours, for he is owed debts and has responsibilities in every direction.”

Camellia showed her teeth again, but this time it was definitely in a smile. Snape watched in momentary confusion as she drank her tea, deliberately lapping it, and then put down the cup and stood.

“That is the place where you do not understand,” she said. “None of us expected Loki to return us equal love to the love we had for him. We were too many, for one thing, and his bonds to all of us were different. And he loved Gudrun more than he loved us. He fulfilled his obligation to the pack by giving us a new, highly protective alpha. We accept that.

“But Harry is that alpha now. We love him that way. It does not matter if he also frees house elves, if he loves his mate more than he loves us, if he sides with you. He is still ours by virtue of our love for him.”

She whirled and stalked out of the room, leaving Snape alone with his tea and his thoughts. He finished the first, carefully organized the second, and rose.

He did not think Harry had noticed yet that it was almost always Camellia who spoke with him, Camellia who took the lead when he planned something with the werewolves, Camellia who had detailed the way in which the werewolves would guard the festival being held two days from now and sniff over members of arriving packs. She was the highest-ranking of the pack after Loki, despite her lack of magic. She had power.

He was sure Harry had not noticed, did not remember, that it was Camellia who had seized his guardian that day by the lake and held him, her teeth pressed to his throat, while another of her companions seized Draco and a third went after Moody. If Harry knew, he would have reacted as Snape predicted he would, ironing out the problem. If nothing else, he would know now that he couldn’t leave that animosity between Snape and Camellia simmering.

He did not yet know, and Camellia had not told him. She might be a werewolf, but she was no Slytherin.

Snape would keep the information silent until he could best use it.

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Rufus was working early that morning, before even Percy Weasley had arrived. He had not been able to sleep, and of course the Minister Flooing to the Ministry was not something that anyone would question.

He did question the knock on his door, until he realized how soft it was, almost ghostly. He should not have been able to hear it across the office, and yet he did. And neither of the Aurors standing guard outside had raised any alarms. It was the way that the Unspeakables had contacted him before, when his first allies from the Department of Mysteries, swearing to back him against Amelia, appeared.

He responded as they had told him to, closing his hand around his wand and tapping his fingers on it three times.

The door seemed to become misty, and then two gray-cloaked figures appeared, walking through it. Wilmot still did not raise the alarm, and his wards didn’t react, either. Rufus nodded, reluctantly impressed. The artifacts the Department cared for, those things too dangerous or Dark or cursed to be allowed into wizarding society, permitted them to do many things that other wizards would misuse—once mastered. It was, Rufus thought, and not for the first time, a good thing that the Department of Mysteries was loyal to the Ministry.

“Minister,” said the first cloaked figure, the slightly taller one. His companion had taken a seat already; he bowed before taking one. His voice was calm and inflectionless. Rufus was sure he would not have been able to recognize it in a different context.
“We bring you grave news.”

You hardly expected good news, Rufus reminded himself, and inclined his head shortly. “What is it?”

“We have a division in our own Department,” the Unspeakable said. “A few of our members think that our goals can best be met by aiding Amelia Bones. They have been feeding her information, and we believe that her sudden courage to pass new anti-werewolf laws and establish the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts may come from their backing.”

“That would make sense,” Rufus said slowly. In his last conversation with Amelia, he’d made a good deal of eye contact. Her own eyes were wide, graveyards where fear had gone to die, and she seemed constantly on the verge of telling him something. “She is, then, constrained to act against her will?”

“Not with artifacts,” said the calm voice. “With terror alone. But yes, we think so.”

Rufus leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. In the end, though, he had to shake his head. He simply knew too little about the Department of Mysteries to choose what the best course of action would be. But that was why he was lucky to have allies there, he knew. He could lean on their advice. The Unspeakables might rarely act in concert with other Departments, and then for motives as mysterious as their titles, but ultimately, they were chosen for their loyalty to the wizarding world as a whole. They would despise someone like Cornelius Fudge, who had only been in the office for his own good, but they had approached Rufus. They appreciated him, Rufus knew.

“And you do not think we can stop this influence as of now?” he asked.

“No,” said the Unspeakable. “Until we know the reason our siblings think encouraging Madam Bones is an aid to our Department’s goals, we cannot act. Keep it as a stalemate for now, Minister. The weight of the situation must be the only thing that changes it. Knowledge is a precious commodity.”

I should have expected an Unspeakable to say that, Rufus thought, shaking his head again. The secondary purpose of the Department of Mysteries, besides making sure that wizarding society was cleared of anything intolerably dangerous, was to gain as much knowledge of those artifacts as they could, so they could be used to benefit wizards and witches when they were understood. Some of the greatest magical discoveries in the last two centuries had come from the Department of Mysteries. That an Unspeakable would counsel waiting until he had all the knowledge he needed was no surprise.

“There is one thing more,” the Unspeakable said. “I would hesitate to mention it, Minister, but we know you as a man of duty, who does the right thing even when it does not suit his own convenience.” He paused. “Alas, there are other people in the world who are not so dutiful.”

Rufus’s muscles tightened. He knew, somehow, what this was about, even before he asked for confirmation. “Harry?”

The Unspeakable’s hood moved in a shallow nod. “Yes. We approached him yesterday, when we realized that he had come to the Ministry and used magic in the offices of the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures.”

Rufus’s hands clenched on the side of the desk. Would Harry have been able to resist the temptation, with the new anti-werewolf laws on the books? He knows what Department, other than the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts, is responsible for handling those laws. Amelia’s pets only hunt. The Regulators take care of registered werewolves. “What did he use the magic to do?”

“Try to escape the notice of our wards, first of all,” said the Unspeakable. “Then we felt his power flare. We are still not entirely sure what that meant, but we have noticed an unusual bustle of activity in one of the offices.”

Rufus closed his eyes. He would not compel anyone. I could not believe that of him. But he did say the last time we met that while he hoped he would never have to use magic against anyone in the Ministry, he would do it now. Intimidating someone, as he did to Amelia? Clearing the way for a friend? Oh, yes, I can see it.

“Go on,” he whispered, while his heart racked itself apart with bitterness for the necessities of war and revolution.

“We tried to talk to him, but he evaded us. We can only assume that he thought we were trying to hurt him, instead of have a private conversation. When we attempted to use one of our artifacts that would have established a privacy barrier, he swallowed the magic from it.” The Unspeakable hesitated again, a minute pause hardly worth observing if all his other words had not come out so calm and steady. “We fear that he may consider our artifacts as sources of magic that would allow him to accomplish more and greater things.”
Rufus swallowed. *Harry drains magic from people with only the greatest reluctance. From objects? There were those stories of children whom Voldemort condemned to be Squibs in the attack on Hogwarts, whom Harry restored as wizards. He did that by draining Black magical artifacts.*

*But he’s the heir of Black. What happens if he chooses to see the Department of Mysteries and its collections as acceptable prey, because they are not sentient?*

Rufus could see him deciding that. And Harry was—well, not inclined to listen to advice, not all the time. Rufus could not see him deciding, now, to raid the Department of Mysteries and drain the artifacts there. But what if he decided, in the end, that it was the only way to make those he fought for safe? The anti-werewolf laws stood a good chance of getting worse, and before Harry would stand for werewolves being executed again or sent to prison, Rufus guessed, he would rise for them.

He remembered Harry’s calm, stern face, and the magic that had flared around him. Harry had made his choice. He had used magic in the Ministry—Lord-level magic, against which ordinary wizards and witches didn’t stand a chance.

And Rufus wanted the Ministry to be a place for ordinary wizards and witches, where they could get the help they needed and craved, and where the law, which was a tool that could work for anyone, not just those with enough power, was in effect.

It was, perhaps, a distant, foolish dream of his, the one that said, someday, the exceptions for Lords and Ladies that were built into wizarding law would be smoothed out. That everyone ordinary would learn not to live in fear of that powerful magic, that they would remember their numbers were as a great a force, in many ways, as that magic, and they would nod in approval as the last traces of a positively Dark Ages mindset were excised from the Ministry’s records.

Harry had seemed to understand that, when Rufus warned him that he didn’t want Lords mucking about in his Ministry. Dumbledore’s magically compelled Order of the Phoenix had crossed the line. Harry using magic to aid his own supporters, if that was all he had done, did the same thing.

“I will have to contact Harry and tell him this,” he said heavily, opening his eyes.

“He will probably write to you,” the Unspeakable said softly. “Violent and—misunderstanding of our role as the former Mr. Potter seems to be, he is not dishonest.”

Rufus nodded, appreciating that. It was true. Harry would probably realize their ways had parted already, assumed Rufus would find out somehow, from the Unspeakables or broken wards if nothing else, and know that all that remained was the formal apology.

“When he does, do not tell him of our role, though of course he may guess it,” the Unspeakable cautioned, rising to his feet. “We must understand the divisions in our Department first. And, of course, the price of our aid remains the same as always: if you tell anyone of it, it will stop coming.”

“I understand.” Rufus leaned back and regarded them with bleak eyes. “Thank you for telling me the truth, gentlemen. I could only wish that everyone’s loyalty to the Ministry was as great as your own.”

The Unspeakables gave short half-nods, half-bows, then went fuzzy and vanished. A moment later, Rufus heard Wilmot’s voice greeting Percy. Then the door opened and Percy entered the office, humming under his breath.

He stopped when he saw the expression on Rufus’s face. “Sir?” he said hesitantly.

“I have a new task for you, Percy,” Rufus said, trying to force his features into an expression of good humor. He *could not* allow himself to brood on this. He had known that his and Harry’s paths would most likely separate one day. Harry was not a Declared Lord, but no one with that level of magic ever remained outside politics for long.

And Rufus could not sacrifice his dreams, his people, his *Ministry* for one person, however complex, however good an ally or leader he would have made.

“What is it, sir?”

“You have a training session coming up soon, I believe,” said Rufus neutrally. “One in which you, as a junior Auror, are to observe one Department in the Ministry and see how it smoothly functions from day to day.”
“Make sure it’s the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures,” Rufus said. “Harry has been there, and he may have left some—traces of magical activity, or unnaturally fast help for an ally of his.”

Percy’s face cleared with recognition—and with an unexpected sadness. Rufus was forced to realize, once again, that he was not the only person who had valued Harry highly. “Yes, sir,” Percy whispered, and then took his place at his usual desk, behind the thick privacy ward, in a thoughtful mood.

Rufus sat back in his chair and closed his eyes again. This seemed to be his morning for thinking.

Are we truly so different? Is there not something I could have done that would have made matters fall out for both of us? For that matter, is there some way that we can ally with each other even now?

But every road he turned in the maze led to a dead end. There was simply no way he could choose Harry over the Ministry. He was what he was: the Minister of wizarding Britain, responsible for the safety of many, not only a few, and not only those who had sworn oaths to him. There were hundreds of wizards who did things that Rufus disapproved of morally every day of his life. There were plenty in the Ministry, including Amelia, who had surrendered to fear. It was still his responsibility to see that criminals received a fair trial, that Departments went on functioning in spite of the fear, that the world spun on. He would do what he could for the werewolves, but he could not change his whole path to help them, as Harry had.

And while I am affected by Harry’s story, and while he has helped me, there is a reason I never become his full-fledged ally. He is a revolutionary; I am a reformer. There it is, at the bottom of it.

I wish him well, I always will, but we cannot walk side by side.

He sat up and shook his head. Perhaps things would look better once he had his morning cup of tea.

And perhaps not.

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Harry had almost finished his letter to Lucius, and the one to Fred and George to ask if they could establish some line of communication to Percy, when an unfamiliar owl swooped through the window of Cobley-by-the-Sea. He rose warily to his feet, especially when a pair entered a moment later, one flying to Connor, who was reading a book on Animagi on the other side of the room, and one to Draco, just glancing up from a letter to his mother. Since Peter had told him of Rosier’s trick with the Snitch Portkey, Harry was paranoid about any letter that didn’t come with Hedwig or one of the owls that the werewolves sent out.

Connor, though, had already opened his letter, and now he laughed—at the look on his brother’s face, Harry assumed. “It’s all right, Harry,” he said, and waved the paper within around. “It’s our OWL results!”

Harry blinked, then turned and accepted the parchment from the bird gently nudging at his shoulder. He scanned it for a moment, and then, in spite of himself, he began to laugh, too.

“I fail to see what is funny about one’s OWL’s,” Snape remarked from the door. He never let Harry alone long now without checking up on him, as if he feared Harry would take belated offense from their conversation in Gollrish Y Thie and go to another of the Black houses. Or perhaps he’s just avoiding the werewolves, Harry thought, as he grinned at his guardian.

“I got an Outstanding in the Divination practical,” Harry said, and then began laughing all over again at the expression on Snape’s face.

“How did that happen?” Connor demanded, sounding envious. “I was Poor at it!”

Harry shook his head. “Because I made up a load of bollocks, and the proctor accepted it.” He returned to his parchment again. “That must be the reason I got Exceeds Expectations in the Astronomy theory portion, too. I can’t remember enough of the bloody constellations.”

“I can,” Draco announced.

“Outstanding, right?” Harry asked him, and Draco nodded smugly. “Not my fault your mother’s star-obsessed,” Harry muttered, and went back to the parchment again.
“Outstanding in Potions, one would assume,” Snape drawled, leaning against the doorway.

Harry smiled at him. “Both the theory and the practical.”

He wondered if either Draco or Connor noticed the softening in Snape’s eyes, or the tiny, tiny inclination of his head that he gave at that news. Harry felt a brief, flashing wave of pride lift him, as if he were a speck in a beam of sunshine.

It was replaced by a gnawing hunger. Sometimes, Harry’s own yearning for a parent who acted like a parent surprised him. At least this time, he had expected it, and he could somewhat quell the hunger by telling himself sternly that Snape was proud of him and loved him. What more could he expect? It was better, far better, than the ultimately false love his mother and father had pretended to.

He distracted himself with the OWL results again. Outstanding in Defense Against the Dark Arts, both theory and practical—he would have been embarrassed to get anything less, especially with Acies as a professor last year. Exceeds Expectations in History of Magic. Whoever marked that must really have liked loads of bollocks. Exceeds Expectations in Charms, Acceptable in Transfiguration, probably because they’d made him use his bloody wand. The latter mark did worry him, though. If he hoped to become an Animagus, he needed to improve. At least he’d achieved Outstanding in the Charms theory portion and Exceeds Expectations on the Transfiguration exam.

Acceptable in Herbology, no surprise. Acceptable in Arithmancy, which he had no doubt Hermione had received an Outstanding in; he didn’t have Hermione’s head for numbers. Harry nodded. All right, then. He thought that was fine for someone with highly specialized knowledge, mostly wandless magic, and a Dark Lord after his head at the time, along with a battle he was planning for.

He started as he felt warmth drape around his neck, and then Argutus’s head poked around his throat. “What did you receive?”

Harry shook his head. He had tried to explain to Argutus about OWL’s before, and the Omen snake never understood, but that never kept him from asking. “Outstanding in all the subjects that matter,” he told Argutus, floating the OWL results in the air beside him and scratching the serpent under the chin, “except Transfiguration, which is a problem. If I want to figure out how to become an Animagus, then I need to grow better at that.”

He caught a glimpse of Snape staring fixedly at him from the corner of his eye. Harry frowned, though he made sure to keep it to himself. Why? It’s not like he hasn’t heard me speaking Parseltongue before.

“But you are going to be an Omen snake,” Argutus said, sounding confused.

Harry blinked. “What?” He was actually fairly sure that his Animagus form, if he ever managed to achieve it, would be a lynx.

“Because I’m here, and I can show you how to manage it,” said Argutus. “And because it’s the only animal worth becoming, of course.”

Harry chuckled and buried his face in the snake’s scales. “I’m afraid it doesn’t work that way,” he said.

“So what way does it work?”

Harry began again to explain. At least there was the hope that Argutus might understand the Animagus form better than he understood OWL’s, and Harry preferred arguing with his Omen snake to any other form of argument. Argutus’s presence had been a comfort yesterday, when he’d told Draco and Connor about the Unspeakable attack and had had to endure both oaths of vengeance and Draco looking at him gently, tenderly, all over, as if he might have an invisible wound somewhere.

And then Draco had ended up sleeping in bed with him last night, and insisting on some lazy morning snogging.

Harry glanced up and met his partner’s eyes from across the room. Draco raised one eyebrow and smiled.

He did say he was going to push. But then Harry let that part of his thinking, along with his explanation about Animagi to Argutus, lapse, because Draco was mouthing something.

It looked like, “Just wait for the festival.”

Harry frowned uneasily, wondering what that meant, until Argutus nudged him again and demanded, “But why can’t you just
convince your soul that it looks like an Omen snake? Maybe it will listen.”

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Lucius enjoyed owls interrupting him at breakfast no more than he did callers using the spell Charles Rosier-Henlin had invented. He therefore finished his tea before he accepted the letter, for all that he knew it was from Harry.

It seemed that Harry had wanted to go formal for this request—or perhaps he had wanted to see if someone were watching his post and if Lucius actually received the letter—or perhaps Draco had told him that Lucius preferred to accept letters. He felt a small smile widen across his face as he fed the snowy owl bits of bacon from his own plate. **Such a treat, to be able to wonder about many possibilities with this Lord, rather than only one.**

He opened the letter, and the ambush came.

Dear Lucius:

_As Draco may have told you, I am currently exploring legal options available to the Black heir in my handling of the anti-werewolf laws. I went to a certain office in the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures, which is now held by a man named Aurelius Flint, Marcus Flint’s father. He seemed to know more than I would have given him credit for, especially because the old debt to the House of Black merely obliges the person working in that office to help; there’s no reason he could have anticipated beforehand that I would choose that route or that I would want information about that particular problem. What do you know of Aurelius Flint? Is he a contact of yours in the Ministry? What are his political positions, his connections?_

Thank you,

Harry.

Lucius put the letter down on the table and stared at it. The snowy owl hooted cheerfully, as if to say that any time he felt like writing a reply, she would carry it.

Lucius stared through her in turn. He was thinking.

He could see why Harry had not been afraid to trust this information to a letter. What he was doing was perfectly legal. That exception for the House of Black had been passed long ago, and anyone who wanted to look at the books would find it.

Aurelius Flint was the center of a vast network of favors owed and secrets possessed. Lucius knew him personally, and had done favors for him himself on several occasions. That, in and of itself, was something Harry could find out by asking someone else, and was not what had torn the ground out from under Lucius’s feet to reveal the abyss hiding below.

No, there was the fact that Flint had worked through a network of favors that had resulted in Lucius being able to enter the Ministry undetected and torture the Potters. And he undoubtedly had the information, or could in a few hours’ time, that would reveal that to Harry, even after Lucius had taken steps to have someone else, former Auror Fiona Mallory, take the fall for his torture, and then put her into a coma when she was sacked.

If Harry discovered that Lucius had tortured his mother and father, Lucius’s power and favored position with Harry would come to an end. He had no illusions about that. Justified vengeance or not, acting on pureblood traditions or not, claiming the debt for child abuse that Harry never would or not, Harry would feel compelled by his morals to turn his back on Lucius.

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He reached into his robe pocket and drew out another letter, this one on a simple sheet of gray parchment, with the seal of an hourglass, black on gray. That had come last night, by no visible means; it had been under Lucius’s door when he went to bed. The parchment said only, _We are in conflict with the former Mr. Potter, over werewolves. You will know your danger shortly._

And now he did. The message was from the Department of Mysteries, which Lucius had contacted for the Dark artifact that had put Fiona Mallory into her trance—irreversible save for the help of that same artifact. If Harry was in conflict with the Unspeakables, that made a second outlet by which he could learn about what had happened, and who was responsible for felling Mallory, and why. Lucius could not say he understood the Unspeakables, any more than most ordinary wizards could. They might tell Harry the truth for their own reasons, or to end the conflict, or to distract him by throwing him someone he could save.

And Lucius with her, but as someone to damn.

If Lucius did not want to lose his power in the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, he must move carefully. And the slight phrase “over
werewolves” added to the Unspeakables’ message had already given him an idea, even though he did not know why the Department of Mysteries would be interested in werewolves.

It could work. It could. But it would have to be done slowly, and secretly, and oh so carefully, because if Harry found out, Lucius was not sure that his claim on Harry’s attention would be the only thing in tatters.

He had walked through barbed conflicts like this before—when unknown people within Hogwarts were threatening his son, and in his days among the Death Eaters. If, this time, he had more to lose, that did not mean that this walk was impossible, he told himself. He only had to watch for more thorns.

He would survive, and, more, he would thrive, secure his family’s position closest to Harry’s side, get rid of the danger, and bury his own past mistakes in one stroke.

Lucius relaxed enough to reach for more bacon and feed it to—Hedwig. A saint’s name. A lovely owl, really.

He would achieve success where others would only see lurking failure.

It was what a Malfoy did.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Twelve: Harry’s Festival

This time, Harry didn’t get much more warning than a soft, gleeful laugh.

The talons that raked down his left shoulder sent him to his knees, gasping in pain. He turned about, his balance jolting as his weight transferred from his hand to his stump, and stared. The bird was hovering overhead, its clawed wings clapping steadily and its talons opening and closing.

You should know what I am now, it told him. And you should not have forgotten, you should never have forgotten, no. You are involved in too many battles, but one lies behind them all, and that is the battle that must be faced at the end, the true war, with your true enemy.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Harry growled, forcing the words out past the pain in his shoulder. The cold that crept across the cuts hurt, but in a few moments, they had gone numb. Harry glanced down, and restrained a grimace. At least the cuts weren’t nearly as deep or severe as the ones the bird had inflicted on him in the Sanctuary.

Look in the mirror, the bird said, and laughed, and then lifted straight up towards the ceiling of the loo. It vanished through a spray of warm water, confirming Harry’s idea further that it was a creature of pure magic. If it wasn’t, then the warm water should have done some damage to a creature of ice.

Harry spent some time staring after it, then shook his head and stood, walking over to the mirror. Since he was in the loo, he should check.

The ice was already melting from the cut, defeated by the warm atmosphere of the shower. Harry stared, and for a long moment could make out no pattern. Then he twisted to the right, and realized that the wound could be seen as a lightning bolt made up of three separate lines.

And has every wound it’s given me been a lightning bolt?

Mind preoccupied, he tried a healing spell, but of course it didn’t work. None of his healing spells ever seemed to work on the wounds that the bird gave him, unless it was a minor effect like warming them or stopping the blood flow. He wrapped his towel around his waist and stepped back out into the bedroom.

Draco was awake, and watching him.

Harry told himself that it was ridiculous that his focus shifted almost at once from the cut on his shoulder to the fact that he was nearly naked in front of his boyfriend. Draco would probably like him to think that way, but he had the wound to deal with, and then the festival, which was today, required arrangements and preparation.

You’re afraid, a voice that sounded far too much like Sylaranas’s told him.
Harry told it to shut up, and shifted so that his shoulder was to Draco. “That damn bird showed up in the loo again,” he said.

Draco jumped up and came to his side at once, exclaiming softly as he tried to heal the cuts. He said nothing about their shape. Harry thought one had to be in the right position for that, and he was already thinking there was nothing to it. He knew some of his other cuts hadn’t been shaped like lightning bolts, and why should he believe anything the bird said?

“And you don’t know what this bird is, Harry, or why it’s doing this?” Draco’s fingers pressed into the skin under the wound, making Harry hiss. Draco murmured an apology, and tried *Integro*. This time, Harry could feel the skin closing over the cuts, and relaxed with a little sigh. They really were small compared to the massive amount of shredded skin and blood and pain the bird had seen fit to inflict on him last.

“No. My best guess is that there’s a wizard imprisoned somewhere who’s really angry at me, and his magic’s grown a personality of its own and come to mark me. It would fit with the ‘he’ the bird talks about, and the fact that its personality reminds me of my magic’s after it first escaped the phoenix web.” Harry squinted at his shoulder. The last traces of pain, from both ice and blood, were leaving now. He nodded his approval. “But without knowing who the wizard is, and with the bird appearing so suddenly and without warning, I don’t know how to stop this.”

“I don’t like that Vera had no idea what it was, either,” Draco muttered, running his hands down Harry’s sides until they stopped at the towel, toying with it. Harry felt gooseflesh break out along his spine, but steadfastly ignored the touch, shrugging instead.

“Neither do I. But that’s why I don’t think I’ll find the answer anytime soon. If the Seers in a magic-filled Sanctuary don’t know what it is, then why should anyone else? At least I know that bird isn’t the product of something broken or rotten in my own soul. I think they would have been able to See that.”

Draco nodded. His mind appeared to be on something else now that the cuts were healed, and Harry suspected he knew what that something was. Determinedly concealing a shiver, he turned towards his trunk.

“Harry?”

He glanced over his shoulder. “What?”

“Why are you so nervous with my seeing you nearly naked?” Draco’s face was calm, as though he were asking about an obscure point of plant lore, but the look in his eyes was anything but casual. Harry suppressed another shiver.

“Because I feel frightened,” Harry said, deciding to be blunt. Draco blinked, his face losing some of the calm mask, and Harry nodded, never taking his eyes away. “It’s not just the fact that I’m not clothed and you are—”

“In pyjamas,” Draco murmured.

“That doesn’t help,” Harry said. “It also isn’t just the fact that I know you wouldn’t hurt me. It…” He shook his head, wondering if he knew how to say it. Or, rather, if he could bear to tell Draco the details. He was so tired of everything leading back to his training, and the thought of talking about what he believed to be true of bedding made his cheeks heat up.

*I do so much better when I know that I’m giving my time or attention to someone else, and don’t demand anything in return,* he thought miserably.

“Harry,” Draco said. “We have to speak about this sooner or later. You’re not nearly as uncomfortable with touching me as you used to be. Is this something new? Or an outgrowth of the same thing?”

“An outgrowth of the same thing.” Harry decided that he had to explain, or he would probably never be able to get dressed. “Draco, I—I never expected to have a lover. At all. My mother told me that lovers are supposed to be equals and partners, and the most important people in the world to each other. It wouldn’t be fair for me to take a lover or spouse when the most important person in my life was Connor, because it wouldn’t be fair to them. They would be expecting, and deserving, my full attention, and it would go elsewhere. And I suppose I still believe that, at some level. Not about Connor, but about the war effort and the revolution effort.” He folded his arms and leaned against his trunk, trying to ignore the fact that Draco was now looking at his chest as if he were—as if he were someone special and physically beautiful. Harry had to ignore this, or not only would he never get dressed, his explanation would never go anywhere. “I’m going to be *vates*. I will be all my life. I don’t see how I can ever stop, and the task is going to take longer than my lifetime.”

He met and held Draco’s eyes. “And—I suppose I’m still worrying that if we become lovers, I won’t be able to give you all the
attention and time you deserve. I love you, Draco. You don’t deserve scraps of attention, spare moments thrown your way whenever I’m not doing anything else.”

Draco listened in silence. Harry thought he was thinking about it deeply, until he said, “Are you done?”

Harry blinked. “Yes.”

“Good.” Draco moved a step forward, his expression calm and determined. “Harry. Listen to me. You never need to worry about this again. Your mother painted a picture of a lover who would never complain, I think, someone who would just leave without a word the moment he thought your attention was going elsewhere.” He nodded, as though in response to Harry’s expression.

“You’re understanding now. I’m not like that. I’m not made for silent stoicism. I told you, I’m going to push. I’ll let you know, believe me, if I think that you’re neglecting me.”

“But—“

“Yes?”

“You deserve someone who can pay attention just to you.” Harry ran his hand through his hair. “I don’t understand why you don’t want that.”

“Because I’m not in competition with another person,” Draco said. “I’m confident that I’m more important to you than anyone else, Harry. As for being in competition with ideas—you’re not in love with them. And frankly, someone who only pays attention to me each and every moment of the day, and to nothing else, strikes me as madly obsessive, not as in love.”

Harry cocked his head. “So I’m worrying for nothing?”

“Yes.” Draco nodded at the cuts on his shoulder. “Just as I think I could have reassured you earlier if you had actually told me what the bird was and what it was doing. You still have a problem with keeping secrets, Harry. But this isn’t a problem.” His voice and face were both unearthly and calm. “Bedding each other isn’t going to change anything so fundamentally that you have to start paying attention to me and only me.”

Harry nodded slowly. He supposed he should have started questioning this earlier, in retrospect, but Lily had made the dream of lovers absolutely focused on each other sound so wonderful. She had made it sound as if she expected Connor’s future marriage or joining to be like that, and she had said that it was the relationship she and James would have had if she hadn’t needed to rear one son to save the world and the other to guard him.

“I should warn you,” Draco went on, the tone in his voice signaling an obvious shift in subject, “that if you don’t put on some clothes soon, I won’t be responsible for what happens next.”

Harry laughed and opened his trunk, the nervousness he’d felt around Draco for the last several days dissipating. So bedding would change some things, but not everything, and he could still love Draco that way and be vates.

He hesitated for a moment, then shook his head. Draco did say that I should ask questions I was wondering about, instead of always keeping them to myself.

“Can I know one thing?” he asked, as he pulled out a shirt and tugged it over his head.

“Of course,” Draco said, his voice a little more normal now.

Harry peered at him over the collar of the shirt. “You keep looking at me with—“Come on, Harry, you can say this, you aren’t a ten-year-old and you aren’t just the boy your mother raised. ——desire in your eyes,” he finished determinedly. “Does that mean something?”

“Besides the fact that I desire you and really want to fuck you when we’re both ready?” Draco grinned at him. “Not really.”

Harry did end up flushing after all, and turned to find pants and trousers. Draco laughed at him, and then went to the loo himself.

“So I should register everyone’s wand as they come through the door?” Erica was patting at her dark blue robes, which one of the werewolves had lent her. She’d been frightened to go back to her flat once she saw the memories in Snape’s Pensieve, convinced
she would find it haunted by Unspeakables. Harry had read her mind with Legimency, but found the Obliviate web there far different from the one he’d faced when he freed Remus’s memory. He didn’t want to dare try and touch it until he knew more about the artifact that had caused it.

“Right,” Harry told her. They stood near the front door of Silver-Mirror. Harry had chosen it as the most impressive of the Black houses, given all its treasures, including the sun-pool and the wind-pool and the pictures by Neptune Black, though he’d heavily warded the pools and the portraits beforehand so that no one could actually touch them without his permission. “When the guests begin arriving, just ask them for their wands. Everyone except some of the werewolves who were born Muggles should have one.”

Erica bobbed her head several times. Harry squeezed her hand, reassured her that she should do fine, and then moved away from the front door himself, through the hall lit by the gleaming fire-pool overhead. Golden drops crept down from the ceiling along lengthy chains that led to lamps, filled the lamps with rich light, and then departed back to the fire-pool overhead. Harry could see some of the werewolves who’d just arrived from Cobley-by-the-Sea, including Camellia, gaping at it. He smiled to himself, wondering what the rest of his guests would make of it.

He tripped over the hem of his robe then, and scowled. He’d ordered the robes from Madam Malkin’s with all the appropriate symbols proclaiming him heir of the House of Black, because if he was going to do this, then he was going to do this right. But, for whatever reason—maybe it was actually in the specifications for festival robes—Madam Malkin’s had made them incredibly thick. They swirled around in his feet in such heavy folds that they barely lifted out of the way in time when he tried to walk, and as for trying to stride, forget it.

Someone intoned a quick charm behind him, and his robes began floating gently around him, just enough not to be noticeable. Harry craned his neck back and saw Snape, in black robes slightly richer than what he normally wore, tucking his wand away. “Thank you,” said Harry. “I needed that.”

Snape smiled thinly. Then his eyes darted to the door, and his mouth firmed into a thin line. Turning, Harry saw Remus just entering, surrounded by other werewolves formerly of Loki’s pack. He had the urge to tense up himself, but this was going to be a festival with guests in the low hundreds. He didn’t have to talk to Remus if he didn’t want to.

“Play nicely,” he murmured to Snape.

“I play cleverly,” Snape said, and then turned and swirled away into the mass of guests already there. Harry sighed and went to greet the rest of the pack.

Remus tried to catch his eye several times. Harry ignored him politely each time, and then Peter showed up to share tales that Regulus had told him about the house, and Harry excused himself gratefully.

More guests arrived. There were those who had already taken the oath to become part of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, of course, but there were also people who had spoken to him at the meeting on the spring equinox, and pureblood families Harry had invited because it was traditional and whom he suspected had accepted the invitations out of curiosity.

And there were the werewolf packs.

Harry found that he could tell the alphas at once, and he didn’t think it was because Loki had given him the magical ability to do so; he had simply been around werewolves now, and he knew more about how the packs interacted. In a group of three or twenty of people with amber eyes and elongated teeth, he watched the way their heads swiveled, and the person they looked to, if only for a flickering moment, before they spoke, and how they tipped their bodies relative to that person. That usually let him locate the alpha.

Some of them were to be expected: a huge man taller than Loki had been and with a more commanding presence, a man with a torn face and a missing eye that said he’d often been involved in status fights, a witch with prematurely white hair who looked as if she never laughed. But others Harry would not have suspected if he hadn’t learned to read the signs. A frankly tiny woman with very dark skin and hands so soft that they felt as if she hadn’t done a day’s work in her life sniffed Harry’s ears and then nodded to him.

“My name is Peregrine,” she said, and Harry recognized the name of an alpha Camellia had told him he’d been lucky to get, since she violently distrusted most wizards and had escaped from Ministry officials trying to track down unregistered werewolves more than once.
“Welcome, Peregrine,” Harry said, and the alpha seemed appeased by the respect in his voice. She showed her teeth in a half-smile, at least, before she led the pack members swirling around her over to one of the refreshment tables set up along the wall. Harry had taken care to send Rose and her mate after a good amount of meat as well as fruit and vegetables, bread and tea and cheese and wine.

There were so many guests there that Harry found he didn’t have time for long, drawn-out conversations. He swirled among them, exchanging snippets of personal concerns with those he knew well, and finding a variety of polite topics to talk about with those he didn’t. He knew eyes were on him. He wasn’t worried. Narcissa herself had looked him over and pronounced him a Black heir her line would be proud of. Harry didn’t think he had to take anyone else’s opinion about that seriously.

Gradually, he did turn his steps towards the back of the room. He had a surprise waiting for many of his guests, in the form of a certain Pensieve and a Black artifact that reflected images.

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Snape didn’t try to prevent the pull of the crowd from leading him where it wanted him to go, but, on the other hand, when he did catch a glimpse of his prey, he moved in that direction. So, not long after the second half of Loki’s pack arrived, he found himself standing behind him as he filled his plate from one of the refreshment tables. He appeared entirely unaware of any watchers.

Snape savored that for a long moment, nursing his tea, before he spoke.

“Hello, Lupin.”

Lupin started violently, and Snape had the pleasure of watching him struggle not to drop his plate. In the end, he set it down on the edge of the table and then turned around, his eyes so wary that Snape could almost forget they were amber.

“Hello, Severus,” Lupin said, his voice formal and correct. “Did Harry send you to speak with me?” Hope tainted his voice, but Snape sneered, and the corresponding expression died off his face.

“No,” Snape said. “Why should Harry want to talk to you, Lupin? He said all he had to say to you the other day. He loves you still—” the words burned his tongue and lips like acid “—but he will never trust you again until you prove to him that you can be trusted.”

“And I don’t know how to do that!” Lupin’s eyes shone with a gratifying desperation. “I know that he’s the alpha of the pack now, and I thought I could teach him about the ways of werewolves. But he’s kept his distance from me, and now I’ve found out that he thinks I’ve betrayed him.”

Snape had another pleasure then, that of being surprised into a laugh. “And you think you did not?” he asked, when he managed to recover. “Of course you did, Lupin. You never let him know that your allegiance had changed, that you considered yourself a werewolf to the exclusion of all else, even his surrogate godfather.” He watched Lupin wince under that accusation. “You abandoned him when you were his father’s friend, his brother’s godfather, the last of those who had both seen him grow up and whom he thought he could trust. You know so much about him. He is vulnerable to you. And you turned around and sold the information to Loki.”

“There was never any question of payment,” said Lupin stiffly. “It was a question of pack loyalty.”

“And you did not tell him about that, either.” Snape paused, watching Lupin through narrowed eyes. This was the reason that he did not quite believe Camellia when she said that, because Harry was their alpha, the pack loved him and would bite off the hands of anyone who looked at him sideways. Lupin was showing no sign of either kind of love he was supposed to bear Harry. “Why not, Lupin?”

“I knew that he would not understand.”

“So quick to judge,” Snape mused. “In a life where you should have learned the folly of that.”

Lupin flushed. Snape lifted his cup of tea to his lips to hide a smile. Really, Lupin was proving to be quite the entertainment. Delicately torturing the only living, free, traitorous Marauder was something Snape had known he would enjoy, but he had not foreseen how much.

“I understand now,” Lupin said suddenly. “It’s because of you, isn’t it? He’s been keeping his distance from me for your sake.”

“And thus,” Snape said, “we have the first evidence that lycanthropy can and will rot one’s brain when one bears the curse for
longer than thirty years.”

“You bastard,” Lupin breathed. Snape couldn’t tell whether or not he’d heard him. “That’s it. You’re not afraid of werewolves, you’re afraid of me, and Harry thinks that he can’t listen to me because of that. When I joined the pack, you encouraged him to see it as a betrayal, because you’ve always thought of me that way, as a treacherous animal. Otherwise, he would have regarded it as a separation over principles. But you poisoned him against me.”

“I assure you, Lupin,” Snape said, his hand dropping so that it brushed the pocket where both his wand and a certain vial rested, “that whatever feelings I may harbor for your loathsome kind, I would not act against Harry in that way. As in so many things, I fear you are confusing me with yourself.”

Lupin showed his teeth. Snape controlled a shiver, but his scent must have changed, because Lupin’s eyes flared with triumph.

“You are afraid,” he said. “Of me. And you’re going to go and tell Harry that, that I didn’t betray him, but you encouraged him to think I did.”

“Lycanthropy rots the brain indeed,” said Snape. His hand slipped into his robe pocket and closed over the wand. “Harry made the decision on his own. He came back from the Sanctuary no longer as inclined to forgive slights and insults and betrayals as he once was. You have not learned to deal with him in this new form, Lupin, so you blame me. But you have forgotten that ordinary wizards are shapeshifters in their minds and souls, when the impetus is great enough.”

Having delivered that dignified line, Snape turned to leave, but felt a hand close on his shoulder. He knew it was Lupin’s hand, and instinctively jerked away, spilling his tea. Though there was no evidence that a werewolf’s nails could spread infection in human form, the thought of one of the beasts touching him brought back too many memories.

Lupin spun him around, using that more-than-human strength Snape hated so much, and nudged him back a few steps until he hit the wall near one of the lamps. His mouth was open, just enough to give Snape a glimpse of fangs and gullet, and he was growling softly, under his breath.

“You are going to tell Harry the truth,” he said. “I want you to tell him the truth. You did something. There’s no reason that he would stay away from me otherwise. There’s no reason that I would find it so hard to accept him as alpha—“

“Let him go, Remus.”

The voice was cold, and steady, and so firm that Snape could not at once place it. He slid his eyes to the side, and saw Peter Pettigrew standing there, his wand poking unobtrusively out of the corner of his sleeve so as not to attract attention, his blue eyes fastened on his former friend.

Snape remembered Peter from the Death Eaters as well as his school days, of course, but he had had little contact with the man since his escape from Azkaban, and this Peter was neither the fat companion to bullies nor the cringing man who had fawned over Voldemort—and who, Snape reminded himself, had only been a shadow in any case, an act to convince Voldemort that Peter had joined him out of jealousy. Peter had had the courage and strength to do what none of his friends did. Snape himself had not dreamed at the time that Peter’s actions were other than what he saw they were.

Three of us, Snape thought now, Peter and Regulus and I, all working against Voldemort in secret for our own reasons, and we could not trust each other enough to tell the truth.

“Peter, you don’t understand—“ Lupin breathed.

“I understand that you haven’t made any attempt to change at all,” said Peter. “If you’re having trouble accepting Harry as alpha, that’s a matter to take up with him and the pack. If you’re going to change your mind and come back to us, then you’ll have to act like that, not just claim it’s going to happen. You waver and waver, Remus, and your convictions are few.” His lip curled, and he moved a step closer. “No wonder you and James got along so well.”

Lupin let Snape go as if burned. “I never cooperated in Harry’s abuse,” he said defiantly. “I never knew about it, and then I found out, and then Dumbledore Obliviated me, and I feared my own anger, so I—“

“Excuses,” Peter said, pacing up beside Snape as Lupin backed further away. He never took his eyes or his wand off the werewolf, but he nodded to Snape. “Are you all right, Severus?”

“I am,” said Snape. He slid a sideways glance at Peter, wondering if it was only his words that had intimidated Lupin so.
Peter kept on watching, not moving, until Lupin dropped his eyes and moved away. Peter huffed out, a deep breath, and then shook his head. “He never truly apologizes,” he remarked, as he tucked his wand back into his sleeve. “Excuses his own behavior, yes, and explains his convictions and his reasoning at length, but he hasn’t said sorry. I think that’s the first thing he has to do with Harry, and he just won’t accept it. He’s convinced himself that he’s wronged for being a werewolf, and that all werewolves are wronged, and that apologies are for other people.”

Snape cocked his head thoughtfully. If he had heard a better description of Lupin’s behavior, he couldn’t remember it. He thought Harry might have said the same thing, if he were clear-eyed enough to see Lupin for what he really was.

“What was the spell you were going to cast?” he asked.

Peter laughed softly. “The Flea Incantation.”

Snape raised an eyebrow. “And that works even on a werewolf in human form?”

“Of course,” said Peter. “The fleas can still sense that a werewolf’s blood is richer and more to their liking than the average human’s. And they’re hard to get rid of, because they can’t be spelled away.” He blinked innocently. “Especially if one casts the spell every few days, so that they come back just as the victim thinks they’re gone.”

“I suppose that one could not learn this incantation?” Snape murmured.

Peter cocked his head. “An offer might be open, as long as there is a counter-offer of not using it enough to seriously annoy Harry.”

Snape smirked, and moved off to a corner to practice. There may be something to be said for pranking.

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“And I thought you should get to know each other.”

Harry concealed a sigh. He really couldn’t blame Connor. He hadn’t spent as much time with his brother as he’d planned to do since Connor came to stay with him, and none at all with the person his brother wanted him to meet. But he could have wished that Connor had chosen to introduce his girlfriend to Harry after Harry had shown his allies the memory of the Unspeakables’ attack.

As it was, Harry had to hold a polite expression on his face as he nodded to Parvati. “I’m glad to hear that you’re dating Connor, Patil.” Though they didn’t know each other that well, he thought “Miss Patil” would have sounded even more awkward, and “Patil” rude. “He needs an anchor at his side, Merlin knows.”

Connor laughed. Parvati, who was wearing a heavy dark gown that showed off her long black hair and delicately pretty features, didn’t.

Connor glanced back and forth between them for a moment, and then smiled. “Things are probably strained with me here,” he said, shaking his head. “I’ll go get something to eat, and let you two talk in private.” He nodded, and bounded off through the crowd before Harry could stop him.

“I did have something that I wanted to say to you without him here, actually,” Parvati said, the moment he was gone.

Harry blinked, and took a moment to respond. He had assumed neither of them would say anything, other than perhaps, “So.” And that was all he managed after his moment was done. “So?”

Parvati folded her arms and nodded. Harry had rarely seen her when she wasn’t laughing, or fawning on Professor Trelawney in Divination. This way, though, she almost looked like a grown woman. “I don’t like the way that you’ve tended to take Connor’s help and give him nothing in return,” she told him.

“Help?” Harry hated to sound like an idiot, but he had no idea what she was talking about.

“I know it was his idea to tell everyone that you were the Boy-Who-Lived,” said Parvati seriously. “I’m not blaming you for that. And it’s true, anyway, so I can’t object.” She put her hands on her hips. “But you haven’t paid attention to him the way that you should pay attention to a brother. You barely spend any time with him. You ask for his help when it suits you, like changing the
way he’s linked to Lux Aeterna, but you didn’t give him help. He’s only gone into battle while you fought once, and then he didn’t get to ride the second iron thestral with you. That was Malfoy.” Her curled lip told Harry what she thought of Draco. Well, there it was hard to blame her. She was Gryffindor, and from a Light pureblood family. “I know you aren’t a Lord, you keep proclaiming it, but there are ways that you act like it, by having sworn companions. Why aren’t you keeping Connor that close to your side? You act like he’s not your brother at all, until it’s convenient for you to remember.”

“Connor’s never asked me for that,” said Harry. “I assumed he didn’t want to cut a lightning bolt scar in his arm and swear himself to me.”

“You assume too much,” said Parvati softly. “He talks about you all the time. He loves you. And you don’t seem to love him as much.”

“I may not spend as much time with him, but we’re in different Houses,” said Harry, aware he sounded defensive. He didn’t care. The suggestion that he didn’t love Connor was too ridiculous for words. “Rival Houses, too. And he had no reason to go to the Sanctuary. And I do try to help him with dueling training and all that, and I—”

“It’s just gone from one extreme to the other,” said Parvati blithely, ignoring the way Harry stared at her. “You were obsessed with him until third year, and since then you’ve ignored him. You didn’t even know we were dating. You were surprised he asked me to the Yule Ball. You didn’t realize how nervous he was about the Tasks in the Triwizard Tournament. You barely talked to him at all last year, except when you wanted something. He loves you like a brother, and you treat him like a—an acquaintance.” Parvati cocked her head. “He deserves more than that. He deserves better than that.”

Harry heard Lily’s words echoing in hers for a moment. *Someone whom you love deserves all your time and attention, Harry.*

“I’ve been a bit busy,” Harry said stiffly.

“So busy you can’t make time for your brother at all?” Parvati arched her eyebrows. “I find that hard to believe. Padma and I are in different Houses, too, and we make time for each other. We’re twins. Sometimes I find it hard to believe that you and Connor are. He loves you more than you love him.”

Harry felt a shard of doubt lodge in his heart and grow.

*Is that true? I know that Draco and Snape are both more important to me than Connor is. But what if I’m the most important person in the world to him?*

“I don’t like seeing the boy I love being used,” said Parvati. “If you keep doing it, then I’ll do what I have to do. He’ll get what he deserves. You might be a vates and a Lord and all the rest of it, but he’s your brother. Make time for him. He wants it.” She nodded firmly and turned away, just in time to welcome Connor as he came back through the crowd with a plate of food.

Harry watched for a moment, heart aching, but had to shake his head when Connor invited him to stay for just a little longer and talk to him and Parvati. Connor looked disappointed. Parvati shot Harry a look which said, clearer than any words could have, *Do you see what I mean?*

Harry turned away and went to the table with the Pensieve, brooding. It took him a moment before he could touch the Black artifact, a prism, and coax it into life. It shone with several rainbows, and made people all over the room turn their heads. By the time Harry cast the spell that would carry his voice to the ears of every guest, most of those people were paying attention to him.

“Good evening, and welcome to my festival to celebrate my sixteenth birthday and my becoming the legal heir of the Black line,” Harry said formally. He could hear most of the conversations dying down. “I know it’s traditional to receive gifts at such a time, but I prefer giving to receiving. Thus, I give you the gift of a warning. I do not ask that you act on this warning, only that you hear, and see, and remember.”

He turned the prism so that it aimed at the Pensieve, and then moved the heavy silver bracelet around his wrist, the one that carried the Black crest and which he had to wear to make this artifact function, to the side of the prism. The rainbows narrowed into an intense cone of white light, and sprang into the Pensieve’s silver liquid. Harry saw the figures in the memories dragged storming to the top of the basin, and then up, bursting into being over the heads of the watchers.

Numerous necks craned backward. If Harry’s own experience was any indication, however, the angle didn’t really matter. He was in the memory, watching as he appeared before the Unspeakable who’d tried trap him in the lift. Everyone who looked could see that it was a collar the Unspeakable was holding, and Harry could hear astonished murmurs.
Harry called for help, and Erica came running. From there, the fight proceeded as Harry had known it would. He heard gasps when he erased the hand of the Unspeakable reaching for Erica, and again when he used fire to consume the Still-Beetle shell and drained the magic from the globe the Unspeakable had thrown at him. By contrast, everyone was silent after the calm “Obliviate!” and Erica’s complaint that she’d lost her memory.

Harry let the images fade, and the light from the prism flicker and die as well, before he spoke.

“I don’t know what the Department of Mysteries wants,” he told them bluntly. “I can tell you that it has something to do with werewolves. I was informed, by a source I trust, that they were the ones behind the new laws that werewolves must wear collars and carry identification wherever they go.

“They tried to capture me. In doing so, they declared themselves my enemies. I wonder now how many times they’ve done something like this, but Obliviated the witnesses and used their artifacts to cause chaos that blended into the stories they told their victims. What else do they have in their arsenal, beyond collars they think can hold a Lord-level wizard, glass globes imbued with the magic of time, and basins that can cast spells from a distance?

“I don’t know. But I do know they operate in the shadows and within the guard of fear. The Ministry employees I talked to were terrified to speak their names.

“I have sworn not to let fear rule me. Those who try to make it rule other people are those I will try to stop. Be wary, but not afraid. Their greatest weapon is secrecy and hiding and the unknown. If we expose them, they will have nowhere to hide. If we bring their artifacts up into the light of day and learn to understand them, then they are no longer unknown.

“My alliance is the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, but the Shadow part of the name only expresses our welcome to those who practice Dark magic. It has nothing to do with the shadows the Unspeakables cast. Those shadows, I will tear down, and make fade before the Light.”

He inclined his head in a bow, then moved away from the table and back into the crowd. Instantly, there was a stir of people wanting to speak to him. Harry wasn’t surprised, and waited patiently for the first to approach him.

Strangely, it was a wizard Harry didn’t think he’d met yet, clad in robes so rich that Harry suspected he was a pureblood. His hair was long and silver, and his eyes vivid dark green. He carried a feather in one hand, and Harry eyed it, wondering if someone had decided to give him gifts for his festival after all.

“Harry vates,” the wizard said, in a deep voice that made Harry want to hear him sing. “I came to offer you this feather, as a token of myself.” Solemnly, he held it out. Harry took it. His power had already told him that it had no magic, that it really was a mere token. “My Animagus form, you see, is a sea eagle.”

Harry blinked. He had studied the list of registered Animagi in Great Britain, and none of them was a sea eagle. But why would an unregistered Animagus reveal himself like this? “Who are you, sir?”

“My name is Falco Parkinson.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “I read about you,” he said. “You were Albus Dumbledore’s tutor, the one who told him he couldn’t be vates without sacrificing his magic. Then you were Hogwarts Headmaster for a year, and then you died.”

Falco smiled mildly, his eyes growing sharper. “So many people believed that,” he murmured. “But when one walks between Light and Dark, one may fool people with competent illusions and glamours, and playing to what they want to believe.”

He must have removed a barrier on his magic, though it wasn’t one that Harry had felt. In an instant, his power blazed throughout Silver-Mirror. Harry stared at him. It was Lord-level, and reminded Harry of a wind come from the sea, bearing a scent of flowers.

“I was Albus Dumbledore’s tutor,” Falco agreed. “I was the one who taught him about balance and sacrifice, although I did not foresee the warped way he would pass those ethics onto you. Then I left the world for fifty years to wander the paths of Dark and Light, because I thought Albus had matters well in hand.” Harry shivered for a moment; he remembered those paths, or half-remembered them. The wild Dark had shown them to him for a moment on Midwinter. They were not something a mortal wizard had any business knowing. “When I came back, I learned what had happened, and I studied you and Voldemort in silence for a time. Now I am convinced that you will destroy the wizarding world in your flailing, unless someone does manage to show you a proper balance.” Falco stared at him calmly. “You would be best-advised to Declare. Then I can be your mentor, and not your enemy.”
Harry wanted to laugh. He wanted to. That Falco could have observed him and yet come to the conclusion that Harry would Declare just to avoid conflict with him was absurd.

But he was remembering a prophecy that might come true three times, and that concerned a Dark Lord each time, and had so far only felled one.

“What is your allegiance?” he demanded.

Falco nodded, as though he approved of the question. “I have none. I have spent a long time between Light and Dark, convincing them both that I might someday Declare for one of them if they could show me enough magic to convince me. Neither has, as yet. I have remained alive for centuries in the same way. They preserve my life in hopes that I might Declare.”

“Then why do you think I need to Declare?” Harry asked. “You haven’t done it yourself.”

Falco looked mildly startled. “My power grew with my age, and by the time I arrived at its full extent, I knew the nature of the wizarding world,” he said. “The growth of yours is unnatural, and you are just a child. A Declaration would give you a path to follow, oaths to obey. At the moment, you do little but strike at the foundation of our world while giving nothing back.”

Harry thought it was an argument he could have believed, as recently as two years ago. But he had done his own share of thinking about ethics and sacrifices since then, and if there was one thing he had learned, it was that making the same choice and sticking to it in every situation was not for him. It had been the right choice to go with Evan Rosier due to his “persuasion” and try to save the children of Durmstrang. It would have been the wrong decision to give in to Voldemort and sacrifice his life to doom all the children in Hogwarts.

Besides, nothing is that simple. I am not meant for the easy path.

“I live day by day,” he told Falco. “I live while other things are going on. It sounds as if you want me to become a Dark Lord or Light Lord first and foremost.”

“That is what Declaring means.” Falco looked impatient now. “Will you Declare or not? You should. Those with Lord-level power must not go unchecked. Your magic is the most important thing about you.” He nodded to the feather in Harry’s hand. “I give you that as a gift, so that you can set wards against me spying on you in my sea eagle form. But I will be also helping Voldemort if you do not Declare, to preserve the balance of Light and Dark. Would you rather have me as mentor or enemy?”

“Neither,” said Harry coolly. “I walked that path once, with Dumbledore, and I know how it ends.” He curled his hand around the feather. “I will not Declare.”

“Enemy, then,” said Falco, and his arms melted into wings, and he rose, and swirled out of the room while people were still gasping and staring. No one had tried to approach them, Harry noticed. Falco had probably set a ward to insure that they couldn’t.

Was that Dumbledore’s ghost?” he demanded, as he curled his arm around Harry’s waist and pulled him towards him.

“No,” said Harry, leaning against him. “Falco Parkinson. A man I thought was dead, but a living Lord-level wizard who’s going to oppose me.”

“Why did he reveal himself to you, if you had no idea he was still living?” Draco asked in bewilderment.

“Something to do with balance, likely,” Harry looked again at the sea eagle feather, but still it didn’t grow any magic or change form in his hand. He shook his head. “Just another enemy for me to fight.”

Draco snarled low in his throat. “For us to fight,” he said. “And this was supposed to be more dramatic and take place later, but for now, I don’t care.” He tugged Harry’s head back and kissed him fiercely.

Harry kissed back, hearing more gasps and several low, interested comments. He fought for and won control of the kiss for a moment, but Draco put up a good struggle. Harry drew away before his head could cloud too much, and gave a grim smile at the staring crowd.

“For those who don’t know, we are going to be joined,” he said. “This is my future partner, Draco Malfoy.”
Draco lifted his head haughtily, letting everyone get a good long look at him. Harry smiled at him, knowing his lips were swollen and not caring. He knew that some of the strangers in the room were staring at him, and he didn’t care. He knew that Snape was rapidly making his way to his side, snarling threats under his breath, and he didn’t care.

Two years ago, Falco might have convinced him. A year ago, he would have driven Harry frantic with worry. Now, all he did was get his blood up.

*When are my enemies going to learn that they can’t make me afraid?*

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**Chapter Thirteen: Lessons, Bloody Lessons**

Harry shifted so that the book on druidic magic settled more comfortably into his lap. Another problem with not having two hands, he reflected, was that the Levitation Charm made it difficult for him to hold heavy books steady; it always seemed to hover the left side of the book just above where he gripped with his right hand. He muttered under his breath and shifted again, then went still when he heard a snort from Draco.

Draco was actually sharing the bed with him and had fallen asleep, which Harry thought was a good sign of how much the festival had wearied him. It was before midnight, so Harry had felt justified in leaving the candles burning whilst he read. But if he woke Draco up now, he wouldn’t feel it was worth it.

He waited, but Draco just turned restlessly away and buried his face in the pillows again. Harry huffed out a sigh and went back to the book.

It actually had several different definitions of place magic, which made it more interesting and useful than most of the books Harry had tried to read on the subject so far.

*The oldest definition of a druid’s magic is the magic bound to a place where a human has lived for years, or where the particular druid’s family has lived for centuries. A magical place has time to grow used to humans when they dwell there for this long. Place magic is, in general, slow-moving, and slow to take notice of those creatures who are in motion. That is why its greatest emblems are trees, hills, and stones, those slow-aging, still giants of the world. Though a river may run through a magical place, and other humans may live there, it means nothing if the river’s course frequently shifts or the other humans often depart. The place magic must first notice a human living in it, and then wrap itself around the human—come to consider him or her as part of what latter researchers have called the “matrix.” In older writings, this is often referred to as the “current.”*

Harry thought of the current of magic traveling Woodhouse. It had not seemed to notice the humans who poured into the valley for the spring equinox meeting—any of them. But it had noticed when they tried to move stones out of the sides of the valley, and had promptly put them back where they were supposed to belong. He wondered why the Antipodean Opaleye had proved the exception able to move the stones. She was also a moving creature, and hadn’t been in Woodhouse long enough for the valley to have adapted to her.

He went back to reading.

*Some have argued that this cannot be the only way a place’s magic exists, because some druids did travel about, and were connected to many different places, not only one. Though research on this subject is uncertain—we understandably know less about druids who moved frequently than those who lived in the same home for years and left their writings behind—there is a good chance that these druids had already established themselves in one place and persuaded its magic to wrap around them. Then they chose a certain circuit of places that they traveled, usually a circular or vaguely circular path. Essentially, they created a second magical place, one bounded not by hills in the manner of a valley or the sea in the manner of an island, but by their travels. They persuaded the current that had wrapped them in the first place to extend outside its original home and wrap this new circuit. The great principle of place magic is its wholeness. The druids who became linked to their new homes were not conquerors. They had to submit to becoming part of something greater than themselves, a small blade of grass in the great lawn.*

Harry gnawed his lip. He knew that some of the Opallines who studied druidic magic worked that way; Paton had told him. They lived for years in certain isolated valleys like Woodhouse, or made their homes into magical places with old techniques.

But he did not have time to either live in one place for that long, or create place magic by traveling in a circuit.

He turned another page.
Understandably, some wizards have wanted to take advantage of place magic without binding themselves to one place. They may build rooms that mimic both the limitations of place magic—namely, that its power cannot be moved outside its boundaries—and its benefits—namely, that magic concentrated in one area is enormously powerful, and may develop a sentience of its own, as all magic tends to do when put under confinement for long enough. There are several rooms in Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry that take advantage of this principle. They will provide secure rooms to train or see the future, but one cannot train or see the future with impunity in any room in the school. The Founders, in their wisdom, realized that Hogwarts itself could not be filled with place magic. Too many people travel through it every year, and the majority of those are young wizards, still in the throes of growing. There is too much motion for place magic to sustain.

This may be the place to indulge ourselves in a digression. Despite many attempts to argue that place magic is neutral—as some of the druids were rumored to have practiced Dark rituals and blood magic—in the modern practice, and in those older examples, such as the rooms at Hogwarts, that survive to the present day, it tends and turns towards the Light. Place magic is deeply ordered, deeply calm, and the personalities and sentience its bound magic creates tend to be intelligent and calm as well, not raging beasts. Under the old definitions of Dark and Light magic, place magic is Light because it is tame, not wild.

Harry nodded. That would be why the Antipodean Opaleye could do as she liked, then. Dragons are the wildest creatures of the Dark. Woodhouse probably couldn’t even feel her, or she was strong enough to oppose its tameness.

He read a bit more, but though the book discussed some of the ways that one might build a room like the Room of Requirement, and speculations on how places that were not obvious candidates for druids’ dwellings had been made into them, there was little that sounded as if it would help him present himself to the magic of Woodhouse. He was about to close the book when a passage at the end of the chapter caught his attention.

Finally, there is a little-practiced technique that may help the possessor of a magical place in bringing himself to its notice. Researchers have argued that in some places, the magical current is so strong that a druid could not have made a stone or wooden house for shelter from the elements without first introducing himself. The magic would have put the trees and stones back into their places, and not troubled to notice him. Yet the first thing a druid often did when moving into a magically powerful place was to build such a house.

This argues for a method of introducing himself suddenly, and later dwelling in the place to confirm the bond, not create it. And, indeed, in the oral records supposedly transferred from the druids and written down centuries later, rumors of such a method exist. “Entering the dream” is its common name. What it might have consisted of is not known, but is of intense interest to those modern witches and wizards attempting to revive druidic practices.

Thoughtfully, Harry closed the book and laid it aside. So now he had another phrase to look for. Or perhaps he could ask Hermione to look it up for him. She’d already written him a list of twenty-four ways the new Ministry laws on werewolves violated precedent, and wanted something else to do. The wound she’d taken from Rosier’s Severing Curse in the Battle of Hogwarts still limited her ability to move around, and she’d finished her summer homework already, of course.

Harry blew out the candle and then lay down. Draco immediately rolled over and buried his head in Harry’s shoulder, with a muffled snort. He didn’t wake, though.

Harry stroked his hair. Then he shut his eyes, and told himself he was going to sleep, and not worry about things. He needed to rest.

Besides, he’d already created a schedule of lessons he had to study in the next few weeks until Hogwarts began again, and things he had to do—especially spending time with Connor. Parvati’s words had stung him deeply. He hadn’t been the brother that he could have been, and certainly he couldn’t delegate this task to anyone else the way that he could some of his research and spying. He would go and be the brother that he should have been.

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“You do have to concentrate.” Peter’s voice was light and soft, but Harry could still tell that he was trying desperately not to laugh. “Think about what you know about yourself. You have to—”

“I’ve been doing that all morning,” Draco snapped, opening his eyes again and glaring at Peter. “And I still don’t know what my Animagus form is going to be. How should I know what the traits that are going to make me into an animal are? You’re a rat, but not everything about you points to that.”

“You might start by considering that you’re an insufferable brat,” Connor said from his corner. “It takes longer than just a morning, Malfoy, you knew that.”
Harry sighed as Draco turned to yell at Connor again. He had thought that this would work because Peter could instruct all three of them—Draco had insisted on joining in—on how to become an Animagus at the same time. So far, though, Draco had whined and fussed, and Connor, who had been at this longer and actually wanted to hear what Peter had to say, had retaliated whenever Draco upset him too much, and Peter either shook his head or bit his lip to conceal his chuckles.

“Draco,” Harry said. Draco was instantly focused on him, with an intensity that Harry found rather disturbing. He cleared his throat and shook his head. “Connor is right about this. You can’t do well at it immediately just because you got an Outstanding in the Transfiguration theory portion of your OWLs. It takes a long time.”

“Three years,” Peter confirmed calmly. “That was how long it took us. But we didn’t have an instructor—we certainly couldn’t tell Professor McGonagall what we were doing, because she would have asked why we were doing it—and we made mistakes because we didn’t know what some of the books we could find referred to. I plan not to let any of you make those same mistakes.” He cocked his head and sat down on top of the desk in the front of the room. This had once been a study in Cobley-by-the-Sea, and though the bookshelves were empty now, it still looked the part. The three boys were sitting on the floor in front of him. “If you can’t accept that this will take a long time, Draco, then you shouldn’t try this. Envisioning your animal form is only the first step, and Connor’s right, it does take weeks.”

Connor looked smug. Draco sulked. Harry sighed and leaned across the distance between them, clasping Draco’s hand.

“Why do you want to become an Animagus, Draco?” Harry asked him quietly. “Think about that.”

“Because I want to be at your side when I can,” Draco snarled back, not quite keeping his voice down. “And I’m better at Transfiguration than you are. This shouldn’t be a problem for me.”

“There’s a reason I’m not teaching Transfiguration, you know,” Peter remarked to no one in particular. “I’m good at the Animagus transformation, and I know how to train someone else in it, but that isn’t the same thing as knowing all about the theory of Transfiguring objects, or other people. And someone who’s good at theory shouldn’t expect to be an expert Animagus the first time out, either.”

Harry thought that would make Draco explode again, but, perhaps because it came from Peter instead of Connor, it just made Draco bite his lip. Then he nodded his head reluctantly. “I suppose I can see that,” he muttered.

“So let’s start again,” said Connor, bouncing in place. “I know that I was getting a vision when Malfoy interrupted.” He blithely ignored Draco’s glare.

“What was it of?” Peter asked intently, leaning forward.

“Something four-legged,” said Connor confidently. “And medium-sized, and it definitely had hair. So, a mammal, but there are lots of medium-sized mammals with four legs and hair.” He wriggled. Harry smiled. “I wonder how he did it. “I want to go back and look for it again.”

“And there was nothing else?” Peter asked intently. “No silhouette?”

“The silhouette was forming when Malfoy interrupted me,” said Connor, and sent Draco a superior look. Draco opened his mouth, but Harry squeezed his hand, murmuring, “Show him you’re the better person,” and Draco shut it again and looked away.

“That’s good progress, Connor,” Peter said warmly. “But even once you have the silhouette, it can take weeks or months to fill it in. James got stuck on the silhouette for weeks.”

Connor blinked. “How could he? It was a stag. That’s pretty distinctive.”

Peter shrugged. “He thought the antlers were horns, and he spent all his time trying to make them form horns instead of antlers. This process is fraught with peril, from your own preconceptions if nothing else. As I said, it took me a long time to accept being a rat. It took Sirius a long time to accept that he was a black dog rather than a paler one, simply because he thought the reference to his family name was too obvious. So try to see and accept what’s truly there, not what you think is there, or what you want to be there.”

Connor nodded and shut his eyes again. Harry nudged Draco’s ribs with his elbow, and Draco sighed and shut his eyes. Harry
half-lidded his own eyes, which made a better concentration tool for him than shutting them completely; when he did, he was too apt to start thinking about everything he had to do, rather than just his Animagus lessons.

He was fairly sure his form would be a lynx, but that could have been because he’d had that form in his visions with Voldemort. Peter had warned him that being certain one already knew one’s form could be the biggest single block to envisioning it. Harry tried to think about why he wouldn’t be a lynx, but his mind kept returning to it.

Why was I one in the first place? I retreated into that form as if it would protect me during the visions—and it did, keeping me out of the way and in the darkness. But why that form? Why not another kind of cat? Why not a bird, with wings that would fly me out of danger? There has to be a reason why it was a lynx.

His mind wandered, brushing over the traits that the lynx was graced with in legends and stories. Harry remembered ideas of lynxes being keen-eyed, graceful, beautiful, the cleverest of the cats. He smiled faintly. He would like to imagine that he was that way, but he had made his share of stupid decisions, and he had missed truths that lurked under his nose before.

Will I do that again? Does it matter whether you’re a different person at one point in your life than at another? Was a lynx my destined form two years ago, and would it be something else now?

Harry was tempted to reject the notion, simply because Peter had remained a rat all his life, and James a stag long past the point when Harry would have said any nobility or pride was gone from him. But he didn’t know enough about the process of becoming an Animagus to say that for certain.

Something else to ask Peter.

Eventually, Peter told them to open their eyes and discontinue the meditation. Then he told Connor to go read about four-legged mammals. Connor nodded with an enthusiasm Harry couldn’t remember him exhibiting for any subject other than Quidditch.

On the other hand, do I actually know what he might like studying? I’m not in half his classes with him, and he chose to take Care of Magical Creatures. And that’s another of those things we haven’t talked about.

When Harry considered it, he was appalled by how little he knew about his own brother, and not just the things that Parvati had listed. He watched Connor leave the room, and felt a throb of longing travel through him. He wanted to talk to him, and not because Parvati had suggested it. He wanted to do it simply because he wanted to.

But he couldn’t do it right now, because he had something to talk to Peter about as long as he was in the same room with him. He uttered a little sigh and turned back to Peter, even though Draco was hovering near the door, obviously eager to escape.

“Peter?”

Peter glanced up. “Yes?”

“This is an odd thing to ask you about, but you’re the only one left who knew our parents and whose word I would trust right now,” said Harry. Remus’s name hung, heavy and unspoken, between them. Peter nodded and laid down the book he’d started to pick up. “I think the prophecy that caused Voldemort to mark us might be coming true more than once.” Again Peter nodded; Harry had told him about that speculation when he came to Hogwarts to help prepare for the Midsummer battle. Since Peter had been a sacrifice because of the original prophecy, it seemed only fair he should know about Trelawney’s third one. “But I don’t know if it fits Dumbledore in all the particulars. I know that Lily and James defied Voldemort three times in the First War, and that was the reason Dumbledore thought their sons could fit the prophecy. But did my parents defy Dumbledore three times? Could he actually be the first Dark Lord in the prophecy?”

Peter narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. “I’ll have to think on it a bit, Harry. I don’t remember all the times that might count. But my instinct is to say that yes, they did. And one time was during their seventh year.”

Harry cocked his head. “What happened?” Lily hadn’t mentioned this—but then, she’d wanted Harry to love and follow Dumbledore, not disobey him. If she had ever turned on him, then that might have lessened her credibility in her son’s eyes.

Lily was very careful with me. Harry suffered a stab of anger as he thought about that. Too careful.

“Most of the older Gryffindor students knew we were going to be soldiers in the War,” Peter began, leaning back on the desk. Harry heard Draco huff in impatience behind him. He ignored that. This was history he had never known, and which could be vitally important for defeating Voldemort and whoever the third Dark Lord in the prophecy would turn out to be. “Albus asked us,
and we loved him and looked up to him, and he trained us himself. So we said yes. But James suffered a brief rebellious streak during our seventh year. I think it had something to do with his parents, your grandparents, dying in the summer before seventh year, and James becoming a Potter in his own right. They were old even for wizards when they had him; they’d almost given up hope of a child. So their deaths were natural, but they reminded James that he might have his own not-so-natural death in a few months or a year.

“He decided there were more important things than the war in the world. He made plans to go off and live on his own, outside Albus’s influence.” Peter shook his head. “I only heard about this afterwards, so I never knew how defined his plans actually were—whether he was going to flee to France the way so many of the older students in other Houses did, for example. But he wanted to go. And since he was an illegal Animagus, and Albus didn’t know about it at the time, he even could have kept out of his way for a good long time. None of us would have betrayed him, certainly.

“The problem was, he wanted Lily to go with him, and he knew she was more devoted to Albus than he was. So he kept putting it off and putting it off, until one night when—” Peter broke off, looking embarrassed.

“They had sex, didn’t they,” said Harry, and shook his head when Peter flushed more deeply. “It’s all right, Peter. I don’t like to think about my parents having sex, but I knew it had to have happened at least once.” Harry gestured at himself.

Peter nodded. “So he persuaded her. They ran away. They left on a Friday night, and were gone for most of a weekend, so not that many people noticed at first. It was actually a Quidditch practice that made people realize James was missing, not just sulking somewhere because he’d had a fight with Lily.

“So Albus was prepared to go looking for them. But then they came back before he could. They were shamefaced, but James never wavered again. I have no idea what Lily said to him, only that it was her idea to come back.”

*Of course it was,* Harry thought. He knew that Dumbledore had begun “instructing” Lily in her third year. By the time she reached her seventh, she would have been tangled up in chains of sacrifice, and not even the influence of the boy she loved would have stopped her for long.

“But why did you know so little about it?” Draco sounded curious himself now, if reluctantly so. “If none of you would ever have betrayed him, then why didn’t he tell you about it?”

Harry looked up in time to surprise an incredibly bitter smile at the corners of Peter’s mouth. He tried to smooth it away, but it was there, and Harry winced as he remembered the way the other Marauders had treated Peter. *His devotion was never repaid with devotion.*

“Oh, Sirius and Remus knew,” said Peter. He was spinning his wand in his fingers, his voice cool and reflective, with barely a glint of the emotion, akin to hatred, that Harry knew waited like black water under the surface. “But they didn’t tell me. They were still dealing with my Animagus form, and all its implications. Thought I would rat them out, apparently.” A blue spark leaped from his wand and earthed itself harmlessly in the carpet.

Then Peter mastered himself. Harry saw him shake his head and stop spinning his wand. When he next looked up, his face was probably as calm as he pretended it was, or at least he wore a better mask. “To be fair to them,” he said, “at that point I was still changing from the horrible person I’d been in fifth and sixth years to someone better. So while I wouldn’t have betrayed them, they didn’t know that. They didn’t know what to make of me. I was changing, and they didn’t know why.”

“Why did you change?” Draco demanded.

Peter just shrugged, and this time, Harry thought, his smile was like a wall. “Many reasons.”

Harry recognized the end of the conversation, even though Draco seemed like he wanted to ask more questions, and dragged Draco out of the room. He went, grumbling. “Sometimes I don’t know what to say to him,” he told Harry, as they turned a corner in the direction of one of the libraries. “He doesn’t seem like a man who spent twelve years in Azkaban, and then he’ll do something that reminds me.”

*I wonder just how much of that man is there, and we just aren’t seeing him,* Harry thought.

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“So, are you going to talk, or are you going to do it?” Draco lay in the middle of Harry’s bed, hands folded beneath his chin and a lazy, self-satisfied grin on his face.
“I’m going to do it.” Harry glared at him for a moment, then turned back to Argutus. The Omen snake held steady, coiled around his left arm, his scales faithfully reflecting Harry’s left wrist, and the dark shimmer of magic above it. Harry knew now that this was a Permanence curse, meant to prevent him from being able to attach a limb of any kind of flesh to his stump, and after some time searching among the books, he’d found a counter to it.

He stretched out his hand above it, took a deep breath, and murmured, “Pausa iam.”

The black shimmer in Argutus’s scales grew bigger, spreading like a sunburst. Harry held still, even when a burning, itching, tingling sensation spread throughout his stump. The book he’d found the countercurse in had emphasized the importance of holding still, lest the magic should gain an even deeper hold as it was dragged off the end of his limb.

The spell gave a final spit and snarl, and then vanished in a small implosion. Harry shuddered at the pain racing down his arm, but it faded. He sat back and looked at Draco with a raised eyebrow.

“That’s the second one,” he said quietly. He’d removed the first curse in the Sanctuary. “Two more, one big one, and I should be able to have a second hand.” He stroked Argutus’s head in thanks, and the Omen snake unfolded and slid away from him, slipping out the door. Harry suspected he was going to sun himself on the cliffs. Cobley-by-the-Sea’s windows were so scattered that any sunlight usually moved on too quickly for Argutus.

“That’s wonderful,” Draco breathed, and then looked a bit abashed. “Not to say that you’re not handsome with only one hand, Harry, that’s perfectly true. But for you to have two hands again, when Bellatrix and Voldemort tried so hard to insure that you wouldn’t—”

“Or just wanted me to despair,” Harry muttered, standing up and stretching. “I don’t think Voldemort ever planned for me to survive the graveyard.”

Draco snorted and rolled over. “So he’s an idiot. We knew that—where are you going?” he added sharply, as Harry headed for the door.

Harry glanced back at him, startled. “To spend time with Connor. I told you I was thinking about that.”

Draco scowled and dug in his robe pocket. Harry watched, not understanding, until Draco pulled out a wooden coin and threw it at him. Harry caught it automatically and looked down. It was the coin the assassins in the Ministry had thrown at him, marked with a winged horse in the middle of flight.

“I’d think finding out who cast that would be more urgent,” Draco said.

Harry curbed his irritation. He doesn’t like it that Connor’s doing better than he is in the Animagus training, I understand that. He tossed the coin back to Draco. “I already know,” he said. “It’s not a secret, really. I asked Zacharias to check for me, because I know he has some contacts in the Ministry. This is a symbol for Shield of the Granian, a militant group of flying horse breeders. They’ve fought back before when the Ministry was going to pass laws that restricted breeding or imposed price controls.”

Draco stared at him. “Stupid of them to use coins that proclaim their identity,” he said at last.

Harry shrugged. “Maybe, maybe not. No one’s ever found out who’s in Shield of the Granian. Either they’re all good at glamours or they have someone who can Transfigure their faces and then put them back. And, of course, the breeders themselves disavow all their tactics. I suppose they might be afraid that I’m going to free the Granians and other flying horses they breed. But I’m not convinced this came from them.” He nodded at the coin in Draco’s hand. “I think now that Falco Parkinson was spying on me and told the attackers the time of my meeting with Skeeter. I’ve set up wards against him doing that again in his sea eagle form. But it could have been disused remnants from the Order of the Phoenix, for all I know.”

“I don’t like it,” Draco said. “I think you should stay here with me so that we can talk about it some more.”

Harry snorted. “You want to talk about other things.”

Draco sighed and rolled his eyes. “And is that a crime?”

“Not at all,” said Harry quietly. “But I want to spend time with my brother right now, Draco.”

“So the problem is still lack of time.”
“And someone else reminding me that I haven’t given as much time to Connor as I could have,” Harry agreed, and turned away. He felt Draco’s frustration behind him as Harry slipped down the hallway, but he said nothing else.

**Good.** Harry shook his head. He had to admit he was feeling a bit harried with all these problems pushing in on him.

But he had chosen the vast majority of them, via his oaths and his acceptance of the positions and power other people handed him, and so he couldn’t complain, but had to do the best he could. Besides, it really shouldn’t have taken Connor’s girlfriend to tell him he was neglecting Connor. Harry should have seen that for himself.

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Connor was trying to understand what Harry wanted, he really was, but so far Harry was stumbling over his words and being tongue-tied, so it didn’t work. Connor half-wished Harry would make a speech. He had liked Harry’s speech about the Unspeakables, and he’d understood all of it.

“But you want to have fun,” he said, trying to clarify the matter.

Harry shrugged as if embarrassed and scuffed one trainer on the floor of Connor’s bedroom. “I’d like to have fun with you,” he said. “I’ve missed you, Connor. I want to spend time with you.”

“You are,” said Connor, mystified. “We’re having Animagus training together every day.”

“Time other than in lessons,” Harry clarified, sounding even more flustered.

“Then you could have said so,” Connor said, and laid his book on Animagus forms aside. So far, he’d eliminated relatively few animals his form might be; as he’d told Peter, there were many, many medium-sized mammals with four legs. “I don’t mind practicing Quidditch, if you want to.”

Harry smiled as if he had forgotten there was such a thing as Quidditch, but was happy to be reminded. “I’d like that.”

Connor went to a corner of his room to pick up his Nimbus, while Harry used a Summoning Charm on his Firebolt, which seemed to be his favorite method of attracting it. Connor studied his brother out of the corner of his eye as they jogged towards the door in Cobley-by-the-Sea that led out onto the cliffs. Lines of strain and tension were leaving Harry’s face, and now and then he smiled as though he were envisioning catching the Snitch out of the air.

***This is good for him, then.*** Connor contemplated something he hadn’t before—certainly not when he thought of himself as the Boy-Who-Lived.

I reckon he gets tired of being a hero.

They stepped out onto the cliffs, and Connor felt the crash and thud of the waves far below. He breathed in the salt air. It was bracing, and he thought it would be interesting to fly on their brooms where the winds crossed and divided in front of the rocky walls. He hopped onto his Nimbus, and darted over the side.

“But fair!” Harry complained, but he was up on his own broom in a moment, and Connor knew the Firebolt could catch the Nimbus any day, so he wasn’t particularly worried about it being fair. He was more curious to see if he could continue flying straight into the wind ahead of him now, or if he would be forced to swerve.

**Swerve,** he thought, as a current forced him towards the cliffs. Connor turned his broom, pushing straight into it, and the wind howled and plastered his robes to his body. Connor whooped. He wondered if Harry even heard the sound, though; the air was fierce enough to push it away.

He found himself shivering, wishing for gloves and other Quidditch gear they hadn’t taken the time to put on, but then strangled the wish. The wind wasn’t that cold, even if it did have the teeth of the ocean in it. He rose, and then rode out over the Atlantic.

The sea was gray beneath him, vast and shuddering and white-capped. Connor thought about dipping down and wetting his feet in the foam, but decided that he would be good. It would probably panic Harry to see him diving into a situation like that without protection.

His thoughts ran along that track until he turned around to see what his twin was doing, and saw him diving straight down, apparently trying a Wronski Feint on a breaker. He pulled out of it in time to avoid crashing, but as he plunged through a trough and then rose again, the next wave caught him a solid slap across the body. Harry yelped, and spat salt water. His hair was
already streaming, his glasses so thick with water that Connor wondered why he didn’t just pull them off. Connor laughed, and was abruptly happier than he’d been since he learned Harry was going to the Sanctuary, and why.

“Watch where you’re going!” he called.

“I suppose you could do better, then,” Harry yelled back.

Connor snorted. “Who do you think you’re talking to?” he shouted, steering his broom around a particularly stiff wind. “I’m not only a Seeker, I’m a Gryffindor Seeker. That means we automatically take risks that you Slytherins are too cowardly to try.”

He thought, as he said the words, that he would have meant them only two years ago. And though it was hard to see from this distance and with his sea-splattered glasses, he thought he could see Harry’s eyes widen as he heard both the words and the playful tone.

“We’re both so different from what we were, Connor thought in satisfaction. They tried to mold us, and they didn’t succeed. Take that, Lily.

If he kept on thinking like that, though, he would have to think about Sirius, and Connor still missed him, so he put it out of his head to listen to Harry’s reply.

“You mean that Gryffindors are idiots who think with their balls instead of their heads,” Harry said carelessly. He held out his hand, gripping his Firebolt with his knees, and a ball of golden light, about the size of a Snitch, formed in his palm. Connor squinted to keep track of it as Harry bounced it up and down. “But they’re even bigger bluffers.”

Connor snorted. “Right.”

“Let’s see you catch this, then.” Harry whipped the ball of light away from him. It immediately arced and headed down towards the waves, now and then weaving back and forth like a feather. “And Wronski Feint only.”

Connor tossed his head back and half-reared his broom. He knew he was grinning like an idiot, but he didn’t care. *Merlin, this is fun*. He waited for the Snitch-ball to settle on a wave, and then he dived.

The wind was strong enough to feel like someone punching him in the mouth. The cold bit him so badly that his hands shook where they gripped the broom. He was peripherally aware of not only wind but water darting around him, and while he understood the air, a few minutes of watching the ocean wasn’t enough to understand that.

He didn’t care. This was the most brilliant thing ever.

He cut in close to the top of the wave, and stretched out his right hand. He clasped it around the ball of golden light, which warmed his palm slightly, and opened his mouth to crow.

Water flooded it instead, and the taste of salt. Connor felt the rearing wave catch the tail end of his broom at the same time, creating just enough of a tug that he unbalanced when he tried to dart back into the air. He tipped sideways, and upside down, and another wave engulfed him.

Connor kept one hand on his broom and the other on the golden ball of light, which meant he had none free to pinch his mouth and nose shut. He swallowed a great deal of salt and began coughing. He’d heard that sea water didn’t kill you on the first drink, but it tasted bloody awful. Maybe it just took a second or third gulp.

He pulled his legs in towards his chest and kicked out again, hard. That had helped when he swam in the small pond near their house in Godric’s Hollow. But the Atlantic wasn’t a pond. He stuck his foot straight into some other current that spun him off-course. Meanwhile, water pressed on his chest like a great hand, and more flooded in through his nostrils and mouth, and he couldn’t get a breath, and his eyes stung so badly from salt that he wanted to close them, and he had lost track of his path back to the surface.

He thought he heard Harry shouting his name, but that could just be what he wanted to hear. Certainly, the ringing in his ears and the wild thumping of his heart was too loud to really let him hear anything else.

Then a hand grabbed him, and so did something invisible that Connor guessed was a powerful Levitation Charm, and together they pulled him out of the water. Connor gasped, and then wondered why he couldn’t breathe yet, and then a great sluice of water came up his throat and answered the question on its own. He coughed frantically. Harry pounded his back, and he choked and
more water came out.

“Connor, can you hear me?” Harry’s voice was frantic. “Can you nod?”

Of course he could nod; Connor let his head fall forward and then fall back. Harry choked on a gasp of his own, and the pounding hand and Levitation Charm went back to work. Connor blinked, and blinked, and finally made sense of what he was seeing. He was lying face-down across Harry’s Firebolt, staring at the sea below, while his Nimbus dangled in front of him and his right hand remained clutched tight around the golden Snitch-ball.

He was safe. He relaxed as much as he could while Harry practically beat him, because when he could finally talk again, he knew just what he wanted to say.

He spat and heaved and coughed and hiccoughed, and finally the half of the Atlantic he’d swallowed was back where it belonged. Harry helped him sit up, and all the while he was talking, his words spilling over each other in panic and relief.

“Connor, I’m so sorry—I never should have done that—I should have known better than to think—”

Connor held up his right hand and opened it, displaying the golden ball. Harry fell silent; Connor thought it was in shock.

“I told you that Gryffindors don’t bluff,” Connor said, his voice more of a croak than he would have liked, but still making his point.

Predictably, his brother said, “But I almost killed you, it was a bloody stupid dare—“

“It was fun,” Connor said firmly. He reconsidered a moment, then added, “Except for the almost-drowning part.”

Harry said nothing.

Connor twisted around, letting the Snitch-ball go so that he could clasp Harry’s shoulder and peer straight into his worried eyes. “Really, it was,” he said. “You’re not responsible for every tiny thing that happens to me, Harry. And that was fun. I like a bit of danger, you know.” He grinned. “I’m Gryffindor.”

“But if I hadn’t—“

“But you did, and I went after it, and it was fun,” said Connor. He laughed. “And it proved that I’m the better Seeker than you are after all, because of the risks I take for my team. Watch!”

He swung his leg over Harry’s broom and hopped off it. Harry shrieked like Parvati might. Connor had never let go of his Nimbus, though, and after one exciting moment of tangling limbs and freefalling, he was mounted on his own broom again. He swung around Harry, laughing.

“You need to relax, Harry,” he told his brother. “It’s not normal to scream this much when you’re having fun.”

Harry only shook his head, staring at him. Connor blinked. “What?”

“I wondered how you stayed so open even when bad things happened to you,” Harry muttered. “Now I think it has a lot to do with growing a sense of humor, and not brooding on your mistakes.”

Connor grinned. “You have been sadly deficient in that regard, Harry.”

Harry just nodded, taking it too seriously again. Connor changed the subject. “Why could you put me on your Firebolt, anyway?” he asked. “I thought Draco had it charmed so only you could ride it.”

Harry’s face changed in an instant. “I’m going to kill him for that,” he said. “I had to break the damn charms before I could pull you up here, and I thought I was going to lose my grip.” He considered Connor for a moment. “Which do you think would be more fun: yelling at Draco for that, or just letting him notice that the charms are gone and then telling him the reason?”

Harry, Connor reflected sadly, had a lot to learn about pranking. “Neither, of course,” he said. “You come in alone and pretend I’ve drowned because the Firebolt flung me off when you tried to use it to rescue me. Then I show up behind Draco and give him a heart attack.”
Harry hesitated a long moment. “I don’t think—”

“He deserves it for being such an utter tosser,” said Connor firmly. “I know that he wanted to give you something of your own for
your birthday, but charming the Firebolt so I couldn’t ride it was just stupid.”

“It was,” Harry muttered.

“Yes, it was,” Connor coaxed. “Come on. This is funnier.”

Harry hesitated for another moment. “I’m not saying I’ll do it,” he began.

Connor grinned and went to work persuading him. The expression on Draco’s face would be completely worth it, in his opinion,
but even more worth it would be teaching Harry to have some fun again.

And some fun with me. I have missed him.

~*~*~*~*~

Chapter Fourteen: Vox Populi

Bang!

Draco watched as the feathers flurried down around him, and tried to convince himself that exploding a pillow was better than
making Connor Potter’s head explode. And then he remembered that perhaps it was, but he didn’t want to feel morally good right
now, he wanted to feel satisfied, and this wasn’t helping.

Someone knocked tentatively on his door. Draco ignored it. He knew who it was, and he didn’t want to talk to that person right
now. He didn’t even want an apology from that person right now. When that person had had a good amount of time to brood on
his mistake, then he might have something to say that Draco would listen to.

Draco pointed his wand and intoned another curse. This time, his headboard exploded. Draco exhaled harshly. That’s something
very good about being here, he thought. In Malfoy Manor, he would have had house elves Apparating in right now, squeaking in
distress about Master Draco’s property being destroyed. But here, he could destroy anything he liked and only worry about a
handy little Reparo afterwards. Maybe Harry was right, and life was easier without house elves.

Well, he’ll have the opportunity to see if he’s right about something else, too, and whether it really is easier to sleep without me
in his bed for the next few nights, Draco thought. This time, he cast at the wall. The walls of Cobleby-by-the-Sea were stone,
though, and so thick with wards that Draco’s spell bounced back at him. He had to raise a quick Protego, and that calmed him a
bit.

Draco sat down on the bed, running a hand through his hair and closing his eyes. Harry had come in alone, his face so distressed
that Draco had believed him immediately when he started talking about the charms on the Firebolt and Connor drowning. Draco
realized now that Harry had been distressed over agreeing to play the prank on him, but that didn’t matter. He’d still gone along
with his brother.

“Draco?” Harry asked.

“Go away,” Draco said, and then flopped back on his bed and folded his arms behind his head, scowling up at the canopy.

“Draco, I wanted to apologize and say—“

“I don’t want to hear it!” Draco yelled, and that silenced Harry’s knocking and talking both. Harry sighed a moment later, and
Draco heard the sound of him walking away from the door.

He told himself that was what he wanted, but moments later his mood had changed and he wanted Harry to have continued
talking at him, maybe even yelling back, and knocking down the door if he had to. That would have showed real dedication, and
that he was so sorry he would rather spend the evening coaxing Draco to talk than with that stupid bloody brother of his.

Draco knew he was being childish, he recognized it, and he didn’t care.

He took a deep breath. His thoughts slowly ceased racing in fury around the center point of his indignation and calmed down. He
clenched his hands in the sheets, but didn’t reach for his wand to curse something else, and that was a bit of an improvement.

_Why can’t Harry behave like a normal person_? he asked the unfair universe that had made him fall in love with a boyfriend who still treated a snog as a special occasion. _Why couldn’t he see that playing that prank on me would have hurt me, and so why couldn’t he refuse to go along with it_?

The thing was, Harry had realized it, and had been sorry immediately afterwards. Draco could acknowledge that. But that didn’t change the fact that he had gone along with it in the first place.

He punched a hand into the pillow. He had _believed_ that that prat Connor was dead, damn it!

Draco closed his eyes and breathed out harshly. He was getting upset again, and if he let that happen, then Potter would have won. So Father had always said, and Draco had no reason to distrust his father on this score. He concentrated on breathing while he picked through all his reasoning in his mind.

Harry had told him he wanted to spend more time with Connor. That was one thing. But even that was iron-clad; Draco could almost believe Harry had created a schedule for spending time with his brother and other people the way he had for studying various subjects until Hogwarts started. Why couldn’t he see that he didn’t have to regiment his hours? He could handle crises as they arose, and he could spend lazy afternoons as well as lazy mornings in bed with Draco.

Harry was living too much of his life too consciously, and Draco didn’t like it. He knew that Connor was Harry’s brother, just like the werewolves were Harry’s pack now and Snape was Harry’s guardian. But Harry seemed convinced that he had to balance them, instead of just—_just living_ with them.

His thoughts might have gone on spinning down that path if he hadn’t remembered something that Blaise Zabini, the traitor, of all people, had said to him once. Draco had wanted Harry to wake up and notice that he was in love with him, and Blaise had told him that if he were waiting for Harry to act like a normal person, he’d have a long wait.

_And that’s true, isn’t it_? Draco sighed and opened his eyes again, waving his wand and casting _Reparo_ at the headboard. _His training, his new political life, all the rest of it, probably make him think that he does need to grant a certain amount of time to each person, and he probably felt like he needed to go along with the prank to keep his brother happy. Then he hated it when he saw how unhappy he’d made me, but still, his focus was on what we felt. Not on what he felt. He’s not normal in that he couldn’t judge what effect on him that prank would have._

_Damn it. I hate his mother. It’s still all tangled and writhing around him, even though he’s so much better in so many ways._

Draco entertained a pleasant fantasy of torturing Lily Potter for a little while, then pushed it away. That wouldn’t do anything productive. Besides, trying to figure out how to break into Tullianum gave him a headache.

He would be the bigger person, he decided. He would be the one who understood what the prank had done to Harry, since the Potter prat was probably still laughing his head off and Harry would be brooding on anything but that. He would be the one who looked at the person in the middle.

_Is it fair that I have to be? No, it’s not. But it’s not fair that Harry has to divide his days up either._

_Besides, this way I get to push more._ Draco smiled. _Potter just wants jokes out of Harry. I want much more important things, and I get to have them. There’s no reason that I can’t be both caring and self-interested._

He would wait until the morning to approach Harry about it, though, Draco decided. Then he would start on the clean slate of a new day, and Harry would be more likely to think he wasn’t angry any more.

Satisfied, Draco repaired the pillow and curled up for a nap. Meditating on the Animagus form he should have been able to see already was exhausting.

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“Good morning, Malfoy.”

“Good morning,” Draco said neutrally as he entered the kitchen. The werewolves still called him by his last name most of the time. Draco had to call them by their first names, because most of them had no surnames, or had rejected them. He most often compromised by calling them nothing at all.
Camellia glanced up at him from where she was turning sausages over, her eyes darkening as they focused on the doorway.
“Harry’s not with you?”

“Not right now.” Draco stepped around her to pour himself orange juice, rather enjoying the piercing way her gaze focused on him.

“Why not?”

“We had a row yesterday,” Draco said, and leaned against the counter so he could sip his orange juice. “He played a stupid prank on me.” He shrugged. “I forgave him, and I’m going to talk to him this morning, but we didn’t sleep in the same bed last night.”

Camellia continued cooking the sausages for a moment, while her frown deepened. Then she put down the pan and leaned forward, looking at him. Draco snorted inwardly and waited. He had thought one member of the pack would approach him with an “If you hurt our alpha” speech sooner or later, and it made sense that it would be Camellia who did that, since she was the one who spent the most time around Harry.

“He’s our alpha,” Camellia breathed. “He’s not a werewolf, so he has no chance of forming a mating bond with any of us. I’m not saying this out of jealousy or a sense of competition, Malfoy. I’m saying this because it’s true. Hurt him, and what’s left of you won’t be recognizable as human.”

Draco sipped his orange juice.

“He’s ours in a way you can’t imagine,” said Camellia, and this time her teeth snapped together. “He’s ours to defend and protect. It’s perfectly obvious that he takes next to no time for himself. We’re going to insist that he does very soon, and without any twitchy little lapdogs ruining it for him either—”

“And you think that insisting on that is the best way to get him to relax?” Draco laughed lightly and examined the back of his wrist. “You should understand. Harry doesn’t know how to relax, unless he’s flying. He tries, but everything becomes another battle for him, or of use to war and politics. And you can’t tell him that you want him to relax, because then he does it as a favor for other people.” He raised his eyes mockingly to her face. “I stand a far better chance of actually breaking down his barriers, because he expects me to be a brat. I can use that. And I can irritate him so much that he won’t realize he’s let his guard down until the moment passes.”

Camellia regarded him without moving or blinking. Draco had heard werewolves understood such staring contests as tests of dominance, but he didn’t look away.

“You had better be right,” Camellia said a moment later, and turned back to make sure the sausages didn’t burn.

“I am,” Draco said softly, but she didn’t look at him again. He sat down on the other side of the table, and smiled at her back. It was stiff with disapproval. Snape would probably have looked the same way if Draco told him of his plans.

Draco didn’t care. It had finally come to him last night, as he was falling asleep, that Harry’s problem with the prank and his problem with intimacy were connected. He was too conscious, too afraid of hurting someone else. He was never going to let his control truly go if he could help it.

Draco had to provoke him into letting go, and then he would get what he wanted and Harry would get what he needed. It was a win-win situation.

A few minutes after Camellia brought over breakfast, a strange owl flew in through the window, a lovely gray creature mottled with black spots. Draco eyed her in curiosity as she landed on the table. The Daily Prophet owls were usually instantly recognizable, but though this one carried a thick roll of newspaper around her leg, she didn’t look like one of them. She was too alert, and nearly vibrating with importance as she sat there.

Draco picked up a whole sausage link, on instinct, and extended it to her. The owl watched him for a moment, then deemed that acceptable and ate it. Only then did she hold out her leg, haughtiness in every line of her body. Draco removed the cord binding the newspaper. Perhaps it’s a special edition.

It wasn’t. It was a different paper altogether, with the title flanked by dancing women with long hair. Draco raised his eyebrows. It didn’t take much looking to see that the women didn’t wear robes, nor much imagination to think of what their long hair cloaked.
The paper’s name was also overgrown with vines bearing grapes, and each of the letters on the end melted into fancy type, dripping down into bottles of wine. Thus, it took Draco much longer to read it than it took him to imagine what the women had on, or didn’t, under their hair.

*Vox Populi*, said the title itself. The smaller letters underneath that were ornamented as well, with more grapes and what looked like horns, but easier to read. *The Voice of the People.*

Draco frowned. *I haven’t heard anything about this.* He looked at the headline, hoping that would provide him with a clue. A moment later, he choked.

**Minister Conspiring With Unspeakables**

“What’s the matter, Draco?” Harry asked just then. Draco felt his hand descend to squeeze his shoulder, and then pause.

Draco read the article beneath the headline. He could feel Harry reading it with him.

*According to unimpeachable sources, the Unspeakables of the Department of Mysteries have been hunting our own Chosen One, the former Harry Potter. They cleared the Atrium of witnesses, and attacked him when he went to visit the Ministry on a completely legal and rather important mission. The only companion Harry had was the checkpoint witch, but he still managed to fight the Unspeakables off. According to our sources, the gray-cloaks attempted to collar Harry and use a powerful artifact, stinking of time magic, on him. When he and his companion escaped, the Unspeakables chose to Obliviate them. Little did they know that Harry is a Lord-level wizard, and undoubtedly used to fighting off such tricks.*

*Our question is: where was the Minister in all this? Why has he said nothing about an attack on the Chosen One in his own Ministry, by his own employees? Why did he not notice that no one except the checkpoint witch was suddenly in the Atrium, that powerful magic was used—both in the attack and in the escape—and that the checkpoint witch then vanished?*

*We contend that Minister Scrimgeour knows full well what happened, but is ignoring it in favor of letting the Department of Mysteries do as they liked. What do we know about the Department of Mysteries, anyway? Very little. They are supposedly chosen by an artifact that will not choose anyone disloyal as a servant, but we now ask: loyal to what purpose? Is the artifact really working for the good of wizarding society, as the Unspeakables have always contended, or for the good of the Department of Mysteries, and no one else?*

*The Minister’s trust in this Department is sorely misplaced. Attempting to stalk and capture the hero of the wizarding world, the only one who can defend us from Voldemort, is beyond the pale. We call on Minister Scrimgeour to explain himself, preferably now.*

There was no author’s name. Of course there wouldn’t be, Draco thought, a bit numb. Someone writing an article this inflammatory wouldn’t want to be known, even by pseudonym.

There were others things that stunned him more. He had *never* seen a newspaper print Voldemort’s name. He had barely even seen it written, unless Harry was writing the letter. The strident tone made no pretense to the objectivity the *Prophet* always supposedly sheltered behind, either. Draco shook his head, wondering who in the world was behind this, and why they expected to get away with it.

“Look,” said Harry quietly, and turned the page.

Draco blinked. On the second page was a too-familiar photograph of Harry flying at the dragons in the Triwizard Tournament. Draco had long since wondered why they couldn’t use another picture of him, perhaps one that was more recent and had Draco in it as well, and showed off the ring proclaiming the joining ritual on Harry’s hand.

The headline above it was something new, though.

**Did He or Didn’t He?: Compelling New Evidence that “Chosen One” is the Chosen of Dragons Only**

Draco skimmed the article, shaking his head. It argued that Harry hadn’t really defended the students at Hogwarts from the dragons when Mulciber cast the Imperio that caused them to break free from their wards; instead, he had communicated with the dragons because he was *their* hero, *their* child of prophecy. It mixed truth with lies so merrily that Draco could see how many would be convinced, and there was no author’s name on this one, either.
“I don’t understand,” he said, as he looked through other articles and found ones that talked about Harry as a hero, ones that derided him, ones that argued for the mixing of wizards and Muggles, and ones that said the magical and mundane worlds should remain separate. “What is their stance?”

“I don’t think they have one.” Harry flipped the paper over to the very back, and touched something Draco hadn’t noticed yet, the name of the publisher and press.


Draco grimaced. He had actually heard of the Hornblower family, though not of Dionysus in particular. They were mad eccentrics who usually didn’t Declare, but had plenty of Galleons thanks to a few common, useful transportation spells they’d invented centuries ago. They interbred with Muggles and halfbloods and Veela and whoever else caught their eyes, usually without the benefit of marriage. Lucius had warned Draco never to have dealings with a Hornblower, unless he was using a binding oath with wording he’d chosen himself. If there was a way to cause chaos, a Hornblower would find it.

And Dionysus had been the Greek god of wine, revelry, and madness, and the Maenads had been his followers, women who went wild and danced their way through the hills. Draco flipped the paper back over and looked again at the dancing women around the title.

The Maenads had also torn apart wild beasts and men they caught, from what Draco remembered. They were utterly indiscriminate in their choice of victims; mothers had slaughtered their sons if the god had commanded them to. Hornblower naming his press after them and choosing them as the emblem of his paper was as close to a declaration of war on all sides as Draco could imagine.

“They’re going to publish anything they want,” Harry murmured. “And most of it won’t be believed, doubtless, but they have some accurate information.” He touched the leading article again. “They had to have talked to someone who was at my festival, or perhaps the writer was there himself.”

*Why, though?* Draco asked. “There are so many other ways that this Dionysus could cause trouble, with much less expense to himself. Why this one in particular?”

“I’m glad you asked that question.”

Draco jerked his head up. The gray-and-black owl had stayed on the table, though he hadn’t noticed; most post owls left after they’d been rewarded for their delivery. She had her wings spread, fanned out, and her beak open. A cloud of glittering light floated out of her beak, and formed the image of a wizard, probably in his thirties, smiling at them.

Draco immediately didn’t like him. He had a look that Draco had seen only once before: on the face of the werewolf called Loki. It was a look that said he wasn’t in control of everything, but he would fling the Severing Curses anyway and let the blood fly and settle where it would. That quite twisted what Draco thought would have been an ordinary face otherwise, with gray eyes and brown hair and a tiny birthmark on one cheek.

“I sent this message with most owls, but most people aren’t going to ask.” Dionysus sat behind a desk of some kind. Now he leaned forward confidingly over it and winked with his left eye. “Now, you, you’re curious. You want to know what’s been going on. That’s good. That’s proper. That’s the first step on the road to true freedom.

“Simply put, the *Vox Populi* exists to publish those articles that most people won’t ever get to read, thanks to the *Prophet* and its vicious politics of strangling dissent at the mouth.” Dionysus sneered. “I’ll publish anything anyone sends to me, and the only editing I do is for grammar. That’s the only thing that could shame my paper. The truth never can.”

“You don’t know what the truth is, you old git,” Draco muttered, but of course the sending couldn’t hear him, and prattled on.

“I pay for everything, and pay the writers, too, so you don’t need to worry about the expense of printing. I want *everyone* to know the truth. The Ministry’s had everything its own way for far too long. And now we’re moving into a war, into a *revolution*, and they want to pretend that nothing’s changed.” Dionysus’s eyes glittered in a way that Draco thought was unhealthy. “That’s not true. I’m taking my example and my inspiration from Harry *vates*, who is our prophet and seer as much as he’s for the magical creatures. He values freedom, and well he should! Freedom is the most important thing in the world.”

Draco couldn’t help turning his head to see what impact that had on Harry. He found Harry watching the sending with an expression born of resignation. Harry caught his eye and turned his hand palm-up, mouthing something Draco could barely hear under Dionysus’s rattle. *Sow the wind, reap the whirlwind.*
“—And now we have a force that can challenge the Ministry.” Dionysus nodded several times, as if to prove that he really, really believed in it. *He’s a Hornblower, of course he does,* Draco thought. “We have one paper that can centralize and vocalize all the dissent, and let our people know that they’re not alone. They can realize that centaurs think the same way they do, and that the people they always respected just because they were pureblood don’t deserve that respect, and that *they can say so.*

“Our motto, besides being the voice of the people, is the same as the Alliance of Sun and Shadow. We aren’t afraid, and our enemies can’t make us be.”

The sending stopped talking, and a moment later the light dissolved and poured back into the owl’s mouth. She gave a little shake of her feathers, then leaped into the air and sped out the window as though afraid they would kill the messenger.

Draco twisted to look up at Harry again. “You didn’t need that,” he said.

Harry huffed out a breath, and sat down on the opposite side of the table, taking the paper with him as he went. “No, I didn’t,” he said, staring at some of the articles, “but I can hardly control what people do, either, or think that my example is going to inspire only restraint.”

Draco folded his arms. “Must you be so—so reasonable all the time?” he hissed.

Harry looked up at him. “What do you mean?”

“You can get angry,” Draco told him. Camellia dodged between them to set a plate full of sausages down in front of Harry, but Harry, his eyes on Draco, didn’t appear to notice. “You’ve been doing well with it since the Sanctuary. And now it’s—drying up again.” He couldn’t find a word that fit what he wanted to say better. “You’re acting as though anything anyone does in your name, you can’t be angry about, and you can’t denounce.”

“Well, I plan to say that I didn’t help to establish or fund the *Vox Populi,* if anyone asks,” said Harry, sounding a bit bewildered. “But I can’t be angry that Hornblower took my example and ran with it in a direction I wish he hadn’t. Of course that was going to happen sooner or later. I’ve set myself up as a political figure, Draco, the leader of an alliance. People are going to misunderstand me and misinterpret me and worship me in ways I wish they wouldn’t. That’s practically a given. It still makes me uncomfortable, but that’s not the same thing as angry. I chose this position, I chose the game, I chose the consequences. I have to live with them.”

Draco shook his head and waved one hand in his fury. “And you’re going to divide yourself up again to deal with this problem—”

“Actually,” said Harry, a small smile creeping over his lips, “I’m not.”

Draco blinked. “What?”

“I have too much happening already.” Harry laid down the paper and leaned forward. “I’ve reached the limit of what I can deal with by myself. That’s why I asked Hermione to research the legal loopholes in the anti-werewolf laws, and Zacharias Smith to research that flying horse symbol. And now I’m looking for a good solicitor to help us represent the werewolves, through Miriam Smith. I thought about going through the Gloryflowers, but everyone and her second cousin knows that Laura Gloryflower’s niece is a werewolf now, so that won’t work. The Smiths are still terribly respectable. I can’t do that all myself, I’m pressed for time to just do the essential things—”

“Like eating your breakfast,” Camellia muttered, drifting up behind him.

Harry obediently picked up his fork, but didn’t let the interruption faze him. “—And this situation is the same way. I’m going to ask someone else to handle it for me.” He took a few more bites, not removing his eyes from Draco.

Draco shook his head. “Who?” He couldn’t think of many other allies who could move with impunity in the circles Dionysus Hornblower traveled. The werewolves were in danger of arrest if they set foot outside the Black houses, Dionysus Hornblower had no respect for blood status and no reason to listen to pureblood money, Harry’s allies in the Ministry were right out, Pettigrew had few if any political connections, and Harry would probably not trust Snape to control his temper.

“You.”

Draco blinked again. “Pardon?” he said at last, in what he knew was a rather faint voice.
Harry cocked his head, and his eyes glittered, bright and sharp. “Draco,” he said quietly. “I know you made a few connections in the Ministry last year, after we defeated Dumbledore. I didn’t know it at the time, but I figured it out later. You’ve kept them up, haven’t you? You’ve not just let them go.”

Draco nodded reluctantly. He really didn’t think Harry had noticed, to tell the truth. Those connections would have been a nice way to surprise him.

“I think you’ll be able to communicate with them more easily than I’m able to talk to anyone in the Ministry, Scrimgeour included.” Harry leaned back and clasped his hand behind his head, ignoring Camellia’s mutters about food. “And I know that some of them have respect for the Malfoy name and the Malfoy money—but you’re not your father. You don’t have as intimidating a reputation preceding you. You can make them underestimate you and take them by surprise.

“You can possess people as well. And I know you can read minds, not just control actions. That ought to be bloody useful in figuring out secrets.”

“You don’t think it’s unethical?” Draco blurted. He’d thought of using his possession gift in just that way, but he had assumed Harry would hate the idea.

Harry looked down at his plate without seeing it. “If you’re going to control their actions, then I would say yes,” he murmured. “It was hard to condone that even for the Midsummer battle, when I knew it was kill or be killed. But this situation, while less desperate, is certainly consumed with spying.” He took a deep breath. “I won’t let my enemies drive me around in circles, Draco. I’ll ask someone else to liaise with the Maenad Press. Honoria, I think. Her illusions are good for so much in that line, and she’d be thrilled to be asked.

“I need information, Draco. Now that the Unspeakables are in the battle, it’s more crucial than it was before. Even your father couldn’t tell me that much about them. And most of the ways of getting information are unethical in one sense or another. I’m never going to torture people for it, but this?” Harry looked up and nodded. “Yes, I think this will work. If you promise that you won’t use the information just to fulfill personal grudges, or your possession to control their actions unless it’s a matter of life and death.”

Draco threw his head back. He felt warmth spreading over him like sunshine. Harry’s trust honored him, and violating it would not be worth the momentary satisfaction he might gain from revenge.

“So you want me to help with managing your reputation altogether, don’t you?” he asked softly. “Keep an eye on how it changes, what new rumors are rising, how the Vox Populi and the other papers are affecting things?”

Harry nodded again. “Yes. Scrimgeour was going to do that for me while I was in the Sanctuary, but…well.”

Draco cocked his head. His mind felt full of possibilities, burgeoning like the grapes growing around the title of the Vox Populi. He wondered for a moment if Harry felt like this all the time, then tried to dismiss the thought, because that just made him shudder.

“It would be more than just having a few contacts in the Ministry, Harry, you know that,” he said. “I’d want to fight for you on several different levels. I’d try to recruit people for the Alliance, find out what the Unspeakables were doing, discredit your opponents.”

“I know that.”

“Have you abandoned your morals, then?” Camellia did not sound at all pleased. “I would not see you become different than you are now, Wild, simply to satisfy the political requirements of wizards.”

Harry leaned back in his chair and shook his head at her. “I’ve accepted that I can’t win this battle if I do nothing,” he said quietly. “And doing nothing would be the only way to insure that I made no questionable decisions. I am vates. I have to push forward. I have to speak news that people won’t want to hear. And if someone imposes on the free will of another, I have to fight back against that. The trouble will be restraining myself so that I only fight back until that other person’s free will is restored, and then stop.” He let out a breath and looked at Draco. “So, Draco, I’m trusting you to bring me the information unless the situation is so urgent that you have to act immediately and you don’t have time to reach me. Don’t just use it indiscriminately.”

“That’s why you can trust me and no one else in this position,” said Draco, while more ideas grew. He had acquaintances among the seventh-year Slytherins Harry had never bothered to make; he had never been as close to his own Housemates as many other Slytherins were, coming from a Light-devoted family who’d hidden away from the wizarding world. “I want to defend you,
Harry, you know that, not just advance my own interests.”

Harry grinned at him. “Your interests are intertwined with mine. I understand that much, Draco.” He hesitated for a moment, then said, “By the way, I’m sorry for the row we had yesterday.”

Draco was glad that he’d already decided to accept and forgive. It made him able to nod and say, “You played that prank because you wanted to please your brother, didn’t you?”

A tension he hadn’t realized Harry was carrying melted out of his shoulders. “Yes,” he said, leaning towards Draco. Over Harry’s shoulder, Draco caught a glimpse of Camellia scowling ferociously. He smirked at her and clasped Harry’s hand. Harry didn’t seem to notice the byplay. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done it. It made you feel so terrible, and I felt guilty for hours afterward.” He hesitated, as if pondering whether he should speak the next words at all, then offered, “I didn’t sleep well last night.”

Draco felt a flash of triumph, but he adopted the most innocent expression he could. “Because you weren’t there,” Harry mumbled, his cheeks flushing even more brightly.

Camellia scowled again. Draco raised Harry’s hand to his lips, eyes challenging. Camellia whipped around and stalked away.

Draco did believe that she wasn’t jealous of Harry as a werewolf would be of a potential mate. But her jealousy was actually more dangerous in the long run. Relatively few people might want to share Harry’s bed (though Draco didn’t believe that, because how could anyone not want to?). Dozens of them would struggle to be close to him, some for the wrong motives. And the ones with the right motives could still exhaust him, as he would want to give them all appropriate time and attention.

Draco would make sure that that didn’t happen. He would evaluate the people who wanted to come close, and send off the ones who would drain Harry more than they would help him. If he was going to be recruiting members for the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, he would be the guard and first line of defense there.

That would help Harry, and it would help Draco. He wanted Harry to be relaxed and happy. And by this time, the selfish reasons and the unselfish ones for that were so tightly interwoven that he wondered if one could actually separate them anymore.

“I’ve already forgotten that prank,” said Draco, being absolutely honest, because it had led him to this point and because it made Harry’s eyes brighten. “I’d like to sleep with you again tonight, if you’ll let me.”

“I want you to,” Harry said at once.

His gaze moved away from Draco then, falling on the Vox Populi, and the lines around his mouth tightened. “I was going to talk to Snape about that book,” he said, and, after one more squeeze to Draco’s hand, stood and wandered out of the kitchen, leaving his breakfast mostly uneaten.

Draco snorted. He needs a distraction. We both do. I am going to provide one.

He leaned back and smirked at the ceiling. And if it’s a distraction that will provoke him to the point of lowering his barriers, so be it. That’s the only way he’ll truly relax, and the only way he’ll be refreshed when he has to face what’s coming after this.

Draco picked up the Vox Populi and made his way towards the door. He had letters to write and research to do. Time to see if some of the tidbits of information that his father had mentioned on the Hornblower family over the years were grounded in rumor or fact.

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Chapter Fifteen: Draco Decides To Be a Distraction

“And you think that you need the book?” Snape’s voice was casual, and only his grip on the silver stirring stick showed how tense he was. Harry had interrupted him in the middle of brewing yet another new potion. Sometimes he thought this was how Snape stayed sane in the middle of so many werewolves.

“I do,” said Harry. “I’ve been having dreams——”

“Visions?” If silver could snap, Harry was sure that Snape’s grip would have snapped the stirring stick.
“No, no.” Harry smiled, and that didn’t appear to reassure his guardian. He held out his hand in a placating gesture instead. “I mean it. They aren’t visions. They’re not even dreams that let me clearly see the title of the book at first. I think this was more in the nature of my mind realizing what I needed before I did, and prodding me with a few dreams to get my attention.”

Snape looked away from him. “That book has passed through the hands of many owners over the years,” he said carefully. “If it contained a cure for lycanthropy, I am sure that someone would have noticed.”

“No?” Harry studied his turned face. He looks as if he’s sleeping better, at least. I’m glad of that. “From what Draco told me about it, each person who reads it is driven to brew a potion that resonates with their goals. Maybe there is a potion that could cure lycanthropy, but only if someone opens the book looking for just that and nothing else. Or maybe I can create the base and then modify the potion from there.”

“It’s possible.” Reluctance think as treacle still crowded Snape’s voice. He turned around again. “But you cannot be under compulsion, Harry. You are vates. Do you forget so easily?”

Harry blinked. “Of course not. But a willingly chosen compulsion is different. If it were really true that a vates can’t compel himself, I couldn’t swear binding oaths, either, or make promises.”

Snape clenched his teeth. Harry could almost hear him striving for some other way to refuse his request, though he wasn’t using Legilimency. Harry made his voice as gentle, as warm, as persuasive, as possible.

“I promise I won’t misuse it, sir. I promise I’ll bring it back to you the moment I have the list of ingredients copied down—“

“That won’t be possible,” said Snape. “The book makes you want to keep it with you until the potion is completed. If you could simply separate yourself from it when you’d chosen the recipe, then Melissa Prince’s spell wouldn’t work.” He hesitated a moment. “She was an ancestor of mine,“ he added.

Harry blinked. “She was?” Now that he thought about it, he supposed he remembered someone telling him Snape had descended from the Prince line, but he refused to claim any of the (largely empty) honors that could have been his, including having the Prince coat of arms on the back of his chair at the equinox alliance meeting.

“Yes,” said Snape, and then turned away and stared into the cauldron again.

Harry narrowed his eyes. I know he’s a halfblood who wasn’t raised in the pureblood rituals. And I know the Prince line was proud enough that they were horrified at the thought of producing a bastard child when that Muggleborn Lord claimed to be related to them, even if he did have Lord-level power. A parent—a mother—who married a Muggle or a Muggleborn...

* I wonder what she would think of herself? I wonder what her family would think of her? *

And Snape’s face was darkening with shadows again, as if all the nights of good sleep meant nothing in the face of this revelation. Harry took a deep breath and guessed.

“Are the dreams about your mother, sir?”

Snape turned so suddenly and so viciously that Harry stumbled back a step. This time, his magic must have lent its strength to his hand, because the silver stirring stick actually bent under his fingers. Harry shuddered a bit, and Snape looked down and seemed to realize what he’d done. Carefully, he laid the silver stick aside.

“They are about nothing important,” Snape said.

Harry could almost hear the rattle of scorpion stings in his words. Ice was slowly creeping across the walls, and it wasn’t Harry’s. He knew that Snape could have a cold temper himself on occasion, though; fourth year was a more than good enough example of that.

“All right, sir,” he said quietly.

Snape eyed him for a moment, then swept across the room. Harry waited while he rummaged through a trunk. Snape had explained that he never let the book out of his possession unless someone else was borrowing it with his permission; the compulsion spell on it, and the potions within, were too dangerous. Harry could understand.

He remembered the expression on Snape’s face a few moments ago, and wished there were other things he understood as well.
Snape turned and tossed the book to him. Harry caught and examined it. It had a handsome, dark cover, with the words that he remembered seeing from the time when Draco was brewing a potion to summon Julia Malfoy on the cover. *Medicamenta Meatus Verus*, or Potions of the True Path.

And he could feel the *magic*. It woke at once, rolling around the cover and in between the pages, purring and laughing and rubbing against his fingers like a cat. It wanted to reach out to him, Harry thought. It was already looking at him, tracking inconsistencies in his own principles, searching for cracks that would allow its compulsion to bind him.

*This is freely chosen*, he reminded himself, and concentrated on a potion to cure the lycanthropy curse, and let the book fall open.

The purring sound in his ears intensified, and then the book’s pages turned as if an invisible hand manipulated them. Harry felt the web curl around his shoulders like Argutus, and it whispered words he couldn’t quite make out. He waited for the book to settle on a page, his heart pounding hard.

And then it did, and Harry glanced down the page, and almost laughed aloud. It was no wonder that no one had managed to work out a cure to the lycanthropy curse so far, he thought. This was a potion to free the soul and the body from a curse, but a note in neat handwriting towards the bottom stated: *To break any truly powerful curse, this potion must be invested with some of the bearer’s magic.*

*Most of the people preparing the potion wouldn’t want to sacrifice their own magic*, Harry thought. *Or they wouldn’t have any idea how to do it, except to a magical heir. I’m absorbere. I can do this.*

“Harry?”

That was Snape’s voice, somewhere beyond the roaring in his ears. Harry blinked and looked up at him. “Hmmm?”

“You will be well?”

Harry nodded, his mind already swimming with plans. Most of the ingredients of the potion were common, but most potions brewers wouldn’t think to add them in the order the book recommended, because they were explosive when mixed. The book recommended a magic-infused base that would get around that, though, and Harry knew where a few other useless, pretty artifacts were stored in Silver-Mirror that could give him the magic he needed. “Yes.”

Snape sighed, but said, “Then go and begin your brewing, I suppose.”

Harry wondered out of the room, still reading the instructions for the potion. But, perhaps because he had had practice before in handling one overriding problem while sparing some time for others, he did make himself a note. *Send an owl to Gollrish Y Thie. Get Joseph here to help Snape.*

******

Draco was extremely frustrated. Today was the day he had planned to push, break some of Harry’s barriers, and make him relax, but he couldn’t find him.

He had used the morning to good effect, writing his contacts in the Ministry, and even some of those more responsible to his father, and playing on the power of his name and his closeness to Harry to ask them to look carefully at the Ministry’s anti-werewolf—and anti-Harry—politics. But then he had gone down for lunch, and he couldn’t find Harry. None of the werewolves who would talk to him had seen him, either. Peter was busy practicing Animagus training with Connor, and they were both annoyed with Draco for interrupting them when Connor had been about to see his silhouette. Draco privately thought Potter was just being a whiny little brat, as usual, and hadn’t been anywhere ready to see it.

It finally occurred to Draco that he might not be at Cobley-by-the-Sea, but in one of the other Black houses. He hastened to the library Harry had set up with Floo connections to all four houses, trying to think. Where would he go?

Probably not Wayhouse, he thought. There was no one there, and the house’s temperament was so uncertain that Harry had specifically said he didn’t want to visit for a while.

Not Grimmauld Place, either. Draco was sure that Snape would have been fuming in that case, over Harry going to talk to Lupin.

He cast a handful of Floo powder into the flames and announced, as confidently as he could given that he’d just reasoned it out,
The flames turned green, and Draco hopped in. Briefly, he was whirled around, and then flung out into the main hall of the house, beneath the golden fire-pool. Draco blinked and looked around. He had expected Harry to be in front of the pictures, perhaps pacing, staring at them moodily, and wondering when Regulus would reappear. That would have been a perfect time for Draco to try and break him out of his brooding. Being teased about said brooding tended to do that to Harry.

Instead, the hall was empty, but Draco could hear low muttering and fussing coming from a side door, one that didn’t lead to the wind-pool. He walked over to it and peered carefully around it.

Harry was sorting through a pile of tiny treasures, spoons and statuettes and coins and others that Draco knew no one would have looked at twice if they didn’t tremble with magical power. In most cases, though, the spells on them were minor, nothing more than a charm to make them brighter and more polished, or cast a mild illusion that might entertain a child for a few minutes. Harry had had them all piled here after the Midsummer battle, Draco knew. He wanted the treasures he could drain to restore the former Squibs all in one place.

Now, though, he had a cauldron set up beside him, boiling with water and smelling of hedgehog quills and something else that Draco couldn’t immediately identify. Draco frowned. **Is he actually planning to melt some of those treasures? Why? What would he use molten silver for?**

Suddenly Harry gave a small noise of satisfaction and stood up, a tiny mirror in his hand. He breathed on it, and then nodded at whatever he saw there; Draco couldn’t see from this angle. He stared, and then Draco felt the pull as he used his absorbere gift on the mirror, drawing the magic from it.

Draco shuddered. **He’s making a potion that uses a lot of magic? What is it? And I wonder if he’s thought that turning all the Black treasures into useless trinkets isn’t a good idea? I know he doesn’t value them, and Regulus doesn’t care, but someone else might.**

“Harry?” he asked.

Harry jumped, but not as badly as Draco thought he should have. Instead, he just glanced up, gave a distracted little, “Hmmm,” and looked back at the mirror. Then he nodded, dropped it, and walked across to the cauldron. Draco smelled a gush of rose scent as Harry poured the magic into the potion. It paused for a moment, then began bubbling more enthusiastically.

“What are you doing?” Draco asked, coming further into the room.

“Starting to brew a potion that I hope will be a cure for lycanthropy,” Harry said, as calmly as if he did this every day. He turned and picked up a book lying next to the cauldron. Draco recognized it from the shape of the spine alone. He’d spent two months carrying that book around and staring into it every day. And in the end, he’d summoned the ghost of his ancestor and received—well, empathy, yes, but also a glimpse of how very wrong everything could have gone.

“Harry,” he hissed. “Why on earth are you using that book?”

“Because it’s the only one that might tell me the recipe,” Harry said absently, and flicked a page over. “And the cure is the one part of this process I can really control, at least until Fred and George set up a means of contacting Scrimgeour through Percy. And I want to be able to do something for the werewolves, not just sit around and be a pack leader in a few isolated houses. Once I go back to Hogwarts, I won’t be able to do even that.” He looked up, blinking. “This potion will take some months to brew, but that’s under normal working times. If I concentrate those months into a few weeks of intense effort, then—”

“You’ll be needed to do other things!” Draco came a step forward, vibrating with indignation. **I can’t believe that Snape would be so stupid as to give him that book. “I could barely concentrate on anything else while I was brewing that potion to summon Julia Malfoy. What makes you think you’ll be able to?”**

“You could still do your schoolwork and argue with me.” Harry didn’t sound concerned. “I can keep up, Draco. But I had this idea from my dreams, and I finally remembered where I’d seen a book with a title like that when I woke this morning. This is a way to do it.” He smiled at Draco. “I accepted the compulsion willingly. It’s not going to hurt me.”

Draco shook his head, hardly able to find the words. **He knows how many different things he has to concentrate on, and then he goes and does—this. I suppose he does think that he’ll be able to brew the potion and still do other things. He isn’t the kind of person to just abandon his responsibilities.**
But he won’t be able to. Draco shuddered. His memories of the compulsion creeping into his brain were two years old now, but when he thought of it, they came curving back, cold fingers stroking his thoughts, twisting them in all kinds of different directions. And I think I wanted to be my family’s magical heir less than Harry wants to find a cure for lycanthropy. This is going to ride him, and he’ll neglect his Animagus training and his political commitments and breaking the curses on his left wrist.

He’ll neglect me.

Draco narrowed his eyes. It seemed that his task of distraction was both more necessary and harder than he’d thought. Harry had already turned away again, murmuring to himself as he laid the book down and picked up what looked like a salt cellar but was probably full of another ingredient. The small golden specks that Harry added to the potion with a delicate shake confirmed that.

“It’s stupid,” said Draco, deciding to be blunt. “You made another spur-of-the-moment decision, and you think that you should finish this because you haven’t achieved a victory in a while.”

Harry jumped. Then he turned around again, and Draco saw that the words had pierced through his compulsion. Harry didn’t like to consider that his motives behind making this choice weren’t purely altruistic. But he did want to break another web or brew a potion that would cure lycanthropy to show that not all his victories were compromises like showing the Pensieve memories were.

Draco was convinced of it. Harry could be selfish and short-sighted, too.

“That’s not true,” Harry said, but his eyes were narrowed, and his magic soared up around him enough that the room reeked of roses. “I’m not doing this just to gratify myself.”

“No, but you are frustrated,” said Draco. Someone else might have been standing behind him and whispering the words into his ear. He could see the pattern Harry had fallen into over the last few days since the festival now, and wanted to kick himself for not seeing it beforehand. “The festival didn’t go the way you wanted, with Falco Parkinson showing up and then escaping, and the Pensieve memories not birthing a movement against the Unspeakables. Then you spent time with your brother, and that didn’t go the way you wanted, either. And then the Vox Populi came along, and while you delegated me to deal with it, you didn’t anticipate it, and that makes you angry. You’re trying for something you think will enable you to make a definite step forward. And maybe it will, Harry, but you can’t afford to do nothing else for a few weeks. Which that damn thing will make you do.” He scowled at the book.

“I am not angry,” said Harry, while behind him a pile of small Black artifacts rearranged itself for no apparent reason.

“Of course you aren’t,” said Draco, with a tolerant smile. “And Snape isn’t maddened by the presence of werewolves in the house right now.”

Harry opened his mouth to counter that, but closed it with a growl. He then shut his eyes and took a few deep breaths.

Draco didn’t want to give him time to recover himself. He might decide that continuing on with the book and the madness and the potion was a good idea, and Draco didn’t want that. He could feel the same excitement that he’d discovered this morning at the thought of provoking Harry welling up. He would get out of this what he wanted and Harry what he needed. Pointing out that
Harry was stupid to make the same mistake he’d made was just an extra.

“He isn’t thinking about them by driving himself into brewing,” said Draco. “But he can afford that, because no one is looking towards him to lead them. You’re in the opposite situation, sorry, Harry. And it was your own choices that put you there. You were so philosophical about that with the Vox Populi, that people wouldn’t do just what you wanted them to do. And now you’re already running away from it? You expect everyone to pause while you brew this potion?”

The wall behind Draco turned to ice, and a spoon pinged as it was bent out of shape. Draco wished it hadn’t. Harry looked towards the sound, and his face went ashen. He shook his head and closed his eyes, and the smell of roses palpably sank.

“I can’t afford to argue with you about this, Draco,” he said softly. “I have to—"

“Do other things, I know,” said Draco, with a nod. Harry opened his eyes hopefully, and Draco used his words to hit him between them. “You have to run away from your responsibilities. You have to subject yourself to compulsion from a book you should know better than to trust, after what it did to me. You have to make sure that you do something concrete, even though no one is demanding that lycanthropy cure from you right now. You have to pretend that you’re still only a political nonentity, and what you choose to do with your time is your choice. Meanwhile, you deny yourself the right to get angry over something like the Vox Populi, and you assume that you’re at fault in that prank, when it was your brother.”

Harry swallowed and closed his eyes again. “Draco, stop it,” he whispered.

Draco paused and studied him. He frowned. He’s far closer to the edge than I thought. I wonder how much time he did spend sleepless because of guilt, not because I wasn’t there?

And then his uncertainty fed back into his anger and his determination. If he couldn’t sleep because of guilt over that stupid prank, then he lied to me. He should know better than to do that.

Besides, it’s a service for me to tip him off this edge. If I don’t, then who knows when he might fall and shatter? At least this is a point when people aren’t expecting that much from him—and if I can get him to release all this anger and guilt and whatever else is befouling him, then he’ll only handle what comes after this better.

Draco wrapped the whole gift to himself with a bow of self-interest. And I’m not frightened by his anger. Quite the opposite. He felt a pull low in his groin at the thought, and went back to work on Harry.

“You’re setting yourself up to fall again, you know,” he told Harry conversationally. “You’ve done quite well for the last little while, but now you’re retreating into old, and stupid, behaviors. Yes, let’s put the vates under a compulsion, that’s a wonderful idea. If you’re an idiot who thinks he has to keep doing favors for others or people won’t love him.”

Harry gave a huge, jolting flinch that shook his entire body. “Stop it,” he said. “That’s not what I think.”

“Yes, it is,” said Draco, quick to follow things up now. He could feel the momentum in the room shifting, charging forward, and he didn’t dare lose it. “You accept that we love you, Snape and me and your brother—I wonder if you accept it from anyone else?—but you still think that you need to come up with reasons that we should love you. You still avoid letting us know when you’re angry and trampling on our wills, and not just because of the vates idea. How many times have you smoothed anger back into the depths because you thought we would hate you if you said what you really thought?”

That was too far, deliberately too far, and Draco knew it. Harry’s back stiffened with outrage. Two spoons rose from their pile and sped past Draco, to clatter against the wall next to him. He didn’t flinch, for a simple reason: he wasn’t afraid.

Harry was getting angry, and the anger was a magnificent sight. Draco wished that Harry could see himself in it; then he wouldn’t have asked that stupid question the other day, about whether Draco physically desired him, or only wanted emotional intimacy. His eyes were alight now, with fire that he usually kept too carefully in check out of fear of his magic, and a complex dark star spread out behind him, briefly forming a pair of white-gold wings.

“I know you don’t hate me, and never will,” Harry said, his voice low. “And I’ve really changed in the Sanctuary, and I’m going to keep pushing forward. I promised you that, Draco.”

Draco looked at the book and the cauldron, and raised one eyebrow. He really didn’t have to say anything else.

“This is a choice I made that doesn’t have anything to do with you,” Harry told him.
Draco wanted to cheer. He didn’t think he could yet, though. Harry wasn’t really listening to his own words. Let this drop, and he was too likely to start castigating himself for saying such words at all. Harry made too much of small rows and tiffs and insults, thinking that each was a case of him stepping on someone else’s free will.

“Yes, it does,” said Draco. “Why is it that you never rest, Harry? Why is it that you can’t relax? Because the only kind of love you’ve ever been comfortable with is conditional, and you believe that if you wait too long, perhaps the people who love you will think you’re lazy, and shift their love somewhere else.”

“That’s not true!” Harry’s dark starburst spread a little further, and a mirror shattered. Draco didn’t even duck, because the glass pieces were going the other way. Besides, ducking would also snap the mood.

“You set yourself arbitrary time limits,” Draco said. He gestured at the book and the cauldron again. “At least, for those things that you do for other people. You pushed away and ignored your own loss of a left hand for as long as you could, because you didn’t want to be thought selfish and weak. You wanted to heal others’ grief instead of looking at your own, because Merlin knows that your own grief frightens you.”

“Stop it!” Harry was yelling now, his hand clenched. “I’m not afraid!”

“Yes, you are,” said Draco, and found himself smiling. He thought he would have been even if he didn’t expect a certain very enjoyable result from Harry’s broken barriers. “The only times I’ve ever seen your pain and your grief were when you literally couldn’t hide them anymore, Harry. Even in the Sanctuary, you kept most of it hidden because you didn’t want to interfere with my healing. Or that’s the excuse you gave. It’s amusing, really. Other people curl up and cry in fear when they hear someone say Voldemort’s name. You curl up and cry in fear because you think someone else might see you in pain.”

Harry snapped his hand viciously sideways. Draco found himself unable to move as Harry headed towards him, his eyes brighter than they had been. The white-gold wings were dripping light, but kept resurrecting themselves, stronger illusions on Harry’s back each time. Draco was definitely hard now, and more than ready. He wondered how much more pushing it would take.

“That is not true,” Harry hissed at him. “Take it back.”

Draco raised his eyebrows again. The magic was holding his jaw shut. Harry hesitated, and Draco saw a hint of self-awareness creeping back into his eyes. Any moment now, he was going to blame himself for expressing a reasonable level of anger that he’d been provoked into.

Draco couldn’t let that happen.

He still had control of his facial muscles, so he let a deliberately mocking look cross his face, as much to say that he knew the truth when Harry didn’t.

Harry stared at him, and Draco felt the pressure of Legilimency. This was even better. He let one thought sound over and over at the forefront of his mind, so that Harry would be sure to hear it. If you’re really overcome most of your training, as you’ve promised me you’ve been trying to do, then I don’t think your fear of bedding me has anything to do with that. I think it’s just fear.

Harry snapped.

******

Harry knew he ought to be able to stop, to slow down. His magic was further out of control than he had ever let it expand before, even when they rode back in the carriage from the Sanctuary and Paton said he had felt it coming. It was blooming and singing around him, and he knew that ought to frighten him.

But those conclusions were like words written on a page pinned on a wall across the room. They might be true, but they couldn’t touch him right now.

He just wanted to make Draco shut up and stop saying things that weren’t true. Of course he believed that Snape and Draco and Connor loved him unconditionally, of course he wasn’t afraid like Draco was insinuating he was—how dare he insinuate that!—and of course he did feel guilty when he had a reason to and didn’t mope unreasonably.

And of course his training was still there, and not just ordinary fear of bedding. So he would prove to Draco that the training was still there.
He had the feeling that there was a contradiction in his thoughts somewhere, a place he couldn’t quite touch.

He didn’t care.

He let the magic go and grabbed Draco’s chin in his hand, growling again in annoyance at the lack of a second one. He had to correct that soon, he thought muzzily. For now, his chest was hot and tight and fell smaller on the bottom than the top, and his thoughts leaped and careened and ran in strange directions, but the main center of them was always the same: proving Draco wrong.

He kissed Draco, more roughly than he’d ever dared to before, because he had always been afraid that if he did, he would hurt him, he was so much the stronger—

Except that that couldn’t be true, because he wasn’t afraid. And so he would kiss Draco hard and even bite him if he wanted, because Draco wasn’t afraid of him, and he should be, and Harry wanted to show him just how wrong he was.

Draco moaned. Harry didn’t think that was supposed to happen. He didn’t have much time to think about it, though, because Draco, since he was no longer being pinned against the wall, had leaned forward, one hand in the center of Harry’s chest, and shoved him backwards, and Harry went half-sprawling, and he rolled over and came up to one knee in the coins, because, damn it, he wasn’t done.

He didn’t use his magic to stop or slow Draco down as Draco sprang at him, though, because why should he? He didn’t need to. He was going to show Draco that he was wrong, because any moment his training would kick in and push him away screaming, and that meant Draco would see that Harry really had struggled to overcome it and hadn’t been able to.

He would be wrong.

Harry thought it was very important to remember that, so he clung to it even as the rest of his thoughts scattered like small startled birds, because Draco was straddling him, and Harry was gasping because he hadn’t known the jut of hipbone digging into his belly could feel good. Then Draco leaned down and kissed him again, and Harry found out that he liked teeth clashing together, even when it was outside battle or Draco convincing him to go to the Sanctuary.

But any moment his training would hurt him and he would win anyway, so he felt it safe to kiss back, letting a flood of hot wetness that was certainly partly blood run through his mouth, and then roll over so that Draco dropped, shocked, onto the floor beside him. Harry reached out and raked the air with his fingers, and Draco’s shirt and trousers parted into neat strips of cloth that fell to the floor. Draco blinked, looking entirely taken aback for a moment.

“Didn’t think someone who was afraid would do that, did you?” Harry asked, and then his eyes took over from his mouth and he shut up for a moment. Draco actually looked…well, he looked much better than Harry had expected him to look for someone with the training he had, because, obviously, someone with the training he had couldn’t expect to be normal and couldn’t take a lover.

But he looked really, really good, and Harry found that he wanted to kiss Draco somewhere other than on the mouth. He crossed the floor between them while Draco was still blinking, and he didn’t remember if he did it on hand and knees, or if he got up and ran. It didn’t matter, because any moment the training would kick in.

He rolled to a stop beside Draco and fastened his mouth roughly on his chest, licking and biting again, and determined to find a place on Draco that would do what the place on his neck did to him. It was not fair that Draco knew about that place on his neck. Sensitive ears as revenge didn’t really count, because everyone, practically, had sensitive ears.

Draco cried out abruptly when Harry licked one of his nipples, and Harry thought he’d found the place. But, really, just having something in his mouth didn’t prove the point, because then he couldn’t talk, so he swung a leg over Draco’s hips and straddled him in turn, and reached down to Draco’s groin. That meant he removed his hand from Draco’s chest and so couldn’t hold him down anymore, but Harry thought he probably wouldn’t want to move away. At least, if the way that Draco gasped and then twitched in his hand was any indication.

Harry hummed in satisfaction and stroked Draco more firmly. His magic was leaping around them in dizzying, twisted, brilliant patterns. Harry thought he saw it create a bolt of lightning out of the corner of his eye, and a pair of entwined figures who looked like him and Draco, but then he let most of his attention go back to what he was doing.

There was so much heat, engulfing heat like the second real kiss he’d shared with Draco, when he came out of the Maze in Lux Aeterna alive, as if they were standing in the middle of the summer sunlight. Harry could taste salt and sweetness in his mouth,
and his head shone with fog and sun and fog and sun in alternating patterns, and he was rolling his own hips now, in motions that
vaguely surprised him, because surely someone who’d had the training he’d had would not know how to do that.

He found himself pressing firmly against Draco, so firmly he hurt his own wrist where he was stroking Draco, pinning his hand
between their bodies. And he regretted not having a second hand more than ever, because now Draco was writhing around and
making noises. Harry quite liked the noises—even if half of them sounded like abbreviated versions of his own name and the
other half were variations on Fuck—but the writhing made it difficult for him to keep doing what he wanted to do, which was
stroke and pull and press down.

He should know to hold still, Harry thought, somewhere in the fog-dazzled confusion. I know how to hold still, and if I know how
to do it, then he ought to know how to do it.

The sun broke through the fog again as Draco shuddered abruptly against him, and Harry felt his hand grow warmer. He blinked,
and stared at Draco, and the way his face had gone slack with pleasure, his eyelids fluttering in regular contractions, his mouth
gasping in air, and he thought, Merlin, I made him feel that good? There was genuine wonder in his thoughts. Harry thought the
wonder would last.

It didn’t. He’d lifted his head from Draco’s chest, and as if that had drawn Draco’s attention, he opened his eyes and rolled Harry
over with unexpected strength. Then Harry found himself with his trousers tugged open and then his pants, as if Draco didn’t care
about all the work he’d done that morning putting them on, and then a hand grabbed hold of him, and all the tightness and heat
rushed from his lower chest to his groin, and wonder had a different meaning.

“Wish I had you naked,” Draco snarled at him. “Should have, if you had done this like a normal person.” Harry wondered what he
was babbling on about as his head rolled back and he heard his breath coming in short, sharp gasps and his hair rasped against his
cheeks and he found himself pressing his hips up in irregular jabs. “Saw you naked once already, though,” Draco added inanely.
“It’ll have to do for now.”

And on now he gave one hard tug, and Harry cried out as pleasure hit him like Light magic, rich and rolling and white-gold, and
ripped him away from the world for at least a few moments.

He kept waiting for the training to appear. It never did.

He came back to himself slowly, with the sense that he needed to collect bits and pieces which had never broken free from him
before. He found Draco sitting beside him, staring into his face.

He didn’t look as if he’d lost, even though Harry had proven he wasn’t afraid. He looked very much as if he’d won something
instead. He was trying to be solemn, Harry thought, but a smirk tugged the corners of his mouth up.

And it hit Harry, then, what he’d done.

He shoved Draco, hard, with his hand and his magic. Draco went over backwards, which was happening a lot lately, and gave a
wince when he landed. Harry guessed that he’d finally managed to notice they were rolling around on top of Black artifacts,
something they’d both ignored earlier. Harry thought he had a number of bruises and small cuts on his own back and hips.

He didn’t care. He struggled against the lassitude in his muscles and the tangling of cloth around his legs, and snarled, “I know
what you did.”

“And you’re angry?” Draco grinned at him.

Harry opened his mouth to snap back, then paused. Either way he went, he realized, Draco had won. Either he’d coaxed Harry
into showing the anger he’d been holding back on, or he was proving that he was right about Harry being unwilling to express his
anger.

“Damn it!” Harry shouted, and scrambled away. He didn’t even know how he felt anymore. He should be angry at Draco for
manipulating him, he knew that, and part of him was, but when he looked over at the cauldron of brewing potion and
Medicamenta Meatus Verus, he wondered what the hell he’d been thinking. Draco had reacted to stupidity with provocation, the
way Harry himself had done with Snape. And he should be angry at Draco for lying to him, but Draco wouldn’t repent for that.
He’d always cared less about it than Harry had, and in the tradition of accepting allies with different morals than he had, he
couldn’t insist that Draco change.

And Draco had made him feel so good, even if what he felt right now was mostly messy and sticky. He closed his eyes and shook
his head. The little cuts and bruises ached now. The cooling liquid on his leg felt disgusting. The memory of how he’d refused to hold back anything, his magic or his rawer instincts, was enough to make him worry for what could have happened.

But he mostly wanted to feel that pleasure again.

“Damn it!” he yelled again.

Draco chuckled.

Harry opened his eyes and glared at him. Nearly naked, his pants darkly splotched, his blond hair going every which way and his face sweaty and pink, Draco had still won.

“I grant you that one,” Harry said, knowing he should sound more upset, and not let afterglow infuse his voice. “And I’ll copy down the recipe and then return the book to Snape.”

Draco nodded, clearly pleased.

Harry sighed. Maybe he should be angrier, but he wasn’t. And if he wasn’t angrier, then maybe—

*Maybe no one has the right to tell me I should be angrier.*

That was a new thought. Harry had spent so much time trying to learn how to be normal and to see what he missed because of his training that he hadn’t considered that some of his own, non-normal reactions might be all right.

He stood, slowly, and cast a cleaning spell that left him considerably less sticky than before, then pulled his pants up. He looked over at Draco, and found his eyes lingering on him. Harry blushed.

“And now he blushes,” Draco said, as if making the observation to a third person, unseen.

Harry shook his head, and leaned against the wall, trying to work out how he felt other than dizzy and angry and relaxed and good and—

And happy.

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

Chapter Sixteen: Another Visit to the Ministry

“Because I thought you needed someone to help you.”

Snape leaned forward across the kitchen table. Harry simply watched him. He was grateful that there were other people in the room: Trumpetflower, studiously reading the *Prophet* and pretending the argument wasn’t happening; Rose, watering a plant she’d bought on her trip to Muggle London; Connor, trying to describe hippocampi in a letter to Parvati. It reminded Harry that other people could see his emotions, if he let them escape his control. He did not let his hand tremble on the cup of tea. He didn’t let himself put down the cup of tea and reach out to Snape.

He’s suffering enough already. If he doesn’t care about embarrassing himself, that’s one thing. But I won’t mortify him in front of others.

“I do not need the Seer,” Snape hissed.

Harry wondered, distantly, if this was what it had been like for Snape and Draco, when they thought he needed healing and he insisted he didn’t. But no frustration gripped his chest, the way it seemed to have happened with them. All he felt was a general weariness, with determination like sliding stone under that.

“Joseph agreed to come,” said Harry quietly. “He has as much right to be at Cobley-by-the-Sea as you do. I can’t force you to talk to him. You asked me why I invited him. I answered. That’s all.”

“As much right as I do?” Snape’s face had gone white, leaving his eyes like staring black coals. “So I am only as welcome a guest in your house as others are?”
Harry could feel the listening silence become listening silence. Trumpetflower no longer turned the pages of the paper. Rose’s murmuring to the plant, which was withering in the sea air, had gone silent. Connor held as still as if someone had just summoned a thestral.

Harry had already decided on his response to things like this, or he might have sat there and flushed. As it was, he felt dull heat creeping up his cheeks, but he simply drained the last swallow of his tea, walked over to the counter, and began running the water to clean the cup. He was getting better with cleaning charms, but water still worked the best.

“You did not answer my question,” Snape said to his back, his voice betrayed.

*That’s because I was close to saying something I would regret.* Harry reminded himself again that Snape was suffering. The dreams were taking their toll on him nightly, but, judging from his reaction to what Harry had said about his mother, he was definitely not in the mood to discuss them with anyone else. He needed to know that Harry wouldn’t give up on him, but he didn’t need poking and prodding. Harry would walk away when he got angry.

“You did not answer my question,” Snape repeated.

Harry shut his eyes and turned away. Snape was a Legilimens, and still more skilled at that than Harry was himself. He would see the rage if Harry met his gaze much longer. He might already have noticed the small leak of magic that made Harry’s cup tremble.

He left, walking upstairs to the bedroom he now shared with Draco. Draco was still asleep, though—the only reason Harry had eaten breakfast without him—so he leaned against the wall and took several deep breaths, counting to ten in Mermish, an old distraction technique Lily had taught him.

When he finished, he had returned to a much calmer state, and told himself, again, that Snape was suffering, but didn’t want to talk about his suffering. Joseph was in the same house with him now, calm and patient, and not engaged with as many different tasks as Harry was. Harry hoped he could delegate the actual handling of Snape to him, since Snape had made it clear how unwelcome his ward’s inquiries were. Joseph would not give up.

He pushed open the door. Draco sighed and rolled over, then abruptly sat up, as if missing Harry’s warmth in the bed, and blinked at him. A moment later, he snorted.

“Went to breakfast without me?”

Harry felt his face relax into a grin, almost against his will. “Did lots of things without you,” he agreed in an appropriately solemn tone. “Woke up, breathed, showered, ate breakfast.”

“I might have shared in the shower, at least.” Draco’s voice was low and teasing in a way Harry had never heard it before. He flushed, but he didn’t think it was as much as he would have at one point. He shook his head in wonder. Trust this to be the most comfortable bond I have at this point, rather than the most awkward.

“True,” Harry said. Draco’s eyes brightened, and Harry laughed at him. “But since sex appears to drive most other thoughts out of your head, I did want to know what you were mumbling about last night. Something about Unspeakables and a paper?”

“Yes.” Draco leaned forward, obviously trying not to just eye Harry’s chest, covered by a shirt though it was. Harry sat down on the bed to make it easier for Draco to focus on his face. Draco blinked and did so. “The Minister still hasn’t contacted you?”

Harry shook his head. “No. And Fred and George seemed convinced that no one could detect the messages they passed to Percy. They were sending them disguised as pranks. Anyone who asks will think Fred and George just don’t like their brother.”

“Then I think he’s either not going to say anything to you about the Unspeakables, or the Unspeakables themselves are interfering,” said Draco decisively.

Harry frowned. “You don’t know that.”

Draco gave him a pitying glance. “Harry, don’t you know anything? In politics, there’s no such thing as an innocent silence. You
hadn’t had any post from the Minister at all, and given what you said happened to you in his Ministry, you should have. Certainly he wouldn’t approve of his own employees attacking you. And if he didn’t believe you at all, he should have demanded an apology. The story is spreading now; I received an owl from Mother yesterday that said she heard of it among people who weren’t at your festival. So he should have responded, and he hasn’t. I think someone’s interfering with his letters. And yours.”

Harry gnawed his lip. “And you think I should draw him out somehow? But if the Unspeakables are really interfering, how? They can stop information from reaching him in the Ministry far more easily than I can convey it.”

“Do something that he won’t have any choice but to respond to,” Draco said. “Write an article about the attack under your own name.”

Harry nodded slowly. “And you think the Prophet would print that?”

Draco raised his eyebrows. “Who said anything about the Prophet? I was thinking of sending it to the Vox Populi, Harry.”

“That wouldn’t work. No one would believe anything that anyone said in there,” Harry said in disgust.

Draco gave a little half-smile. “You’d be surprised. Besides, if your name appears with the article, then it would be a simple matter for you to disavow it if it really wasn’t yours. But claiming it? I think that will make a difference. And you heard Hornblower babbling on. He’d be glad to do you the favor.”

“Maybe,” said Harry, still unconvinced. “Why would that draw the Minister into responding where nothing else would, though?”

“Because, so far, no name has appeared, and the Prophet hasn’t carried a story about it,” said Draco. “And because he knows that you’d be protesting if your name was used without your permission—no matter how many people decided to disbelieve you. Your name appears, you support it, and he’ll know that it’s either true or the person who wrote the article has your permission. I think either would worry him, given what power the Boy-Who-Lived can command. So he’ll contact you.”

“At the least, I suppose it would make an interesting experiment to see what he does when an article like that gets published,” Harry said slowly.

Draco gave him a feral smile. “Exactly.”

“Right then,” said Harry, and leaned forward to clap Draco on the shoulder. “I’ll write it. Want to give me a hand?”

This time, he was the one who blushed, in the face of Draco’s delighted laughter.

******

Harry blinked when a gray-and-black-spotted owl hurtled through the window of Cobley-by-the-Sea that very evening. He had thought Hornblower would take some time to read his article and get back to him; he must have articles pouring in every day, judging by how thick the Vox Populi was. But this owl had arrived just a few hours after he sent Hedwig off.

The owl extended her leg impatiently. Harry removed the message. It was brief enough, thanking him for the truth and for letting his voice be heard, and containing a payment of seventeen Sickles. Harry smiled and poured the money through his fingers, feeling oddly proud. It was the first money he had ever earned by simply doing something that wasn’t magical. The power of his name was undoubtedly why Hornblower had agreed to print the article so fast, but that didn’t matter. He had still earned this.

“It’ll be out in tomorrow’s paper?” Draco asked, leaning down to peer over his shoulder.

Harry nodded. “And, as you said, the Minister’s response will be very interesting,” he murmured. He was growing more and more concerned. Fred and George had owled him earlier, insisting that they had sent several messages to Percy, with codes that no one except those who were members of the Weasley family could have figured out, and had yet to receive an answer.

I doubt the Unspeakables can control all the ways this article can reach him, though, even if they are watching Percy’s correspondence and the Prophet. People will talk about this even if Scrimgeour thinks the Populi is nothing more than rubbish.

Your move, Minister.

******
Rufus sighed and sat down slowly at his desk. It was only seven-o’clock, and he’d been in the Ministry for two hours already. He’d spent an hour and a half of that arguing against giving the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts new powers. He’d had unexpected support from the Head of the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures, who didn’t like the new Department edging in on territory that Department nominally controlled, and still Amelia had almost won.

Every time he needed a reminder of how thin the ice he walked on was, someone was sure to provide three.

He reached for his teacup, and then an owl hurtled through his wards as if they weren’t there and landed on his desk. Old Auror instincts had Rufus leveling his wand before he thought. The owl didn’t move, though, simply sat still and ruffled her feathers. Then she gave him an irritated look, as much to demand where the owl treats and the admiration for her were already.

Rufus narrowed his eyes. “Deprindo,” he said.

A mist of blue wavered up from the owl’s feathers in answer. Yes, she was a magical construct, which explained how she had passed the wards, but didn’t explain where she was from. The gray feathers with black spots looked vaguely familiar, but Rufus couldn’t imagine what the pattern signified.

He noticed that she carried a thick coil of paper. Either it was a newspaper or a wrapping of many papers around a threatening missive. Rufus didn’t laugh. It could be a Howler, but he had received worse things since he became Minister.

He cast Deprindo on the newspaper, too, but that was normal. Still, someone could have woven the newspaper with a hidden hex. He floated it off the owl’s leg and spread it out in front of him, one hand ready to flick down in the motion that would call the wards to his defense.

Nothing happened, though. The newspaper unfolded, and Rufus could see the title and the dancing Maenads on either side of it. He grimaced. He’d heard of the Vox Populi—he had some of his own private spies, of course, who informed him the instant anything likely to cause enormous changes appeared in public—but he hadn’t thought Hornblower would dare to deliver a paper directly to him.

Then he saw the headline.

**Boy-Who-Lived Confirms Unspeakable Attack.**

*By: Harry*

Rufus shook his head numbly. This—wasn’t true. The Vox Populi had used Harry’s name without his permission, and he would be angry when he heard. It might even break the cold silence with which he’d answered every piece of correspondence that Rufus used to try and reach him.

Nevertheless, he leaned forward and read the article, fascinated to learn what this unknown writer would dare to say. It was in first-person, presumably to maintain the illusion that such a thing had really happened, and ensnare those otherwise rational people who would believe that no one but Harry could know all the details of such a thing.

*I visited the Ministry on August 8th, in order to try and gain information on the anti-werewolf laws the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts has passed. I ended up stumbling unexpectedly into a trap much deeper than I had believed any were laid. An Unspeakable pursued me out of the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures. He had a collar in his hand. I believe he was planning to capture me.*

*I had wrapped myself in a spell of my own creation which kept him from finding me in the lift we rode together, but he stood in the doors of the lift when they opened and held the collar towards my neck. I became visible long enough to call for help and duck under his arm. However, I quickly realized that the only person left in the Atrium who wasn’t an Unspeakable was the checkpoint witch on the gates. When I called, she came running, but otherwise only Unspeakables closed in.*

*I protected Erica when one of the Unspeakables would have grabbed her, erasing the hand of the one who did so.*

Rufus heard the paper crumple, and realized he’d reached out and gripped the side, nearly shredding it. He swallowed and eased his grasp as much as he could, so that he could continue reading the article. But his heart was beating much too fast, and his breathing was erratic, and he wanted nothing so much as to firecall Harry—assuming he knew where Harry was—and shout at him.
He used magic in the Ministry. He used magic against my people.

He had known that, of course, from hearing what the Unspeakables told him, and from what they confirmed of a spell placed on Aurelius Flint, but hearing about it secondhand and reading Harry’s own not-even-apologetic account of it were different things.

Then Rufus shook his head. He’d fallen into the trap. Harry hadn’t written the article. Someone posing as him had. But he would definitely have to speak to Harry, and soon, so they could correct this misconception that might seriously hinder the ability of the Department of Mysteries to continue working.

He went on reading anyway, his eyes sliding down the words in fascination.

Erica and I then ran for the lift that would transport us back to the entrance of the Ministry. There were Unspeakables ahead of us as well as behind us, however. One of them flung a Still-Beetle shell at me. The shell contains the magic of a Lord-level wizard, and would have frozen me to the ground, unless it was spelled to work as a Portkey. Then it would have transferred me into a cell where the Unspeakables, doubtless, could examine me at their leisure.

Rufus frowned. If that was true…

But it wasn’t true. It was an article written by someone posing as Harry, in a newspaper that would turn to rubbish, just like everything Hornblower touched did. And if there was the slightest hint of truth to this, then the Unspeakables who had attacked Harry were the same ones who had frightened Amelia. No one could say who they were or what they wanted yet. It was best to let their colleagues study and handle them, rather than blame the whole Department of Mysteries for something a few of them had done. Rufus knew Harry understood that. He had insisted that not all werewolves be blamed for the actions of one pack.

More proof that this article-writer is not him, Rufus thought, and continued to read.

I used fire to destroy the Still-Beetle shell before it hit me. The Unspeakable who had flung the shell had a ring that absorbed the fire, however, so it did not harm him. He next cast a small glass globe that appeared to contain a rose, and rang with the magic of time. I swallowed the magic, and broke the globe harmlessly. I do not know what it would have done, but I believe it was another attempt to capture me. After this, I locked my eyes on the Unspeakable and told him to move.

He did, and Erica and I made it to the lift. However, the Unspeakable dipped his fingers into what looked remarkably like a Pensieve filled with blue liquid instead of silver, and spoke the single word, “Obliviate.” Though the liquid splashed on the floor far below the lift, it still took Erica’s memory of the event.

I felt the compulsion to forget clawing at my own mind, but my will was strong enough to throw it off. I am not sure if the Unspeakables believed that I had forgotten as well, or if they were content to let me go because they believed I could do nothing against them.

I can and will do something against them. I have created multiple records of this event, including Pensieve memories placed in the basin no later than fifteen minutes after the chase was done. I have shown these memories to those who attended a certain festival marking me as Black heir, but I will show them to anyone who wishes to see. If someone owls me with a certain public time and place, I will arrive, carrying the basin with me.

Their greatest weapon is secrecy, and the terror of secrecy—altered memories, unknowable artifacts, the threat of vanishing into silence and never coming out again. If we destroy those shadows, they must face us in the light.

Rufus was almost light-headed with relief by the time he finished. The unknown article-writer had gone too far. He’d made claims that would be impossible to back up. The moment someone asked to see the Pensieve of memories of the attack, Harry would ask what he was talking about, and that would be the end of that.

On the other hand, the last lines concerned Rufus. Someone attacking the Unspeakables because they practiced secrecy, and prying into the shadows around them, would make it impossible for them to function. Rufus knew that most of them were loyal; the Stone that chose them made certain of that. Because a few had somehow managed to turn traitor was no reason for the rest to suffer.

What would make it worse was if Hornblower were to take it into his head to dig through the shadows. Rufus had encountered the man before, in the service of one fringe cause after another, though it had been three years since the last time he had really moved. Hornblower believed himself responsible to no one and nothing but the principles he had adopted this month. He was like a terrier, too, and never let go as long as there was something to be worried at.
Rufus looked thoughtfully at the magical owl, which still sat preening itself on his desk. “Can you carry a message for me?” he asked.

The owl looked up and hooted at him.

Harry had ignored all his owls so far, Rufus thought, as he reached for ink and parchment. But he wouldn’t ignore this one, not when he saw the message Rufus had sent. It was simple—the false article torn free of the *Vox Populi* and wrapped in an envelope, along with a piece of parchment that said simply, *We need to talk.*

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“I am glad you listened to sense,” Draco said, as he flicked a mote of dust from a sleeve Harry did not believe actually had dust on it.

“I try,” Harry muttered. He’d had a short argument with Draco first, of course, because he had feared that going into the Ministry with too large an entourage—an entourage that included werewolves—would smell of intimidation to Scrimgeour. But Draco had pointed out that the last two times he’d been in the Ministry, someone had attempted to kill or capture him. Harry had said that more people around him wouldn’t prevent that, and besides, he would feel compelled to defend them all.

Draco had *looked* at him until Harry admitted that most of those he would take along were capable of defending themselves, and that, apart from a few communication spells to ask Hawthorn, Adalrico, Peter, and Narcissa if they would mind coming with him, was that.

They stepped out of the lift and moved towards the Minister’s office. Harry hadn’t replied to Scrimgeour’s owl; he’d simply appeared, and deliberately brought along people who wouldn’t mind waiting hours if Scrimgeour couldn’t see him right away. He didn’t want any more post intercepted by silent enemies he was sure, now, must be the Unspeakables. There was no one else who would have both the interest and the undetectable methods to keep Percy from contacting his brothers, or to isolate the Minister and Harry from one another.

Harry turned the corner into the final hallway that led to the office, and saw Wilmot, as well as an Auror he didn’t know, guarding Scrimgeour’s door. They straightened at the sight of him. Harry gave a soft snort. He didn’t believe they hadn’t known he was coming. Messages had presumably raced through the Ministry the moment Harry came in with twenty people surrounding him.

“The Minister has visitors,” said the Auror Harry didn’t know, a small, prim woman whose severe hair and brown eyes reminded him of Vera. Vera, of course, had never looked that unsympathetic, or had that tight a grip on her wand.

“We’ll wait,” said Harry politely.

“On what?” the Auror demanded.

Adalrico was already taking several small objects out of his pocket—crumpled pieces of parchment and crumbs, mostly—and Transfiguring them into chairs. One was large, elaborate, draped with banners of silver and green, and took up half the hallway. Harry winced a bit, but he sat down when Adalrico elaborately bowed him towards it, sneaking a glance at the Auror. The look on her face was priceless.

“When these,” Harry said, and noticed that the other chairs Adalrico had Transfigured, he gave to the werewolves. He felt a wave of warmth that burned up the embarrassment of a few moments before. If anyone walked past and noticed that the people sitting down, except for Harry, had amber eyes, while the pureblood wizards remained on their feet, that should tell them where this particular delegation stood.

“And how long do you intend to wait?” The Auror had recovered herself quickly, Harry had to give her that. Her hold on her wand had increased, though, to the point where her knuckles were the color of milk.

Harry shrugged. “Until the Minister is done speaking with his other visitors. I didn’t tell him I was coming, so of course I didn’t have an appointment.”

The Auror stared. Harry ignored her, and turned to Narcissa, who was examining the size of the hallway with a cool, appraising gaze. Harry smiled. “Not as big as the entrance hall in Malfoy Manor?”

“Truly,” Narcissa murmured, “if things had been different, Lucius might have been Minister. I was estimating the number of ways
this hallway could be improved. There are not many. The Ministry has always been grim.” She cocked her head to the side, and a faint smile touched her lips. “Grim would suit Lucius, but he would demand an environment more imposing, I’m sure.”

Harry snorted. Lucius was supposedly working on a very important project at which he couldn’t be disturbed. If it was anything like his other important projects, it would end in a few months and never be spoken of again.

He glanced up as he realized someone was missing. Narcissa still examined the walls. Adalrico had Transfigured his last chair and stepped back with a flourish. Hawthorn, wearing a slight glamour charm that made her eyes appear hazel instead of hazel-tinted amber, was quietly speaking with one of the werewolves about Wolfsbane. The rest of the pack lounged on chairs as if they couldn’t believe their luck. And Draco had moved up to stand at the arm of Harry’s seat.

Harry frowned. Where’s Peter?

He saw a flash of gray along the wall near the Aurors’ feet, and sighed. Peter had slipped into rat form and gone ahead. Harry knew he had to trust him to take care of himself—that was something he really needed to learn—but he couldn’t help thinking the Minister’s office might have wards on it that would imprison or hurt Animagi. His hand absently rubbed the stump of his left wrist.

Wilmot and the suspicious Auror showed no sign of noticing that something was wrong, and shortly, because he was looking for it and for no other reason, Harry saw the small gray shape returning. Peter slid round the far corner behind Adalrico and then came strolling back a moment later, as though he had arrived to join the group late.

His eyes found Harry’s, and he mouthed a single word.

Gray.

Harry hissed beneath his breath. That meant Unspeakables were in Scrimgeour’s office right now, dressed in gray cloaks.

He swallowed his anger and agitation. He had expected this might happen, after all; Unspeakables were stopping Scrimgeour’s post. He was here, and if the Unspeakables attacked him here, they were going to face much more serious opposition than they had when he was alone or only with Erica. He forced his hand to relax and his magic, which had been rising around him, to sink back into silence, folded around him like cloth. He reminded himself to thank Snape for teaching him Occlumency, again; it helped him weight and sink his emotions, and it might be a tiny positive thing that would help rebuild the trust that had broken between them again with Harry’s comments about Snape’s mother.

Draco’s hand tightened on his shoulder. “Unspeakables are here?” he breathed, so softly that the Aurors on Scrimgeour’s door had no chance of hearing. Harry wondered if the wards he suspected the Unspeakables had strung throughout the Ministry would listen in, however.

“Yes, they are,” said Harry.

Draco said nothing. He leaned against the wall and closed his eyes instead. Then his hand fell limp on Harry’s shoulder.

Harry restrained his agitation again. Draco had gone hunting with his possession gift. He was doing what Harry had asked of him. Harry could not, and would not, interfere, no matter how worried he was for Draco’s safety in the minds of people who had things like the Obliviate Pensieve. He sat still and relaxed, and watched the bag that hung casually off Camellia’s left shoulder.

Draco tapped his fingers on the side of Harry’s neck much sooner than Harry would have expected. “Two of them in there,” he breathed, again barely moving his lips. “Just telling the Minister that they know some of their own attacked you, but those are renegades from the rest of the Department of Mysteries, and what they need is undisturbed time to investigate the matter within their own ranks. They’re having to work hard to convince him,” he added. “I think Scrimgeour thought the article was entirely false.”

Harry glanced at the bag hanging from Camellia’s shoulder again. It contained Snape’s Pensieve, and the memories. Draco followed his gaze, and a strangely feral expression overcame his face. Harry thought he’d seen the same expression in the eyes of wolves hunting deer.

Then he was trying to remember where he had seen pictures of wolves hunting deer, and thus missed Scrimgeour’s door opening.

“The Minister will see you now,” Wilmot announced a moment later, and Harry saw a flash of red hair disappearing back into the office; Percy must have come out and told him.
Harry rose, darting a glance at Draco. Draco grimaced and shook his head, eyes saying clearly that if the Unspeakables hadn’t come out of the office, then Harry shouldn’t enter it.

Harry shrugged back. If the Unspeakables attacked him in front of the Minister, he had no compunctions about using his magic to defend himself. And he didn’t think Percy and Scrimgeour would try to lure him into a trap, which meant the Unspeakables had probably gone out a different way.

Draco hesitated, then nodded, but positioned himself at Harry’s right shoulder. Harry had no objection to that.

Wilmot and the other Auror crossed their wands, though Wilmot looked regretful about it. “You’re the only person whom the Minister wants to speak with, Harry,” Wilmot said.

Harry spent a moment looking into his eyes. Wilmot turned his head just slightly aside, as most of the werewolves tended to do when fixed with a challenging stare. Harry didn’t think he was treacherous.

He took Draco’s hand and squeezed his wrist, hard, then cast a nonverbal Summoning Charm. The bag on Camellia’s shoulder flipped open, and the Pensieve skimmed out and towards him. The female Auror jerked and shot a Stupefy at the Pensieve that Harry made it duck so as to miss.

“Nervous?” Harry asked.

“I wonder why?” Draco asked, giving the words a particularly nasty twist that Harry knew he must have learned from his father.

“You can’t take that in there,” the female Auror told him, as the Pensieve settled into Harry’s arms.

Harry raised his eyebrows. When they push this far, it’s time to push back. “I’ve been attacked twice in the Ministry,” he said pleasantly. “I’ve agreed to enter the Minister’s office without anyone at my back. Unless the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Magical Artifacts That Look Just Like Pensieves has passed a new edict barring them from the Minister’s office, I am going to take this inside so that he can see the memories of the second attack.”

“You can’t,” the female Auror repeated stubbornly, but Scrimgeour’s voice came from inside, firm and final.

“Let him in, Hope.”

Hope gave Harry a look that said, “This isn’t over.” Harry gave her one back that he wanted to say, “Of course it isn’t, you’re still alive,” and then passed her. He thought she recoiled. He didn’t care enough to keep watching her, though.

Scrimgeour still sat behind his desk, the way he always had. A cup of tea stood near at hand, and in front of him was spread the copy of the Vox Populi that Harry supposed he had ripped the article out of. Or, no, actually, he realized as he came nearer. This one was whole, with the article he’d written on the front page.

“Harry,” said Scrimgeour, voice distant and neutral.

The Unspeakables did get to him first, Harry thought, but he was feeling unnaturally calm, rather than angry. He’d started thinking this morning, and each new “precaution”—the people here and talking to Scrimgeour, that the Minister seemed to disbelieve in his account of the attack altogether, the fact that he had a reason to think he was in danger in the Ministry and still had to leave all his friends behind—just tipped his thinking more and more in this new direction. Scrimgeour was acting as if he didn’t care what happened to Harry; the Ministry, and its people, were more important.

I’m sure they are, to him. But I no longer need to bend over backwards to accommodate every little sensitivity he has, if he won’t show me a moment’s consideration.

“Minister,” he said, and sat down in the chair across from Scrimgeour. He could feel Percy Weasley’s intent gaze from the desk behind Scrimgeour’s, concealed under a ward. He subdued another rise of irritation, but let the words accompanying the emotion through. If he has to have protection every moment of the day, why should I be treated any differently? I know there are people who want me dead, even if some of them are blind and wounded right now.

“I know the article is false,” Scrimgeour started. “I summoned you to discuss who you thought might have the gall to do this using your name.”
Harry half-lidded his eyes and drowned his temper in another Occlumency pool. “There is no trick, Minister,” he said. “I wrote that article.”

Scrimgeour’s face tightened. Then he said, “And I suppose that you’ll tell me the memories are in that Pensieve?” He nodded to it.

“Yes. So you can see it for yourself.” Harry braced the heavy basin with his left arm and held it out. It sloshed, nearly sending some of the silver liquid over the rim. Harry frowned.

“I want a second hand.

Scrimgeour rapped his fingers on the desk for a long moment. Then he said, “If you say the attack happened, Harry, I believe you. But that leaves two things for us to discuss.” He leaned forward earnestly. “First of all, you don’t know who the Unspeakables who attacked you are. There’s reason to think a division in the Department of Mysteries has split them into two factions, or even more. The ones who attacked you were those who do want to see stricter anti-werewolf laws passed. But that doesn’t mean tarring all Unspeakables with the same brush is a good thing, as you did in this article. That hinders the ability of the loyalists to do their job, and sends the ones who did commit crimes scuttling even deeper into their holes.”

Harry imagined his mind flooding with cool, calm silver, to hold back the frustration. “And where did you hear about this division, Minister?”

Scrimgeour shook his head. “I can’t tell you that.”

Unspeakables, then. Poisoning the well. “I couldn’t see the faces of the ones who attacked me,” said Harry intently. “Unless you can suggest some way to separate the traitors from the loyalists, I have no reason to retract what I said.” He paused, then added, “I notice the Department of Mysteries didn’t come forward to denounce what some of their members had done.”

“It’s complicated, Harry,” Scrimgeour said. “I don’t understand the full story myself, but I don’t think anyone does. The Department will investigate it. I will ask you not to stir the pot further.”

Harry smiled thinly. “I can’t promise that, Minister. I stir the pot just by existing.”

Scrimgeour took a deep breath, and his bad leg moved in a spasm, as though it hurt. Harry thought he was holding back frustration of his own. “The second thing,” he said, “is that you used magic against employees of the Ministry.”

Harry blinked for a moment, then said, “Who were trying to capture me.”

“You’re still a Lord-level wizard,” said Scrimgeour. “And you’re an absorbere. It’s magic that others can’t do. You know how I feel about that. Much as I felt about Dumbledore compelling my people, in fact.”

“I saved one of your employees, though I couldn’t save her memory,” Harry said. “Doesn’t that matter to you?”

“She’s welcome to return to work at any time,” Scrimgeour said. “The word I received was that she didn’t come to work for several days, they couldn’t contact her, and she’s been sacked.”

“They couldn’t contact her because she fled from her flat,” said Harry. “In expectation that Unspeakables would come after her.”

“Tell me where she is now, then, and I’ll tell——

“I’m not going to tell you that,” said Harry softly. Not when you had Unspeakables in your office, and they’re probably listening to us right now. “She’s mine to protect.”

“Listen, Harry,” Scrimgeour said. “The Department of Mysteries can’t just reveal their secrets like that. The Stone chooses ‘em for loyalty, and that’s important. Even the traitors are acting in accordance with the Stone’s wishes, though they’ve misinterpreted ‘em somehow. I can’t destroy an entire Ministry Department because it houses a few of my employees who haven’t behaved as they should, and I can’t order a full investigation when it would endanger the security of the British wizarding world.”

“I understand,” Harry said. “Likewise, I can’t let people who turn to me for protection be hurt and do nothing about it, and when attacked I will defend myself.”

Scrimgeour grimaced as if he’d swallowed a lemon whole. “I am asking,” he said, “that you make a public statement acknowledging that there are some mistakes in your account, and that you leave the Department of Mysteries to punish its own, rather than dragging them into the light, as you put it in your article.”
Harry tilted his head. “You fear the power of my name, don’t you?”

“As you said, you stir the pot just by existing,” said Scrimgeour. “And they’re trying to find ‘em, Harry—the traitors, I mean. But they don’t need this. Not now. And not from the Boy-Who-Lived.”

“I said I would use what power my reputation and my magic could give me, Minister,” Harry said calmly. “And I am.”

Scrimgeour stared at him incredulously. “So you won’t even give them a chance to solve this on their own?”

“If they had come to me themselves and explained the nature and manner of the problem?” Harry laughed. “Of course I would. As matters stand, I have only your word—and, I suppose, theirs—that the division exists at all. For all I know, the whole Department of Mysteries does want to capture me, and those who came after me were following the Stone’s orders. That doesn’t even touch what they want with the werewolves. I won’t yield on this, sir.”

Scrimgeour closed his eyes and bowed his head. “That makes matters harder than you know,” he said in a strained voice.

“Why?”

“I cannot tell you that.” Scrimgeour refused to look at him.

Harry raised an eyebrow and stood. “Well. It seems that our communication problem isn’t going to be resolved after all. Good day, Minister.” He turned for the door.

“Harry. Wait.”

Scrimgeour had been one of his most trusted allies at one point—or, if not an ally, a leader Harry could trust to defend his people—so he turned around. Scrimgeour had a hand extended to him, and the expression of pleading on his face made Harry’s heart give a painful lurch.

“You are vates,” Scrimgeour said. “Surely you can respect the free will of the Ministry employees in this matter? Surely you can give the Department of Mysteries a few more days?”

Harry shook his head. “Their free will extends until the border at which they attack me,” he said quietly. “And I no longer make excuses for my enemies, Minister, any more than I doubt the abilities of my friends to fight. It’s insulting to do that, really. If someone tries to collar me or tells me that he wants to bring me to trial for the death of his child, I believe him.”

He turned away and stepped out through the door, brushing past Hope, who still stared at him suspiciously. Wilmot’s gaze, by contrast, was appealing.

Harry didn’t meet it. He wasn’t Wilmot’s alpha, and though he admired the man’s courage to walk above the abyss that the Ministry had become for werewolves and still somehow hold his job, he couldn’t spare Wilmot the agony of decision. The Minister seemed determined to trust the Department of Mysteries. Harry would not.

He scanned his people carefully, meeting pair after pair of eyes, and murmuring spells that should let him detect any magic placed on them. He sensed nothing. Harry relaxed a little.

“Nothing strange happened?” he asked.

Draco, who’d taken a sharp step forward when he saw Harry and then controlled himself as if he didn’t want anyone to think badly of a Malfoy’s self-control, shook his head.

“Good,” Harry said, and led the way back towards the Atrium. He was worried enough to want to Apparate them straight home from the corridor, but he couldn’t without tearing through the Ministry’s anti-Apparition wards and essentially poking Scrimgeour in the eye. He had no grudge against the Minister, or the other innocents whom the wards protected.

Besides, he didn’t want to seem afraid, despite his failure to convince Scrimgeour to trust him above the Unspeakables.

_I will not let them make me afraid._

He remembered, abruptly, the news he’d intended to warn Scrimgeour about, to prepare him. He hesitated for a moment, then
shook his head. It wasn’t news that directly affected the Ministry, and everyone would find out the truth in a few days, anyway. Scrimgeour could wait and read it on the front page of the *Prophet*.

I wanted to warn him to prepare for chaos. But chaos is what’s coming, no matter how he tries to stall it, and I don’t want to warn the Unspeakables.

Let’s see what they do when Thomas’s storm spreads its wings.

_*.*.*.**_

Chapter Seventeen: Dancing Above the Abyss

Thomas smiled as he admired the front page of the *Daily Prophet*. He and his people might almost have written the article. They hadn’t, of course, because there was just too much to say and they could never have chosen what would go in such a short piece of writing. Rita Skeeter had studied their report instead, asked intelligent questions, and written the article.

He loved the photograph, though. It showed him holding up a copy of the thick, bound *Report on The Grand Unified Theory of Every Kind of Magic*. They had chosen that title, in the end, over the probably more accurate *Report on The Grand Unified Theory of Every Kind of Wizarding Magic*. Thomas was happy about what he’d learned from talking with the centaurs in the Alliance of Sun and Shadow. Their magic did seem to run on the same lines as most wizardry, and so he’d not insisted that the title of the report had to change.

The headline was intriguing, too, sure to get attention and make the readers see that they owed an allegiance to the truth, whatever their personal prejudices.

**PURE BLOOD NOT SO MAGICAL AFTER ALL**

*Grand Unified Theory Suggests Differences Between Muggleborns and Others ‘Insignificant’*

Thomas hummed under his breath as he read the opening of the article.

An international team of research wizards—whose members include the Chinese Light Lady Jing-Xi and the British wizard Thomas Rhangnara, husband of Head Auror Priscilla Burke—today published their Grand Unified Theory of Every Kind of Magic, a project on which they have been working for decades. The Grand Unified Theory draws some surprising conclusions, including that other factors have far more influence on a wizard’s magic than blood.

“It’s something obvious to anyone who looks, of course,” Rhangnara said. “After all, the most pureblooded families produce Squibs, and how could Muggleborns occur at all if all witches and wizards must have one magical parent?”

He rejected, along with the Russian research wizard Ilya Petrovitch, the ancient notion that all Muggleborns are descended from halfblood marriages or from Squibs exiled into the Muggle world.

“The research simply doesn’t support that interpretation,” Petrovitch said, via translator, from a firecall yesterday. “There are many factors that work together, and while genetic heritage is one of them, the most important appears to be the choice of the magic. Sometimes it chooses non-purebloods to wield it. Sometimes it doesn’t choose the children of purebloods. Magic is more sentient than we usually thought, and far more interesting.”

Asked what some of the other factors that influence magical birth would be, Rhangnara listed them without pausing: the mother’s will for the child in her womb (why, he said, the children of raped witches are almost always Squibs); where one lives (some of the first admitted Muggleborns in the British Isles came from places hallowed by druids); and weather the day one is born (thunderstorms produce more witches than wizards). He has obviously studied this in detail, and just as obviously loves the work.

“There’s so much that goes on that we haven’t acknowledged,” Rhangnara said. “More, there’s so much that goes on that we can’t control. The old methods to ‘insure’ the birth of magical children almost always focus on blood. Even in the old days before the International Statute, when wizards and Muggles lived side by side and they knew about us, wizards were encouraged to intermarry with their own kind first and foremost. But it’s not nearly that simple. We have a wonderful culture that calls itself pureblood, full of rituals and ceremonies and beliefs that are a legitimate heritage. But that has next to nothing to do with blood. After all, Muggleborns can learn to be part of that culture, too, and many have.”

He named the old Dark Lord Fallen as an example; though he claimed to be a bastard son of the Prince pureblood line, he was in fact a Muggleborn.
“We have a tendency to rewrite our own history,” he added. “So when someone says that there’s never been a Muggleborn Lord, I’ve learned that, in fact, there often has been, but wizards—or the Lord himself—would prefer people to forget it. And the same thing happens with ancestry. Pureblood families will claim they’ve always intermarried with wizards, and sometimes, that’s even true. But, most of the time, it’s not.” The Malfoys and the Blacks, he said, are examples of families with recent Muggleborn ancestry. By his estimation, Abraxas Malfoy, father of the current scion, Lucius, displayed the classic signs of a powerful halfblood wizard.

Thomas frowned. He had said more at that point, but for some reason, Skeeter had summarized and skimmed a lot of it. He wondered why. It was all interesting.

Rhangnara fully expects the Grand Unified Theory to change the way that wizards think about themselves.

“It’s wonderful,” he said. “For so long, our view of the world has been so simple. We could track where magic went, and we just ignored the things that challenged those ideas. And now we’ve learned that most of those ideas aren’t true at all, or are just smaller drops of water in a vast ocean. Even the Grand Unified Theory only leaves us on the brink of more mistakes to explore and perceptions to shatter. The future is going to change as we wander through them with our eyes open.”

Skeeter had at least chosen the right quote to end on, Thomas thought, happily. How could anyone not be excited by that image of the future?

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Lucius opened the *Prophet* that morning, and narrowed his eyes at the photograph. *What has Rhangnara done to get his photograph in the paper? Harry said nothing about any such move, and he is usually good enough to warn us before—*

Then he saw the headline, and went very still.

He could feel his heart galloping, regular as running footsteps, in his ears. The table trembled a bit. Lucius had to let his magic get far out of control before he could manage even that much wandless power, but today, he thought, while his body shook with sincere, helpless rage, it was justified.

“Lucius?”

Narcissa’s voice came from the door of the breakfast room. Lucius did not care. He could not look up from the article, or keep from following its bizarre conclusions to the end. More and more of them piled up, and his rage grew stronger, and his scorn.

*There is no such thing as the choice of magic. It only grows a personality when confined. It cannot choose who will wield it and who will not.*

*Place magic? An old and discredited belief of the druids. There are magical places, such as Harry’s Woodhouse, but they will never notice a modern wizard.*

*Weather? Storms? How can they determine our children’s futures? They are only wind and rain.*

Then he read the paragraph where Rhangnara had the gall to claim that the Malfoys had recent Muggleborn ancestry, that Lucius’s own father had been a halfblood.

He froze as he read. He thought of going into the room he had shown Draco when he confirmed his son as magical heir, and the Malfoy ancestors speaking to him of shared blood and responsibilities, and he knew that what Rhangnara said was a lie, designed to cast aspersions on him.

*My father was not the son of his mother and a Mudblood. If he was, then he would not have been a Malfoy, and not able to be confirmed as magical heir. That room would have honored only a son of my grandfather.*

And then he wondered if Abraxas could have been the son of his father and a Mudblood woman, brought into the family, adopted as her own child by Lucius’s grandmother Anais Henlin, and the door firmly shut on any discussion of his befouled heritage. That would make him both a halfblood and a Malfoy.

Lucius marshaled his thoughts, then placed them carefully in a box and locked them away. He would not consider them again. They were false. The Malfoys were a pureblood family, and his grandfather would no sooner have touched a Mudblood, or a
Muggle, than he would have cut off his own hand.

“Lucius?” That was Narcissa again, standing near the table, her eyes wide and wondering.

He looked up at her, and remembered what the article had said about the Blacks also sleeping with Mudbloods. But surely that had been in previous generations. The recent ones had campaigned to bring back Muggle-hunting. They would not have done that if they had known what they were.

*Or they would have done that if they needed to convince others that they were perfect purebloods, and hide their shame deeply, where no one would look for it.*

Lucius also placed that thought in the treasure chest. He would not think of that. Narcissa was pureblooded. *He* was pureblooded. Draco was pureblooded. He would not think that his son’s veins were swarming with dirty blood, or his wife’s.

*Much less my own.*

“It seems that one of Harry’s allies has done something mad, again,” he said dryly, and extended the paper so that she could read it. Narcissa accepted it and sat down, only letting a tiny, well-bred gasp escape her mouth every so often.

Lucius stared at her, at her lovely face, at the way she sat with her blonde hair just escaping in soft curling wisps around her white throat, at the delicate bones of her cheeks. *Finer than any Mudblood’s, surely. She is not one of them.*

*No, of course she isn’t. Rhangnara is mistaken. And he would not have made those remarks about Malfoys and Blacks unless he intended to attack our family personally.*

Lucius nodded his head, securing the truth in his own mind, knowing what he must do. He felt a vague sorrow at the thought of it, but a greater irritation. He was already entwined in careful plotting for which Harry would throw him out of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow in a moment, if he learned of it. He would have to add another coil, this time focused on getting rid of Rhangnara.

*That, however, will be a pleasure. The other is a sacrifice I wish I did not have to make.*

Lucius flexed his fingers, checked to make sure that his face was smooth as Narcissa hit the part of the article that concerned their families, and reached for his teacup.

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Hermione sat up in her bed with difficulty, and managed to reach one of the treats on the bedside table to give to the owl who had delivered the *Prophet*. The bird snapped up the food delicately and then spread its wings, soaring out the window. Hermione watched it go wistfully. She understood the importance of spending time in bed and taking her recovery carefully after the Severing Curse, and it wasn’t as though she never got to write to anyone, and of course she received the *Prophet*, and she would be going back to Hogwarts in less than two weeks, but still she wished she could have just waved her wand and uttered a Summoning Charm for the treat.

She opened the paper.

She stared at the headline on the front page. She stared at the photograph. She read the article.

She closed her eyes.

For a moment, thoughts tumbled and reoriented themselves in her head. She didn’t know what to think, how to feel. She had learned the pureblood rituals to show up some purebloods, and because she was convinced it was the only way a Muggleborn could make anyone important pay attention to her. As the article said, wizards were adept at lying to themselves. Hermione could be as brilliant and get as many O’s on her OWL’s as she wanted—as she had, in almost everything—and still people like the witches and wizards at Harry’s alliance meeting could give her pitying looks and turn away. She had to adapt and fit in, and the only pleasure she might get out of it was someone complimenting her on her skills and *then* learning that she was Muggleborn.

But now this.

After a moment, her emotions stopped brewing quite as wildly, and settled on happiness and fierce determination.

*If it’s true, then no one can say that I must have Squib ancestors, or that I must be a changeling switched at birth.* That was one of
the speculations Hermione had overheard at the alliance meeting, and it had irritated her profoundly even then. Anyone who had read about fairies knew they didn’t do that, and probably never had.

*If it’s true, then Zacharias is going to be so upset.*

Hermione shrugged. Let him be upset. She liked Zacharias a great deal—sometimes she thought she loved him, sometimes she wasn’t sure; it wasn’t something she could analyze properly—but he had too much invested in his pureblood ancestry. Hermione had tried to adapt and succeed in many things because she had learned, during her third year, that intelligence would not get her everywhere. If this revelation destroyed Zacharias’s conception of the world, then he would just have to rebuild.

*And Zacharias can be wrong like anyone else.*

******

Connor was glad that he had been awake before anyone else but Trumpetflower—who didn’t seem to sleep—and not because he was writing a potentially embarrassing letter to Parvati, as had happened the other morning. It meant he got to see the *Daily Prophet* first, and look at the story, and laugh and laugh and laugh, and then laugh some more at Trumpetflower’s shocked face when he passed the paper to her.

It meant he got to sit back and watch when Harry and Draco came downstairs, yawning. Draco sat at the table, while Harry went to make them toast. He was getting better at the toast, Connor thought. His fire charms didn’t burn the bread to ashes any more.

The *Prophet* lay on the table, face downward. Connor had put it like that on purpose, for maximum shock value. Draco grumbled under his breath about people who couldn’t fold a paper courteously when they were done with it, picked it up, and turned it over.

Connor was a bit disappointed with his initial reaction. Draco didn’t shriek. He didn’t shout something about Rhangnara being wrong and how dare he do this and Harry should fix this right now. His eyes narrowed slightly, as if he were trying to force the sleepiness away.

Then his face went pale, as if he were going to faint.

Connor brought his arm up in front of his mouth to muffle his laughter in his sleeve.

Draco read through the article. Connor could tell by his face when he hit the most interesting parts. When he reached the revelations about blood not being important, his face turned ashen. As he went on, he shook his head more and more, until he looked as if he had epilepsy. Then he reached what Connor knew were the paragraphs on the Black and Malfoy marriages, and tossed the paper into the air, snarling. He snatched his wand from his sleeve in the next instant. Connor was sure that he was going to set the paper on fire.

The *Prophet* was tumbling all over the kitchen in a mess of sheets, and Connor had his wand, so it was no trouble for him to wave it and call, “*Accio* front page!” just as Draco cast *Incendio* at the rest of it. The stink of burning paper filled the room, but the article had already sped over to Connor and settled itself firmly in his hand. Connor pressed the beaming photograph of Thomas Rhangnara, waving his heavy book, against his heart and grinned at Draco over the top of it. Draco looked murderous. That was fun. Connor liked it when Draco was looking murderous. It meant he lost control and shouted entertaining things. He had come up to Connor’s room the other day to make the silliest accusations over the prank that he and Harry had played with the Firebolt. Draco had said it had hurt Harry. Connor knew that couldn’t be true, because he and his brother were close enough now that Harry would have come to him and told him about that—if not the day after the prank, certainly later.

“Give it to me, Potter,” Draco spat.

“Why?” Connor asked. “It’s an innocent article. It never did anything to you.” He petted the paper as if it were a Kneazle kitten and watched in fascination as Draco’s face darkened further. “Besides,” Connor added, just to fan the flames, “it’s true.”

“It is not!” Draco shouted, and actual spittle came flying out of his mouth on the last word. Connor applauded.

“I think this is the least like a pureblood wizard I’ve ever seen you act,” he told Draco. “I see the article was true after all. And I bet it was a Muggle your great-grandfather slept with.”

Draco let out a wordless howl and tried to spring across the table at him. Trumpetflower had grabbed him, though, and just like the rest of the pack, the slender werewolf had much more strength in her arms than someone might think at first. She held Draco effortlessly, and took away his wand with a simple movement. Connor put his head down on the table, unable to muffle his
giggles any longer.

“Enough, Draco. Connor.”

That was Harry, and he didn’t sound like a brother, he sounded like a leader. Connor knew that meant he had gone too far. He lifted his head and gave Harry a contrite look. Harry nodded to accept it. He sometimes seemed to believe that Connor could not possibly cause that much trouble, because he was a Gryffindor and Harry considered Gryffindors a bit simple-minded compared to devious Slytherins. Connor didn’t think Harry was even aware he had that prejudice, but Connor himself was not above exploiting it.

“What’s the article?” Harry asked, though in a tone of voice that said he already knew. He extended his hand, and Connor put the front page of the Prophet into it. Harry read it quickly, his eyes narrowing. Now and then he nodded, as though he were encountering a piece of information he hadn’t expected, and near the end his eyes widened. Connor smiled. I didn’t think Rhangnara would dare to mention information about specific families, either, but he did.

Harry put the paper down on the table and turned to face Draco. “Let him go, Trumpetflower, please,” he said.

Trumpetflower did it immediately, and stepped away, but she kept her gaze on Harry. Connor wondered idly if Harry had really noticed the way the members of the pack looked at him. Probably not, because Harry never noticed things like that. He assumed he just asked for things and they got done, because people wanted things from him or because of Loki’s request. But Connor knew that some of the werewolves were thinking of Harry as their true leader. He’d seen the process happen last year, as the students stopped looking at McGonagall as a substitute for Dumbledore and started seeing her as the real thing.

But he looked away from Trumpetflower and went back to watching Draco, which was much more fun. Connor had accepted that Harry and Draco were going to join. He also knew they had had sex at least once, because he wasn’t as unobservant as his brother seemed to think. But he also knew that Draco was only civilized on the surface, and underneath lay a bloody, sodding, prissy little wanker. Harry was about to get a sharp reminder, it looked like.

“That article isn’t true,” Draco told Harry, with a great deal of appeal in his voice. Connor knew the sentiment: Make it not be true. He had done the same thing to Harry when he was younger, especially after Harry took Lily’s magic away, but he had grown up since then. Draco hadn’t.

“It is,” Harry confirmed quietly. “Thomas told me weeks ago, when I contacted him about coming to the meeting for the Alliance of Sun and Shadow.”

Draco just stared at him. Harry looked back, his head on one side, his expression regretful but calm. Connor smiled. He isn’t going to yield. Good. Harry gives Draco what he wants far too much of the time.

“All of it, as far as Thomas can tell,” Harry said. “He had done the same thing to Harry when he was younger, especially after Harry took Lily’s magic away, but he had grown up since then. Draco hadn’t.

“It is,” Harry confirmed quietly. “Thomas told me weeks ago, when I contacted him about coming to the meeting for the Alliance of Sun and Shadow.”

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“All of it, as far as Thomas can tell,” Harry said. “He might have made a mistake; it wouldn’t be the first time. But from what they can tell right now, yes, it’s true.”

“What’s true?” Draco’s voice had deepened. Connor shook his head. He wants to see if Harry will actually say it. Of course he will. Idiot.

“The part about your grandfather probably being a halfblood,” said Harry.

See? Connor thought at Draco, while the other boy wrapped shaking arms around himself. You thought he wouldn’t, and of course he does. If Lily hadn’t given him that stupid training, he would have gone to Gryffindor for sure.

“And that would make me one-eighth Muggle,” said Draco, his voice deep with disgust.

“Or one-eighth Muggleborn,” said Harry. “I really don’t think there’s any way to tell, and Thomas certainly didn’t mention one.”

Draco shook his head. “My grandfather was a halfblood,” he repeated, with a tone of nausea in his voice.

Connor felt the sudden deep silence in the room. He turned his head, and saw Harry’s face so tight that it looked smaller.

“Why, yes,” Harry said. “Just like your boyfriend is a halfblood.”
Draco stared at him. Then he scowled and said, “That’s not what I meant, and you know it.”

“How?” Harry asked pleasantly.

“It’s not—you’re not—I know there’s a difference,” said Draco. “I’m not prejudiced against you, Harry. This is about my family, about what blood I have in me.”

“So blood is one thing and a cock is another?” Harry hissed. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Connor was glad he wasn’t eating, as he would have choked. He had always known that Harry had a fouler mouth when he got upset, but he hadn’t expected him to say anything like that.

“It is different!” Draco yelled as Harry turned his back. “You aren’t giving me a chance! My whole world has just turned around, I’ve just found out that I’m not who I always thought I was, and you—"

“I know that it’s different with you,” Harry said, not looking back. “It always is, Draco. I think you only accept that I’m a halfblood because you don’t have to think about it. The moment you do, then something like this happens.”

He trotted out of the room and disappeared. Trumpetflower glided after him. Connor knew Harry would have a guard of werewolves until he reached his room or some other safe sanctum.

Draco sank down on the other side of the table, looking a mixture of disgusted and angry and shocked and defeated. Connor coughed and stood up. Draco’s gaze darted to him, and his expression changed again, eyes gone nearly opaque with hatred.

“None of this would have happened if you hadn’t started it,” he said.

Connor laughed again, because he couldn’t help it. “Oh, yes, Malfoy, I control the Prophet, and choose which stories to print,” he said. “And I funded all the research Rhangnara’s group did, didn’t you know? I’ve been setting this up since before I was even born, that’s how powerful I am.”

“He knows I didn’t mean that,” said Draco. “I don’t forget he’s a halfblood, I just don’t think about it.”

“Maybe you should,” Connor said, and left him there.

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Rufus wanted tea. And a headache potion. And to go to bed and wake up again so that the day could begin once more.

But mostly, tea.

He had already searched his office and confirmed that he had nothing to make tea with there. He didn’t even seem to have a cup left. While he was sitting and wondering who could possibly have stolen his cup, and what they could possibly want with it, the door opened and Percy Weasley entered, carrying two cups of tea and a folded copy of the Daily Prophet. He held one of the cups out to Rufus without a word. Rufus grasped it and drank greedily.

It soothed his headache, a bit, and he settled back in his chair with a sigh. Percy had already taken his desk and spread the paper out in front of him, with the air of someone who’d already read it. Rufus braced himself. Percy was still a trainee Auror, and that meant he was supposed to be getting practice in gauging and anticipating people’s reactions. Time to see if the instructors were still working since Moody left.

“What do you think will happen as a result of that?” Rufus asked, nodding at the article.

Percy frowned in thought. He was usually careful, and he had a brain, when he wasn’t trying to jump between the Minister and deadly curses. Rufus approved of that. There were plenty of Aurors who could leap into action at a moment’s notice and Stupefy the enemy. Percy was the kind who knew how to ask questions, and which ones were important.

“Well, the purebloods with a lot of influence in the Ministry aren’t going to be happy,” Percy said. “And even the ones without a lot of influence in the Ministry, I suppose. Most pureblood families have something in the way of pride for their names and their history, and some of them trade on it. Not us,” he added hastily. “But some.”
Rufus smiled thinly and decided not to tell Percy about his second cousin on his father’s side who had once tried to bluff his way out of Auror custody on the strength of, “But I’m a Weasley!” He nodded. “And if enough people believe it to be true, what do you think will happen?”

Percy’s face went blank, but Rufus couldn’t tell if that was awe, or shock, or just more thought. “Oh, Merlin,” he whispered. “It’s going to be total chaos, isn’t it? Not just a few pureblood families upset that they supposedly had adulterous ancestors. Chaos everywhere. Muggleborns believing that laws should be changed, and magical researchers questioning the basis of some ethics, and people trying to use this information for their own gain, and charlatans promising that they can help parents control how much magic their children are born with…” Percy trailed off, staring at the wall.

“Yes.” Rufus looked at the paper with another sigh. He knew Thomas Rhagnara was connected with Harry, though not how closely. But it was true, just as the Unspeakables had warned him, that Harry was going to bring more chaos down. Revolution was one thing, but Rufus had dealt with revolutionaries before; they usually had clearly-defined goals and the tendency to babble on at anyone who would listen to them. Harry was the only one he’d ever met whose main course of stirring up trouble seemed to be inspiring others to cause that trouble.

The Unspeakables, by contrast, brought clarity. They were being extraordinarily open with him for someone who wasn’t even part of the Department of Mysteries, though Rufus suspected his office helped.

They’d told him that the renegades in the Department had been more devious than they thought. The truth of the attack on Harry was as he’d told it—a fact that had been obscured when the Unspeakables first came and spoke with Rufus. They’d believed, then, that some of their people had been part of the “attack,” but had just wanted to speak with Harry.

Now they knew that some of their own had been Obliviated, and, more, dream-woven, which made them think that certain experiences had happened in reality when they were just waking dreams. The Obliviated and the dream-woven had recovered their memories, and they were one step closer to finding the traitors. But they had asked Rufus to delay Harry from spreading more chaos if he could. Trust of the Unspeakables would diminish if the Boy-Who-Lived said they were to be distrusted. And now the Unspeakables who had come to Rufus suspected their traitors had had help from outside the Department. They even thought they knew who, but it would take some time to confirm if they were right.

Rufus had had hope. The Unspeakables were being as open with him as they could without breaking their oaths to the Stone, which chose them, and was an artifact as ancient, powerful, and incorruptible as any justice ritual. What was sworn to on the Stone could not be broken or doubted—but the traitors had found a way to keep their oaths while advancing only a narrow set of goals that did not truly benefit the Department of Mysteries. The loyalists’ inquiries into how were continuing.

Rufus, armed with that knowledge, had faced Harry, and found him worse than the cold, proud boy who would not reply to his letters out of sheer stubbornness. He had found someone who could not seem to understand that more people than his revolutionary group existed in the world. He had found someone who was not content to defend himself with the common magic available to everyone, or make his way to other levels of the Ministry in an effort to find help when he was attacked, but had to use his absorbere gifts, and thus increase both the traitors’ fear and the likelihood that Harry would use it against other Ministry employees.

He had found, Rufus feared, an incipient Lord.

He stared in silence at the paper, at the smiling man who held the book with the acronym GUTOEKOM gleaming in gilded letters and could not seem to understand why other people would not welcome his theory. Rufus felt as if he were looking at Harry, too, and Harry’s allies—dancing above an abyss, and not understanding the emptiness that lay below, or the people who would fall.

Rufus knew he would have to wait, because the Unspeakables had asked him to, and because, though the balance between him and Amelia had very subtly begun to shift in his favor, it had not tilted all the way yet. He could not even send a letter to Harry, because Harry would only ignore it in his pride and certainty that he knew what he was doing, as he had all the others.

Galling, he thought, to wait while your Ministry rips itself to shreds around you, and the best and brightest hope of the wizarding world looks first to himself and those he has sworn to protect, and only then to the world his actions will shake.

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“And this is where we have the major presses,” Dionysus Hornblower was yelling cheerfully, over the thump and clack of the Vox Populi being produced. “Run without house elves and on our own magic, of course.”

“Of course,” Honoria murmured, watching as the machine in question gleamed and ratcheted and danced through its motions in a
blaze of metal. The Maenad Press used a large house near the end of Diagon Alley. Honoria wondered idly whether they’d had to bribe the shopkeepers near them to ignore the noise, or if they’d just bought the space and planned to expand. Dionysus looked as if he were an expanding kind of wizard.

He had been absolutely delighted when Honoria appeared and said that she was to function as Harry’s liaison with the Maenad Press. And, to be honest, Honoria was delighted right back. Dionysus was brash and too confident and noisy, as the instantly converted tended to be. (Honoria’s mother had been noisy about having married a pureblood wizard most of her life). He worshipped Harry in one breath and criticized him soundly in the next, mostly for moving too slow. He yelled at the people working on the *Populi*—editing articles, assembling the paper, creating the magical construct owls that delivered it—and they yelled right back, unintimidated. He had already mentioned going to Azkaban, fighting with Aurors, sneaking out of enemy territory during the First War with Voldemort, sleeping with an unknown woman only to find out that she was a Death Eater the next morning, and more stories that Honoria wanted to hear in full. Ignifer would just hate him.

He was the epitome of *Gryffindor*, whatever his House at Hogwarts had actually been, if he had attended Hogwarts. Honoria wasn’t entirely sure he hadn’t spent his years between eleven and seventeen on the run all over the Continent while being taught Dark Arts, illegal Charms, and blood magic.

Honoria had missed people like this.

“That owl is missing a left wing, Jamie!” Dionysus yelled at one of his workers, who probably wasn’t even named Jamie, but was instantly correcting his mistake. He turned back to Honoria, beaming. “Have a plethora of articles on that new theory,” he said. “Due to come, or whatever its name is. Fascinating nonsense. Have you read it?”

Honoria blinked. “Ah, no.” She’d split her days lately between visiting the Maenad Press—well, spying on it at first—scouting out London pack territory to help the werewolves who lived there with escape routes if the Department showed up on the next full moon, and shagging Ignifer.

“Pity,” Dionysus said. “Read the first hundred pages last night. Changed my mind on some things. Changed my mind completely. That young Harry, he’s a changemaster, yes?”

“I don’t know what that means,” said Honoria. She felt a grin threatening to split her face. She was left behind and scrambling to keep up. It was *fantastic*.

“Means he comes into a place, and it changes,” said Dionysus. “But he knows about that and anticipates it, not just hides in fear. Changes the center of gravity, as some Muggles I know go on about. Hepzibah, don’t make me come over there and finish editing the bloody thing for you! Congratulations, Jamie boy, now the owl is missing its right wing. Yes, Harry knows how to change things.”

Honoria laughed. She was having *fun*. She’d have to thank Harry for giving her this assignment.

And then the entire room turned red. Honoria lifted her head in astonishment. The globes filled with a heatless light charm that hung from the ceiling had been white-gold before, but now they blazed like the fire of an angry Hungarian Horntail.

“What does that mean?” she asked.

Dionysus had a gleam of battle in his eyes when she looked back, and had already drawn his wand. “Means the wards have been triggered,” he said happily. “Use of a powerful magical artifact not in common use nearby. The Unspeakables have shown up. Thought they would.” His grin widened. “Ready for them.”

“What?” Honoria said blankly, and then the Unspeakables attacked.

It was like nothing she’d experienced. Gray cloaks were swooping out of nowhere, seeming to congeal out of mist that drifted from the walls. They carried glass globes, thin straps of bronze, patches of light that made Honoria’s head hurt to look at but which drew her eyes anyway. Some of them definitely had swords. The level of magic in the room had increased to the point that Honoria didn’t think she’d felt anything like it, even when Harry was at the alliance meeting.

Dionysus howled happily. “Hullo, you bastards!” he shouted, and swept his wand in a gesture Honoria knew she had never seen before. “Lions roar, you know.”

The crimson glow from the lights grew more intense. Then the walls appeared to catch on fire, and from them came glowing shapes that intensified and took on solid form as they flew. They were magical constructs, like the owls, Honoria thought, but
these had the shape of lions. By the time they landed, each had a mouth full of teeth and paws bristling with sharp claws.

The Unspeakables turned to deal with them. Honoria saw some of the swords come sweeping down, and even though they only cut across a lion’s shadow, the crimson creatures screamed and vanished. One shoved its head towards the light in a gray-cloaked figure’s hand and then charred and crisped, like a moth venturing too close to a flame. Honoria was sure, in the moments before she took to her gull form so that she could fly above the chaos and be in less danger from it, that she saw one Unspeakable also rip a lion apart with the two halves of a glass globe.

But the lions were doing their damage, too, tearing open gray robes and making blood fly, and Dionysus’s people were rising with their wands in their hands now, as if they had expected it. Honoria knew she’d made the right choice in taking to the wing, no matter how many people had seen her change and so knew she was an Animagus. The flashing colors of *Stupefy*, *Diffindo*, more hexes and jinxes than she could count, and an occasional Severing Curse were blinding. She shivered in particular at recognizing the Severing Curse, thinking of a cold night in October when she’d dropped between Harry and Igor Karkaroff and felt one of those catch her across her chest and belly.

Dionysus was in the middle of it all, directing the attack like the master of a circus directing the acts. His shouts of encouragement in battle, Honoria found, didn’t sound much different from the scoldings he gave to be sure that his people did what they were supposed to do with the paper. He had a shield around him that appeared to eat every attack the Unspeakables could come up with, but which didn’t stop his own spells from getting out. Honoria saw him stun and bind two Unspeakables whose cloaks fell back to reveal pale, shocked faces, and he dueled with another one-on-one for two minutes before putting him out with what Honoria thought was a time-delayed blast of light that blinded him.

The thunder of spells and roaring from the lions and teeth-clattering rattle from some of the artifacts the Unspeakables carried only lasted for a few minutes, but that was more than long enough for Honoria. *Give me Woodhouse and planned battle any time*, she thought, winging uneasily in circles, dodging the occasional curse from someone who’d noticed her.

Then the Unspeakables still standing vanished, taking their artifacts with them. The lions at once paused and lowered their heads towards Dionysus, bowing like shadows made of flame. Then they leaped and melted into the walls again, and the lights turned back from crimson to white. Dionysus swept the room with a practiced eye, and nodded.

“Jamie, help Hepzibah bandage that wound,” he said. “Diana, you’re off-work for the rest of the day; go home. Godric, for the love of all that’s holy, you’ll sit down now or I’ll *sit* you down.”

Honoria returned cautiously to the floor, changing back into her human body as she went. Dionysus saw her and grinned.

“There you are,” he said. “Should have reckoned you would be a gull. I like it, I like it. Fits.”

“You—you sounded as if you were prepared for that,” Honoria said, staring at the Unspeakables lying on the ground. Even the bloodied ones seemed to be just unconscious, not dead. She expected them to change into mist at any moment, but they didn’t. They just lay there.

“I was,” said Dionysus. “Bastards are always showing up when they think I’m making too much trouble.” He nodded once or twice. “Worked up a battle plan with my people, and we only use spells that aren’t going to send us to Tullianum. Besides, the Unspeakables are always aiming to capture, not kill. Only fair if we do the same to them.” He nodded again. “Mind you, this is the most serious attack we’ve ever had, but I anticipated that. I’m seriously annoying them at the moment.”

“And the lions?” Honoria asked.

Dionysus chuckled. “Like them? They’re the products of an artifact I stole from the bastards. And the shield, too. And a few other little things.” He winked. “Of course, tell anyone other than Harry and I’ll know who prated.”

“How do you steal from the Department of Mysteries?” Honoria said. She needed to sit down. Dionysus had steered her into a chair before she could think to ask for one.

“When they try to recruit you and then change their minds later,” said Dionysus gleefully. “They would have modified my memory or chained me there to do whatever it is they do to prisoners. Theft was the least they deserved. Bastards.” It seemed to be his favorite insult.

“And what are you going to do—with them?” Honoria nodded at the captured Unspeakables. Dionysus followed her gaze, and his whole face seemed to become sharper.
“Right now? Have a good laugh at the Ministry with the *Populi*. And then introduce them to another little toy of mine. Bastards are all immune to Veritaserum, but not to my toy,” Dionysus actually rubbed his hands together. “And then tell Harry about what I find. If I want to. Certainly report it in the *Populi*. The people deserve to hear and know the truth.”

Honoria leaned on her hand and shook her head. She supposed one of her major tasks would be convincing Dionysus to share all of what he found with Harry, since the Unspeakables were Harry’s enemies as well, and also what he might know about the Department of Mysteries from the brief time he’d spent training there. He might share it without convincing, but Honoria was not willing to wager on that. He could change his mind in a moment.

*Merlin, this is so much fun. Now that I know what to expect, anyway.*

She leaned back and smiled at Dionysus. “This is going to make the Ministry look very bad,” she said.

Dionysus chortled. “They deserve it. Bastards.”

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Chapter Eighteen: Dionysus and His Maenads

“The Unspeakables he talked to confirmed that they attacked the Press because they wanted to shut him down,” Honoria said, her eyes half-slitted in enjoyment as she sipped at the cup of orange juice Harry had given her when she refused tea. “And something else, which he was reluctant to tell me at first until I reassured him that it would never go further than your ears.” She gave Harry an enigmatic look. Harry nodded. He certainly wasn’t about to announce whatever Honoria had to tell him from the front page of the *Prophet*. That Hornblower would do so in the *Populi* was shocking enough.

Honoria let out her breath. “They did want to capture him—him and anyone they could get their hands on, really. They would have *Obliviated* me and anyone else they didn’t take. Dionysus said that it’s their usual course. The Unspeakables usually strike to capture, not kill, unless the other person has invaded the Department of Mysteries. He also thinks it’s why that faction of Unspeakables seems to want to identify werewolves with collars and papers, rather than just kill them the way the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts wants to.”

“What do they *do* with their prisoners?” Harry whispered, feeling a convulsive shudder travel through him at the thought of going down into the bowels of the Ministry and never emerging again.

“That was the thing we couldn’t find out,” said Honoria, with a sad smile. “At least, not from those Unspeakables. Dionysus said they swear an oath not to talk about it. He was surprised he’d got that much out of them.” Her fingers slid along her glass. “But he can guess, based on what he saw in his own short time in the Department of Mysteries.”

Harry shook his head. He still found it hard to believe that anyone sane would approach Dionysus Hornblower and ask him to have anything to do with secrecy. “What does he think they do, then?”

“Use the magic and the bodies of those they capture. He said it would make sense, given that they wanted to capture you.”

Harry gave a smile he knew was twisted. The most important thing about him was his magic, Falco Parkinson told him. Well, why wouldn’t the Unspeakables have thought the same thing? And a Lord-level wizard who could drain magic himself was probably of interest to them. *Pity I can’t send them after Voldemort.*

He did toy with the idea of spreading a rumor that Voldemort was recovering, but then shook his head. The panic it would cause wasn’t worth it, and it was unlikely to distract the Unspeakables from everything else they were doing, including influencing the Minister.

“Thank you for assigning me to the Maenad Press,” Honoria said, capturing Harry’s attention again. “I *love* this. Dionysus is who I want to grow up to be.” She was grinning.

Harry raised his eyebrows. “But not who you want to shag?” he asked, grateful to be able to tease her about something.

“Please.” Honoria stood with a shrug. “As if I have any interest in men. If I did, there are people who would already have filled that place.”

“Tybalt?” Harry knew they were old friends.
“Among others.” Honoria winked at him, and then turned and walked towards the Floo on the far side of the room. Casting a handful of green powder into the flames, she called out, “Dragonshome!” and was gone.

Harry leaned back, with his arms folded behind his head, and closed his eyes. He was in the middle of a seething, boiling cauldron here, and this time, he didn’t have the excuse of retreating to the Sanctuary while someone else watched the pot for him. He felt, rather, as if the Maenads pictured on the front page of the *Vox Populi* would sweep around the corner at any moment, seeking to tear him apart in retaliation for all the mistakes he’d made.

He had to plan, had to think, and some of it would take longer than a single day.

For the moment, though, he might as well go up to a bedroom bereft of Draco and try to sleep as well as he could. Harry knew that the morning, which would bring the publication of Hornblower’s article on the attack, would be vicious.

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Ignifer felt Honoria arrive home, the wards twanging, but she couldn’t leave the room and go to her, as much as she wished to. She was occupied in a different conversation with a very different woman in a fire, instead. This was her mother, Artemis, who had firecalled her every day for the past sixteen years, trying to persuade her to change her mind and Declare for Light again. Resisting her had become considerably easier since Ignifer had started sharing a bed with Honoria, though.

This time, something had changed. Artemis had given her scolding. She had asked Ignifer to make submission to her father so that Cupressus might forgive his daughter and welcome her back. Ignifer had refused. But now Artemis lingered, her eyes darting around the room beyond the flames as if she wanted to admire Ignifer’s paintings and panels. Ignifer stood with her arms folded, refusing to close the connection before her mother decided on it. That would not be polite.

“Do you ever find,” her mother said at last, “that there are some things you cannot discuss with your fellow dishonorables in the Dark? Some things that are unspeakable?”

Ignifer opened her mouth to reply, and then shut it slowly. She stared at her mother. Artemis stared back with pleading eyes. Ignifer understood the silent message well enough.

She has reason to think that the Unspeakables are watching their house. Well, why not?

She had known, from the time when she was a small girl and still thought her father the center of the universe and the greatest wizard in creation, that the Apollonis family had artifacts on hand that other wizards wouldn’t like them possessing. It was just a sign of shortsightedness, Cupressus had explained to her. Other wizards would say the artifacts were dangerous, but they weren’t, not if treated with respect. What would cause them to lose blood or limbs was forcing those artifacts to perform like slaves or beasts of burden. One approached them in honor, or not at all.

Then had come a day when Ignifer returned home from her tutor’s house and found all the artifacts gone, her mother white to the lips, and her father with a burn on his face. He refused to speak a word. He simply fingered a scrap of gray cloth.

Ignifer had learned that Unspeakables had raided the house and removed the artifacts, saying they were too dangerous for any family to possess, even the most Light-devoted family in Ireland. She learned it in that roundabout way that she learned most things in the Apollonis household. Rumor and myth and murmured words and glances eventually distilled into reality.

She did not believe, even now, that the artifacts had been the kind commonly raided from criminals. Cupressus would never have stood for anything Dark in his home, as his reaction to Ignifer’s Declaration proved. He had thought they were safe, and they had certainly been of the Light.

And now the Unspeakables were pressuring him again, it seemed, or watching him, or urging him to act against Harry.

“There are many things that are so difficult to say,” said Ignifer carefully, watching her mother. “I was reared in the Light, and even those who chose Dark late in their lives find me odd.” She heard the door to the room open behind her, and knew that Honoria had entered. Artemis’s face tightened, but she still didn’t shut down the Floo connection. “But I know that sometimes, silence is the best course.”

Artemis’s eyes closed in relief. “Yes, that is true,” she whispered. “Silence, and only speaking when it’s time. I am glad that you understand me, daughter.” And then the Floo connection went dark, the green to the flames spluttering and dying. Ignifer shook her head.
Honoria wrapped her arms around her waist and leaned up to kiss her. “What was that about?”

“Unspeakables trying to push my father to do what they want, I think,” Ignifer said, turning around to bury her face in Honoria’s hair. She smelled so good, and in the past few months, Ignifer had begun to dare to allow herself to think that the smell wouldn’t be snatched away from her just as she got used to it. “Or perhaps make him act against Harry.”

There was silence for a moment, and then Honoria snorted.

“They’re trying to push your father around?” she asked. “The man so stubborn that he’s resisted reconciling with his own bloody daughter for over a bloody decade?”

“Yes,” Ignifer murmured into her ear. “I wish them joy of Cupressus Apollonis.” For the first time in sixteen years, she could imagine her father acting as he normally would without pain, and the subtle, inflexible rings he would spin around the Unspeakables trying to spin rings around him. Cupressus had held his own family in check with an iron will, but he had done much the same thing with the other Light-devoted families of Ireland, to the point where all of them considered him their leader. Like only Harry that Ignifer could think of, Cupressus was not afraid of the Ministry’s shadow-hunters.

Honoria was laughing, Ignifer realized when she came back from her daze. “So do I,” she murmured. “And now. Bed?” She tilted her head up hopefully.

Ignifer kissed her. “If you say so.”

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Harry yawned before he could stop himself, then winced and shook his head. He hadn’t spent a productive night as far as sleep went; sometimes he’d managed to snatch a whole hour before he had to rise up and pace around his room again, because he’d had another idea or another insight or another plan to fit into place. As it went, his throat hurt with weariness, and sometimes his eyes blurred.

But he could repair that with sleep later, and he had seen things that he would never have seen if he had waited until the morning. His step as he came down the stairs was firm, and he felt a quiet confidence filling him. He was in the middle of chaos, but his priorities in the middle of that chaos were the same as they had always been: stay on the vates path, help those who looked to him for protection, continue to live and heal himself simultaneously with everything else. He thought, now, that Scrimgeour was faltering precisely because the chaos had warped his own vision of what his priorities should be.

He entered the kitchen, vaguely aware of one of the werewolves, probably Trumpetflower, walking behind him. They did seem to always keep an eye on him. Harry wondered if he should be worried by that; he doubted they had so closely observed Loki. If they couldn’t trust him to take care of himself, they might not trust Harry to take care of them, and there had to be mutual trust between pack and alpha. All the research Harry had studied agreed on that.

Another thing to consider.

Only one person was in the kitchen: Draco, sitting at the table and scowling at a paper. Harry couldn’t see whether it was the Prophet or the Vox Populi from this angle. He suspected it didn’t matter.

Draco jerked his head up when he saw him, and stared. Harry just nodded back. He needed to—talk to Draco. That was the best description he had come up with of what he wanted to say. Not yell, of course, but “reconcile” would imply more of a breach than Harry had thought was there, and “apologize” was not entirely true. “Face the truth with,” maybe.

“Good morning, Draco,” Harry said quietly. “I’d like to speak with you, if you don’t mind.” If Draco told him to sod off, then he’d eat breakfast and go talk to someone else. Snape was a good candidate.

Draco blinked as if that were the last thing he’d expected, then looked over Harry’s shoulder and scowled. Harry wondered if he should be worried by that; he doubted they had so closely observed Loki. If they couldn’t trust him to take care of himself, they might not trust Harry to take care of them, and there had to be mutual trust between pack and alpha. All the research Harry had studied agreed on that.

“I don’t want an audience,” Draco snapped.

“Fine,” said Harry, and caught the tail end of an astonished look on Draco’s face before the Malfoy composure covered it. Really, did he think I’d refuse a reasonable request? It’s only stupid things I’ll refuse. Harry nodded at Trumpetflower. “We’re going to my room. Will you stand guard outside it and make sure that no one interrupts?”
“She could hear something.” Draco said.

“I’ll cast a ward so that she can’t,” said Harry.

“I want to stay here,” said Draco, folding his arms and scowling.

“Other people have to get in and eat breakfast,” Harry said.

Draco opened his mouth, then shut it again and stood up. He watched Harry with more interest now. Harry arched an eyebrow back, gave a thin smile, then turned and led Draco out of the kitchen.

Trumpetflower caught his arm. “Wild, are you sure it’s a good idea for you to be alone with him right now?” she whispered. “Loki could handle Gudrun, but they were mates. It was impossible for them to truly hurt each other.”

Harry squeezed her hand. “I’ll be fine, Trumpetflower, but I would appreciate it if you would talk to anyone who wants to talk to me and turn them away for right now. And, of course, not try to undo the ward so that you can listen in,” he added, catching a glimpse of her wand in her shirt pocket.

Trumpetflower lowered her eyes. “We just want you to be safe, alpha, that’s all,” she said.

“I know,” said Harry, and waited until she nodded. He could feel Draco’s eyes on his back, and knew the balance of his mind was sliding more and more from angry to thoughtful. Or, at least, it should be if he was any kind of Slytherin at all.

Harry led the way up the stairs, Draco just behind him and Trumpetflower at his heels. He let Draco see him casting the ward on their room that would prevent anyone outside from listening in, even with some of the less common and cleverer eavesdropping spells. Trumpetflower took up her position as guard, and Harry walked inside with Draco and shut and spell-locked the door.

He turned around. Draco already had his arms folded again, and the mulish anger on his face. Harry doubted it was entirely genuine. Draco was going to push and see how much he could get away with, as he so often had before. Harry fought hard not to smile. Making this into a conversation between reasonable adults, instead of a shouting match, had paid off.

“What you did to me yesterday was wrong,” Draco started. “You knew about that theory, and you didn’t tell me!”

“I knew about the Black and Malfoy marriages, and the general truths of the Grand Unified Theory, before then,” said Harry. “I am sorry for not telling you—if you can tell me that you would have accepted this at any time.”

“What?” Draco blinked.

“If I had told you about this when Thomas first told me,” Harry said, making sure to watch Draco’s eyes, “would you have accepted it? Or would you still have been nauseated that your grandfather was a halfblood?”

Draco’s eyes flicked slightly to the right before he said, “Of course I would have accepted it. It would have been in private, not making a fool out of me in front of your prat of a brother!”

Harry shook his head. “You’re lying, Draco, and I don’t need Legilimency to tell that, either,” he added, when Draco opened his mouth to protest. “I should have handled the situation better. I can admit that. I should have done it in private. But I don’t think you would have accepted it even that way.”

“Why did he do that?” Draco burst out. “He must know that the only Black-Malfoy marriage in existence right now is my family’s! He’s making all three of us look bad. He must have done it on purpose! Why aren’t you trying to exile him from the alliance for treachery against your partner and his father?”

“Because he doesn’t see it that way,” said Harry, blinking. He knew blood was important to Draco, but could he have truly spent time in close quarters with Thomas and not realized he wouldn’t care about that? “He sees it as an interesting fact. Maybe amusing, given that those families have always said they were pureblooded to the bone. I’m sure he said more than that, and Rita Skeeter chose what to include in the article. That he did say it, I have no doubt. It’s interesting to him, Draco. And that’s all. He didn’t mean it as an attack because he can’t conceive of blood being as important to someone as it is to your family. You’re still magical, and you’re not research wizards, as he is. Does it matter how you got to be magical?”

“Of course it does!” Draco said.
Now we’re getting somewhere. Harry leaned against the bed. “Why?”

“Because we’re not Muggles,” Draco said passionately. “We don’t share anything with them, Harry! And even the Muggleborns like Granger—I suppose it’s good that she can study the pureblood rituals and fit in, but you can’t say that she’s the same as we are!”

“Probably not,” said Harry. “I think this came too late for a lot of people to completely change the way they feel about blood. But Hermione’s children? I can see them growing up proud of who they are, not caring about the old prejudices. As Thomas said in that article, it’s the future that’s so exciting, more exciting than the revision of the past.”

“She’s not the same,” Draco snapped.

Harry frowned a bit. He thought he knew where this was going, but he wanted to be sure. “Draco,” he said. “I’m not going to make you change your mind, though there are some things we need to talk about with blood. But what do you want, exactly? You know that I won’t just stand silent as you call Hermione a Mudblood. That’s under common rules of politeness.”

“I want you to believe that there’s something different about her,” Draco insisted. “Because there is.”

Harry had to laugh, though he tried to do it as gently as possible. Draco stared at him, betrayed.

“Draco,” Harry said, striving to make his words also gentle, “even if I believed that, do you think it would matter to me? I’m trying to bring centaurs, werewolves, house elves, into this alliance—all people that are far more different from you than you are from Hermione. Difference is not enough to put me off someone. Behavior would be, and if Hermione tried to use this to force you to change your mind on blood differences, well, that’s wrong. So far, though, I don’t know what she thinks. So far, all I have is your behavior to judge by. And it’s not impressing me very much.”

“It’s different,” Draco said, and now he was pleading. “You know that, Harry. You were raised pureblood.”

Harry winced. I thought it would come back to this sooner or later. “I wasn’t, Draco,” he said.

Draco blinked again.

“I was abused,” Harry said, though the word made his skin crawl as he said it and all his trained sensibilities want to revolt in protest, “into believing that I needed to know those rituals to win Connor allies. That is the only reason that I know as much as I do, Draco. Not interest in the rituals for their own sake. I can’t think of much I’m interested in for its own sake. I was also raised with a belief that Dark was evil and Light was purely good, and that I could trust Headmaster Dumbledore before anyone else. I changed my mind on those things. Why shouldn’t I change my mind on the others? Evaluate them, rather than blindly believe them? Culturally, I’m pureblood. But if that means I have prejudices, I won’t hold onto them just because I was raised with them.”

“But if you don’t, then your blood—“ Draco stopped.

“I know,” said Harry calmly. “I know that my knowledge of the old dances made some of my allies look past my blood. By now, though, people like Mrs. Parkinson and Mr. Bulstrode should know me well enough not to care about that. If they don’t, they can always leave the alliance.” He took a step forward. “The real candidate here, Draco, the first real test, is you. Do you love me enough to actually be in love with someone who’s half-Muggleborn? Or do you want to ignore it the way you always did? I’m afraid that I don’t want to ignore it any longer. You believe strongly in purity of blood. If you speak up about it, though, I’m not going to be silent. I will remind you that I’m a halfblood as often as you remind me that you’re a pureblood. We are equals. Nothing can change that. Unless you want to step out of the joining ritual now, of course.”

Draco was silent for so long that Harry began to fear what he would say. But he steadied himself against the temptation to back off, and apologize, and say that of course it didn’t matter what Draco believed, that Harry would always be there by his side to accept and support him.

It matters. Damn it, it does. And I cannot be afraid, not like this. I am vates. It’s my path to grant freedom first and foremost. If Draco can’t look past this, it’s better that he be free of the joining ritual now, so that he can find a partner he’s happier with. No one I love can wear chains.

Harry lost his train of thought as Draco let loose a little snarl and grabbed him, yanking him close and kissing him hard enough to involve much pain and little pleasure. Harry accepted it, because he thought he had his answer. He waited until it was done, and then stepped back and asked, “Well?”
“You win,” Draco said. “You always do.”

Harry shook his head. “Not good enough. I don’t want to claim victory over you. Do you accept what it’s going to be like, Draco? That this argument isn’t one we can just resolve, that it’s going to turn between us while we live over and around it? I don’t want to have an imaginary agreement, where both of us feel constrained to never talk about blood or the Grand Unified Theory. I want to be able to argue with you.”

Draco closed his eyes. “My fault for falling in love with a vates,” he muttered. Then he glared at Harry. “As long as we’re using honesty, I hate it when you talk about the end of the joining ritual. It makes me feel as if you want it to end.”

Harry smiled. “I want it to end, but not for the reasons you think,” he said.

Draco stared at him again. Then he said, “You’re too good with words. Yes, damn it, all right. We live with this. And I won’t call Granger a Mudblood when I see her again.”

“And I apologize for not telling you earlier,” said Harry.

Draco gave a short nod, then took a closer look at Harry and snorted. “You didn’t sleep any better than I did last night,” he said, and climbed into his own bed, patting the sheets beside him in silent invitation.

Harry hesitated only a moment before joining him. He had other things to do, that was certainly true, but what he wanted most was the courage to do them, not the time. There was nothing that had to be handled immediately, right now.

Besides, he wanted to sleep with Draco.

He settled himself carefully in the strange bed, and then found it wasn’t strange at all as Draco’s arms wrapped fiercely around him. Harry rested his head on Draco’s shoulder and his hand on his spine.

“Someday, I’ll be the one to reach out first,” Draco murmured into his ear.

Harry snorted, stirring Draco’s hair. “Not everything is a sacrifice,” he said. “Or a debt. I wanted to talk to you, so I did. Simple as that.” He closed his eyes. Weariness was coming in now like a tide, as if it had only been waiting for the moment he lay down to return.

“Nothing with you is simple,” Draco whispered, and then Harry was fairly sure he fell asleep. Or maybe that was himself, remembering nothing past the moment in which Draco touched his hair, with a gentleness that felt strangely akin to awe.

******

Rufus had received messages from Unspeakables and magical owls and regular owls and Percy, but he had to admit that finding a letter slid under his door was new. He had come to the office at a more normal time today, and therefore had only a few moments to cast spells on the envelope, looking for hexes, before Percy strode in with the Vox Populi swinging from his hands.

“Look at this, sir!”

Rufus examined the article, and his mouth tightened. Of course Hornblower was claiming that Unspeakables had attacked the Maenad Press. It was the kind of thing he would claim, the kind of story that he would wave in the air as a banner, trying to rally the masses. The problem was, this time he was only one factor among many troublesome ones, and the rallying might actually work.

“What’s that, sir?” Percy had caught sight of the letter.

“I don’t know who it’s from, yet,” said Rufus. He was sure that it could not be from the Department of Mysteries; they would have come to him themselves, rather than send a letter, and in any case they usually used gray parchment and an hourglass sigil.

“I found it shoved under my door this morning.”

Percy narrowed his eyes. “And no one saw anything?”

“No.” Rufus knew Percy didn’t trust Wilmot, though Percy couldn’t say why; he just shuffled his feet and looked embarrassed when Rufus asked. “And I don’t think there are any spells on it.” Nevertheless, he cast a spell that would hang the letter in the air
a distance from him, then cast yet another that would slit open the envelope. Inelegantly, the three sheets of paper tucked inside tumbling out.

Rufus examined what he could see. It wasn’t a letter. It appeared to be pages ripped from a book. He frowned and cast another spell. But the *Deprendo* revealed no sign of magic on the pages, Dark or otherwise. Rufus felt safe, at last, to pick them up, shuffle them, and read them.

They began in the middle of a sentence, which wasn’t helpful, but Rufus quickly discovered why his mysterious correspondent had wanted him to see them.

--did not believe in the loyalty of those who would have sworn themselves to the shadows. He was a Light Lord, and fierce with it, a deadly opponent of any such thing as secrecy. He asked how the newly formed Ministry could have a Department that worked in the shadows and yet be the bastion of justice for the wizarding world that it was supposed to be.

The first Unspeakable, whose name has passed into history only as the First, reassured him. “We have one artifact already that we have studied and understand the purpose of,” he said.

This artifact was the Stone, a great gray block at least ten feet high, and ornamented with white runes. The Light Lord examined it, and admitted it was undeclared, neutral magic, neither Dark nor Light. But he demanded a demonstration of how the Stone would keep the Unspeakables loyal to the Ministry.

The First laid his arm upon it, and cut his palm in the manner of someone securing a life debt oath. “I swear that I will be loyal to the Stone,” he said. “And the Stone serves the Ministry. I cannot lie, save in the service of the Stone. I cannot hurt others, save in the service of the Stone. I cannot vanish into the shadows, save in the service of the Stone.”

Those oaths are the ones all Unspeakables have taken from that day to this one, and the Stone has kept them loyal. Minister after Minister has been pleased to accept those oaths. The Unspeakables are chosen by the Stone; they do not choose themselves. Promising recruits who cannot accept the oaths and subordinate their wills to the Stone’s do not join the Department of Mysteries. The Stone itself is the product of another world—for similar artifacts, one may consider the Maze that traditionally sits within the Potter home of Lux Aeterna—and it cannot be fooled as the artifacts of this world may be.

It is worth noting, since it is so often claimed as a folk story, that the Light Lord Seaborn was not satisfied with the Unspeakables’ explanation. He asked how they could know that the Stone was loyal to the Ministry, and they told him that the Stone spoke in their heads. They invited him to put his hands on the Stone and listen. But the Light Lord Seaborn expressed a strange reluctance to do so, saying that he feared his own will would be taken.

Yet every Minister from that day to this who has been introduced to the Stone has agreed that its purposes are the Ministry’s. They know it, as perhaps only the Unspeakables otherwise do. Those of us outside the Ministry are fortunate to even know the Unspeakables’ oaths. But the will of the Stone, once sworn to, cannot be broken. Unspeakables may seem to do wrong in the public’s eye, but they do, always and only, what will advance the goals of the Stone, and thus of the Ministry.

Rufus swallowed. He had known that, of course, though not the specific details about the Light Lord Seaborn. He had known the Unspeakables served the Stone, and that they could not break their oaths. He had known that even the traitors could not really be traitors, not in the sense of acting against the Ministry, and therefore they must have simply interpreted the Stone’s orders wrongly. He had been willing to grant the loyal Unspeakables time to find them, because they were still his people, and they had acted wrongly out of the best of motives, not out of fear as Amelia had. It had to be the best of motives. The Stone guaranteed that.

But he had not known the Stone was from another world.

And he should trust the Stone so much only if he remembered meeting it and hearing from its own mind that its sworn companions served the Ministry.

But he did not remember meeting it.

“Sir?” That was Percy, and he sounded concerned, but he also sounded as if he were speaking from a very long distance away. “Is something wrong?”

Rufus shook his head and looked back at the pages. And that was when he saw that some of the letters on the pages were circled, faint marks that would hardly show up unless someone were looking for them. He would have pulled a piece of parchment from his desk and written the circled letters down, but suddenly he was oppressively aware, as he had never been before, of the wards
that ran throughout the Ministry, allowing the Unspeakables to watch what went on. They had been strengthened in his office, for his own protection, of course.

Sick doubt filled his belly. He had believed the Unspeakables blindly, as he only should have after meeting the Stone. The sense of serene confidence described in these pages suited him perfectly.

And he could not remember meeting it.

He ran his eyes over the letters on the page instead, memorizing them. He had used to be fairly good at acronyms and codes when he was an Auror. Then he snorted and crumpled the pages up, tossing them in the air with a snarled, “Incendio.”

Percy gasped as ashes drifted down. “Sir?” he asked.

“Damn pages were trying to put a compulsion on me as I read them,” said Rufus, wondering if the Unspeakables’ wards could pick up his heart beating in his ears like a frightened hare’s. “Time-delayed spell. Trying to fill my head with stuff and nonsense about our allies.”

Percy looked outraged. “And it was Harry who was doing that to you, sir?”

I must walk a tightrope. I must not let the Unspeakables know that I suspect what they are doing to me. If they are doing it to me. If Harry really is right, and they were lying.

They cannot lie, I thought.

Save in the service of the Stone.

“It must have been,” said Rufus. “There were no identifying marks on the papers, but who else would have a reason to try?” He shook his head. “And compulsion, too. It seems that he has slipped from his vates path.”

I must be careful. If they took me to meet the Stone and I do not remember it, Merlin knows what else they could do to me.

He provided a sympathetic ear to Percy’s outrage, while he rearranged the circled letters on the pages in his head. It didn’t take long. The message was too short to be a sentence, only thirteen letters long. It was obviously a name, and in a few moments he had it, if only because that name had drifted across his mind more than once in the past few days.

Aurelius Flint.

Rufus let out a sharp breath as he considered that. Other people in the Ministry were willing to play chess on his side, if he let them. At least, he thought that was what this message meant.

And he needed allies. Reaching out to Harry would only reveal to the Unspeakables what he knew. They had stopped Harry’s post reaching him—and didn’t that make more sense than Harry just refusing to answer letters, out of boyish pride or not?—and they had altered his memory. Rufus was far more vulnerable to them than Harry was. He would have to play his cards so close to his chest for now that not even Harry could be allowed to see their faces.

For now, he must maintain the tense status quo, dancing between balancing the Department Heads and his own power, and now he had to add the Unspeakable as malevolent partners.

His gaze wandered across the room and fell on the portrait of his grandmother Leonora. She gave him a serene smile.

Rufus narrowed his eyes, and wondered if Aurelius Flint had a portrait in his own office.

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Harry stood outside Snape’s door for a long moment. He didn’t want to do this. He wanted to do this even less than he had wanted to confront Draco. There, there was at least the chance that Draco would reach out to him, because of the love they shared and because Draco couldn’t bear arguing with him. Snape had not seemed interested in reaching out to him halfway.

It didn’t matter, though. Not after this morning.

Aware of the person waiting around the corner, Harry reached up and rapped on the door.
Small sounds from inside the room, sounds of cursing and pacing, went quiet. Harry waited. Snape must have some means of identifying him. Harry would let five minutes pass, then knock again.

The door opened after three minutes. Snape stared at him without expression. Perhaps he expected a scolding, Harry thought. Perhaps an apology. Well, he was about to get neither. Harry really didn’t have time for either. And he had someone on his side who would do a far better job of the scolding than he could. That person had the time, the interest, and the lack of personal connection that Harry now thought were key to helping Snape. He loved Snape so much that he backed off when he saw that he was hurting him. And perhaps if Snape’s dysfunction had remained in snapping at Harry and silently fuming at himself, then that would have been enough.

Not after this morning, though. Not after Harry had heard raised voices in the entrance hall of Cobley-by-the-Sea, and then heard a curse he recognized, followed by a shriek and the scent of burning hair and skin. If Harry had not been there, if he had not known the countercurse to *Ardesco*, and if he had not dropped the wards on the house long enough to Apparate with her to Hogwarts and the hospital wing, he knew Camellia would have died.

Snape had cursed one of the werewolves. Understandable, perhaps, with the full moon only two nights away, and the house’s main focus, including Harry’s, on brewing Wolfsbane and making plans to protect the pack from the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts.

But he had stepped past the point where Harry could allow this to continue. The rest of the pack was silent, but it was a threatening kind of silence. They lay in an immense pile for comfort in the middle of Cobley-by-the-Sea’s biggest room, their amber eyes shining in the dimness when Harry looked at them. He had told them that it would never happen again, and that he would deal with Snape.

They had watched him. They were shaken, Harry knew. They had depended on their alpha to protect them, and he had not. They would be questioning whether they could trust him now. They would definitely not trust Snape. The temptation during the full moon to slip out of the rooms in which they would otherwise lock themselves, pad down the hall, and chew through Snape’s door…

Harry bowed his head. This had gone too far. He had tried to balance Snape’s free will and the free wills of the werewolves, and had ended up giving too much free rein to Snape’s.

Snape wasn’t healing. Harry bore the onus of having waited so long to try and heal him. He looked up into Snape’s eyes, and said, “I’m sending you away. To Hogwarts, in fact. I notice that you haven’t given Headmistress McGonagall your resignation, so you still plan to teach Potions and act as the Head of Slytherin House. That’s fine. But you’ll have to spend the last few days before the start of term preparing at the school itself.”

Snape said nothing. Harry had expected that. Snape had said nothing for too long. *Perhaps I should have left him in the Sanctuary*, Harry thought, *or denied his request to come with me in the first place. But that would have stepped on his free will, too. These are the costs of being vates.*

“I can’t force you to leave,” said Harry. “I know that. And I can’t just leave you to hurt, for both your sake and others’. What happened to Camellia could happen to someone else at Hogwarts.”

Snape finally spoke, his words glistening dark as pitch. “Did you know that she was the werewolf who attacked me, held me, and threatened to infect me, that day by the lake?”

Harry blinked. “No. I didn’t recognize her.”

“She was.” Snape’s voice held only a little of what Harry knew must be a rushing torrent of hatred.

“Did she threaten to infect you now?” Harry asked, making sure to keep his voice calm and toneless.

Snape looked away from him.

“I thought not,” Harry said. “You’re going, sir. And I’ll send someone with you to help you and make sure that you don’t curse anyone else.” He nodded to the corner, and Joseph stepped around it, his eyes fearless and patient and fixed on Snape.

“Regardless, you are not welcome in this house. You used magic against someone under my protection.”

“I never swore the oaths of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow,” Snape snarled.
“And because of that, you think I’ll allow you to curse anyone you want?” Harry narrowed his eyes, and let Snape catch a glimpse of his own anger. “No. You’ve stepped too far. I’ve tried to help. You’ve slapped my hand away, except for short periods that I hoped might be signs of healing, or balancing. I can’t help you. I know that, I’ve tried, and I’ve failed. I’m exhausted. If you really wanted to fester in your own bitterness, I would have been content to let you do it, because that only hurts you and me, but not this. Not this,” he repeated, because now Snape was staring at him as if he didn’t understand.

“You cannot—” he began.

“He can,” said Joseph, and his voice was merciless. “You haven’t been acting like a guardian towards him lately. He’s been playing the role of parent to you, and you’ve reacted, at best, like a sulky child. But sulky children don’t nearly kill other people because of insults.” Harry was glad that Joseph wasn’t talking to him like that; he’d never heard anyone, even Snape himself, muster so scathing a tone of disappointment. “Come with me, now.”

He reached out and clasped Snape’s arm firmly, while Snape was still too astonished to protest. The Portkey he held in his other hand activated then, and the swirl of colors caught them up and washed them away. Harry closed his eyes. He’d obtained the Portkey from McGonagall while he was at Hogwarts. Harry would send Peter later with Snape’s Potions equipment, most of which was too heavy for an owl to fly.

He hadn’t realized, when this started, how much faith it was going to take him. He had trusted Snape, and too much. Now he had to trust that what he was doing was for the best, that what actually mattered was giving Snape another chance to prove himself while making sure he couldn’t hurt others.

This is probably why Willoughby and other people want to bring me to trial. They don’t trust me any more, and why should they?

Harry straightened with a shake of his head. That was done. He would go and speak with the pack now, and make it clear that he took his responsibility as their alpha seriously.

He loved Snape, but he couldn’t permit him to lash out cursing werewolves left and right, any more than he could let Draco blindly hurt Connor.

Or vice versa. I’ve made two mistakes now, going along with that prank and letting Snape stay here without a check on his animosity for so long, and I’m only lucky the consequences haven’t been more devastating.

What do I do?

Watch out, of course. And try not to make any more.

******

Minerva was prepared for it when Severus and his Seer appeared in her office. If she had not been prepared for it, she would not have given Harry that Portkey in the first place. As it was, she sat primly behind her desk, hands folded. She had already been to see the burned young werewolf in the hospital wing, and the sight had filled her with a rage that she had not felt against Severus in all the years they had been colleagues.

May I remind him of the teacher he faced during his years as a student here. Perhaps that will get through to him where nothing else will.

The Portkey spun the two figures out in a whirl of colors in even less time than Harry had told her it would probably take. Severus was staggering, as he obviously hadn’t expected to come this way, and he pulled away from the other man in a moment, his wand raised high, a curse on his lips—

Minerva raised an eyebrow. The wards around the school, back under her control after the tearing down and rebuilding Harry had helped her with in the spring, snapped taut, and all Dark Arts magic in the room abruptly ceased to function. That affected no one but Severus, of course. His curse failed, and for a moment he stared at his wand as if it had betrayed him.

“That is enough,” said Minerva, making sure to keep her voice smooth and cold, the way the lake froze in winter. “Severus.”

Severus turned and looked at her, but said nothing. Minerva understood his glare, well enough not to wither under it. Severus was a frightened boy in one part of himself, and someone had dug up that part and put it on display.
“My name is Joseph,” said his Seer, bowing and drawing Minerva’s attention. His face was the calmest she’d ever seen, though a hint of frustration appeared when he looked at Severus. “I’ll be staying in the dungeons to help the Potions Master heal. I hope that you don’t mind.”

“I wouldn’t have agreed to accept him back without your company,” said Minerva crisply, and that, at least, made Severus pay attention to her.

“Minerva,” he whispered.

“I would have contacted Professor Slughorn and told him that I needed him to return,” Minerva said. “It’s true, Severus,” she added, as the betrayed look on his face grew further. “I saw the young woman you cursed. She’ll be lucky if she manages to grow any hair on her face again. What is the matter with you, that you would use _Ardesco_ on someone outside of battle?” Her own frustration and fear bled through in her voice. She could see how badly Severus needed the sanctuary of Hogwarts, the work he was used to doing, the protection of people who understood him, but Remus Lupin could be argued to need the same things. Minerva had sent him away without hesitation when it became obvious that Remus was a danger to the children she had sworn to protect. If it came to it, she would do the same thing to Severus. She would not play favorites in this, and though Severus might tell himself so, it had nothing to do with Slytherin and Gryffindor.

“She insulted me,” said Severus at last, every line in his body tight with rage.

“And you replied with a curse instead of that cutting tongue of yours?” Minerva made every line in her own face tight with disapproval. She was thinking of the boy Severus had been, caught in a spiraling circle of hatred with the Marauders, and how it seemed that he had now turned outward and wielded that hatred upon others. The image of the burned woman in the hospital wing vied with the image of young Severus in her mind’s eye. She had failed him, she could admit that—she felt she had failed every student who had gone to Voldemort—but she could not stand aside because of that and allow him to visit the consequences of her failure on others. “I do not believe you could think of no insults equal to what she had done.”

“I will not—”

“You _will_,” Minerva told him. “These are the conditions of your employment here at Hogwarts, Severus. I am making Filius Deputy Headmaster. I am going to inquire personally after your talks with Joseph. And if you curse any of your students, even with something so mild as boils, I will sack you.”

Severus said nothing. Minerva recognized the mask he’d bolted over his face now. She had seen it too many times in the years when Albus sat in her place, and she felt the familiar frustration sweeping over her. The temptation to back off and leave him to stew in his own bitterness was strong.

Save that, now, she was the one in the position of protecting the students from him, not Albus. And she did not have the hold over him that Albus had. She had to make sure that he understood her, and if he could not accept the terms, then she would sack him now.

“Well,” Severus said. His voice had become its bored, mocking drawl again. “I accept, Headmistress. Now, if you will excuse me, I will scuttle back into my dungeons, where I belong.” He bowed and strode quickly for the door.

Joseph followed him. Minerva frowned, but he turned, gave her a reassuring nod, and kept on following Snape.

If he _can_ see his soul, and still wants to help him, then I suppose that there is hope, Minerva thought, and rubbed her brow, sighing.

Then she turned back to testing the wards. Contrary to what Severus might think, her tasks did not all revolve around tormenting him.

******

Harry came down to breakfast the morning after the first full moon night of August feeling hopeful. His pack had stayed in the Black houses during their change, all given Wolfsbane, most sleeping beyond locked doors. Camellia had returned to them, healed of her burns by Madam Pomfrey’s skill, and if she had demanded that Harry stay with her when she became a werewolf, well, she had the right to demand that. Harry had found some moments of surreal comfort in pacing up and down the halls of Cobley-by-the-Sea with a huge dark werewolf at his side, and even in watching the hippocampi with her.

Those allies of his he’d delegated to watch the werewolf packs in London—Honoria, Ignifer, Narcissa, Tybalt, and John—had
contacted him near dawn with reports of success. No Department hunters had come after the packs there. Harry knew there might be reports of new hunts in the *Daily Prophet*, but he was thinking there probably wouldn’t be. Most other werewolves in Britain didn’t live in packs, but as scattered individuals, and the majority of them had refused the collars and identification papers. The hunters would have to stumble on one by sheer good luck.

He picked up the *Prophet*, glanced at the first page, and had his hope destroyed by the headline.

**DEADLY WEREWOLF MURDER**

Harry took a deep breath, and read.

*Members of the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts are recovering this morning after a deadly attack on their headquarters last night by a werewolf.*

“He was only one, but he was a monster,” said one hunter, Gerald Darkling, 53. “He had white fur, and he moved like a lightning bolt, and none of our spells could affect him, even when they hit him. He bit anyone who got in the way, but he tore Felicia apart. What’s left of her doesn’t look human."

*Felicia was Felicia Joyborn, one of three Department hunters who killed two werewolves last month...*

Harry closed his eyes. That would have told him, even if the description of the werewolf hadn’t, what had happened. Loki had taken vengeance on one of the murderers of his mate.

Harry rubbed his forehead tiredly. He’d given warning about Loki’s possible future attacks in the interview he’d granted Skeeter, in the letters he’d posted to Scrimgeour—which he now knew had never reached their destinations—and in a few messages he’d tried having Fred and George pass to Amelia Bones for him, since he doubted she would listen to what he had to say.

And it hadn’t worked.

Harry could see the path stretching ahead. The papers had been full of the chatter about the Grand Unified Theory in the past few days, but this would bring the werewolf issue back into focus. The Department had been ravaged, one of their members murdered and others made into werewolves. The outcry against the packs would rise again, especially once someone figured out who the attacker must have been. The Unspeakables would be able to push through, with much less resistance, laws that made the collaring and identifying of werewolves mandatory. Harry would have to work hard to disassociate the packs he was protecting from this madness, if anyone would believe him in any case.

All for Loki’s vengeance.

*This is why I hate revenge, Harry thought dully. Because it never affects only those people it’s supposed to affect. It splashes more widely, and it makes one person’s rage more important than the free wills of all the rest.*

He took a deep breath and stood. He had a pack to reassure. He had speeches to prepare, since some of the reporters would want to talk to him, and Hornblower would probably contact him about an article for the *Vox Populi*.

And he had Department hunters to offer support to—both the newly-made werewolves, and those two hunters left who were now in danger from Loki’s teeth. Politics did make for strange bedfellows, indeed.

*And who said this would be easy?*

*~*~*~*~*~

**Intermission: The Initiation**

Snape wondered that no one in the building they were about to attack could feel the power lapping around him, Malfoy, and Rosier in black, quiet waves. Perhaps they simply accepted the Dark Lord’s magic as part of the natural power of the night; it was the autumn equinox, the old holiday of Mabon, when the light and darkness were of equal lengths.

*The pause before the night grows longer,* Snape’s father had once called it. Snape had stared at him in astonishment. Tobias could only have learned that from his wife, and he had said it long after he stopped communicating with Eileen in anything more than grunts. But he had turned away when his son tried to speak to him about it, and never said it again.
It was, though. Snape could feel the power of the night on the wind that swept over them where they crouched in a low, scrubby field of trampled grass. Cold dryness filled his mouth. Overhead, clouds tattered across the moon, which had just begun to dwindle. The stars seemed smaller than normal, and impossibly far away.

Snape shook his head slightly. Whatever concealing spell the Dark Lord was using, it still seemed strange to him the Light wizards could not sense how their lives were about to end.

“It is time.”

Malfoy said that as he rose to his feet. He carried his wand out already, and the moonlight let Snape see his faint smile as he held it up. Beside him, Rosier laughed, but Rosier was always laughing. Snape drew his own wand, but didn’t raise it as yet. The point of this raid, for him, was to undergo his initiation into the Death Eaters. That meant he had a specific kill to make, in a specific way. No blindingly striking out, for him.

A low cry drifted up to them, a sound like a dying deer might make.

“Now,” said Malfoy, in an exultant voice as soft as the cry, and then aimed his wand at the house. “Cremo!”

The house’s roof exploded into fire. Snape could hear the screams of the children inside, and knew a moment’s wild contempt. Observations had indicated those children were at least seven and nine years old, and they were both magical. They should have known how to defend themselves by then. That they did not was pathetic. That their guardians had not taught them to expect something like this, when they were in the middle of a war, was beyond scorn.

The house’s door tore open, and a wizard in a huge, floppy robe ran out, his wand aimed at the flames. He didn’t even glance at the Death Eaters. Snape wondered, with weary incredulity, if he actually thought chance had started the fire, when the Dark Lord’s people were everywhere hunting Mudbloods and the Light wizards who sought to protect them.

“This one’s mine,” said Rosier. “Glubo!”

The curse manifested as a stream of black fire that Snape could barely see, which struck the wizard full-on in the back as he tried to deal with Malfoy’s conflagration. He staggered as if under a physical blow, then let out a wail of astonished pain. The robe flew aside as his skin began to peel from his body, strips falling from the spine, unwinding from his neck, yanking like pared apple skin from his legs. Snape watched the flesh revealed without flinching. He had charred out the part of himself that should be horrified by such things, he thought. Or the Marauders had done it for him.

“As the poet says,” breathed Rosier. “I pray thee sigh not, speak not, draw not breath; let life burn down, and dream it is not death.” His laughter returned then, sharp and high. “Except that it is. It always is.”

“Howard!” cried someone inside the house, and then out came a witch with long, pale hair. A sudden flash of light from the fire revealed that she bore the yellow eyes of a pureblood Light family.

Rosier tilted his head at Snape. “That one’s yours,” he said. “I prefer them younger.” He glided forward, aiming for the house where the Mudblood children lay. He easily avoided the charge of the red-haired wizard who sprang out, and who soon saw Malfoy anyway and ran forward with a shout. Snape concealed a smirk as he caught a brief glimpse of Malfoy’s face. Lucius had not known that Gideon Prewett was here, and the chances that he would be able to defeat him all by himself were extremely small.

And then Snape was alone with his victim. A Vance, he knew that, but he could not remember her first name.

She stared at him, one hand scrambling for her wand, caught between her terror for the wizard Rosier had flayed and her terror of him and the shock of the attack and the horror of it all. Snape held her eyes, and did not look away as he raised his own wand.

Every Death Eater initiation was different. For some, Lord Voldemort would require that they did something they personally found repugnant, such as killing a child, to show their dedication to his cause. For others, they had to use a bloody, torturous spell, rather than the painless Killing Curse. And for still others, the test was a test of emotion.

The Dark Lord had told Snape to commit a murder in a certain frame of mind. Then the Lord would read his mind when he came back to the Death Eaters and learn if he had actually done as he had been instructed.

Snape had never murdered before. He wondered, distantly, if he should have felt some hesitation. Gryffindors would have said yes. Even some of his fellow Slytherins would have said so. They bragged about practicing Crucio, but they would have gone
faint and sick if they had seen it used on a human being, rather than the rats and spiders they found to practice with.

But none of them knew the lessons that Snape’s mother had already taught him by the time he entered Hogwarts at eleven. *The Dark Arts take a steady hand and a clear mind. And, above all, you must not care that much.*

Snape met the witch’s eyes, and said, “*Ardesco.*”

The flames exploded from within the Vance woman’s body just as she readied her wand. She screamed and screamed as her eyeballs blazed from behind with the fire, as her hair caught flame from underneath, as her bones were briefly outlined against her skin with the sheer intensity of it. Usually, that curse took some time to kill, giving the victim a chance to counteract it, but Snape had cast with considerable power and care. She died, but the death was concentrated into a few seconds of endless pain.

He watched, and he noticed the way that her skin smelled as she fell, and the blackened smears her crisped hair cast on the grass. Then he turned and walked to the house. Behind him, Malfoy was battling more and more fiercely with Prewett, but that was to be expected. Snape was not blind, even if the others were, to the consequences of the Dark Lord sending Malfoy to a house where that wizard lurked. Malfoy had failed to defeat him time and again, and the Dark Lord wanted only the strongest to serve him.

He peered into the house, and saw that it was done, the Mudblood children dismembered. Rosier sat in the middle of one bed, tracing a hand in the liquids. He was chewing on something. Snape thought it was a heel, with a large strip of flesh still attached. He glanced up at Snape, blinked, and swallowed.

“Any trouble?” he asked.

Snape smirked. “Malfoy is having some trouble with one of the Prewett twins,” he said.

“Let him have trouble,” said Rosier comfortably. “They won’t kill each other.” He lay back and closed his eyes in bliss as the blood crept under his robes. Snape wrinkled his nose. He could not imagine *bathing* in the liquid; it would dry into a sticky mess that would prove hard to clean off later. But Rosier evidently enjoyed it.

There were few Death Eaters like Rosier, and Snape was just as glad.

He lifted his head as he felt the alteration in the night around them. It was not merely the cessation of curses from outside, which indicated Prewett had once again escaped. It was the arrival of that deep, earthy power that he had felt around him when Malfoy had taken him to meet his Lord. He turned to the door and fell on one knee moments before the night parted to reveal Lord Voldemort.

Rosier let out a small, happy sound. “I would kneel, my lord,” he said, “but this bed is so warm.”

Voldemort laughed, a hissing sound that seemed to come from the back of the house more than from in front of them. “I will grant you that concession, Evan,” he said. “And Severus.”

Snape lifted his head and met the Dark Lord’s eyes. He felt the Legilimency sweep into his mind, a casual scything, looking for the emotions he had felt when he killed the Vance witch.

He showed his Lord everything, of course. He had no reason not to. It was true. He had joined the Death Eaters to have revenge on his enemies, but he would not run into battle madly shouting, a liability to his Lord’s larger cause. His rage was not even smoldering embers. What was left was the cold ashes of bitterness, and the wormwood satisfaction of inflicting losses, of any kind, on the hypocrites and liars and braggart children of the Light.

Snape had changed from even as much as a month ago, when he had first met the Dark Lord. He had had a chance to walk among and work with the other Death Eaters, and he had seen what they were. He knew he was beyond them, save perhaps the mad Rosier, who genuinely did enjoy what he did. He was not *touched* by what he did. He had no personal rivalries as Malfoy did with the Weasleys, no desire to seek out the Marauders before anyone else. What he had was the ability to do anything, as long as it *hurt* the Light.

Voldemort was smiling, he realized when he looked up. “Very good,” said the Dark Lord, softly, and then lifted his wand, yew body and phoenix feather core, symbols of resurrection. “Bare your left arm.”

Snape did as he was told, never taking his eyes from his Lord’s. The smile might have a touch of genuine amusement to it now, Snape thought. That did not matter. He knew exactly what he was here for, and what the Dark Lord could give him.
“Severus Snape,” said Voldemort, “wizard, son of Eileen Prince, do you consent to serve me all the days of your life?”

“I do,” said Snape. He could accept a lifetime of torturing and killing and hurting those who hurt him, he thought. Easily. The satisfaction was worth it.

“And do you consent to be loyal to me, putting my goals and not your own first, for as long as you shall live and carry the Dark Mark?”

“I do.” Snape saw a gleam far back in Voldemort’s deep eyes, and knew he was signing his freedom away. He did not care. Freedom had never brought him revenge.

“Do you consent to wear my Mark upon your skin, and take no steps to remove or alter it?”

“I do.”

“Morsmordre!”

And the Dark Mark formed on his skin.

Snape had never felt any pain like this pain. *Crucio* did not compare. Knives slashed his skin open, his flesh, his bone, and imprinted the Dark Mark deep, deep, deep, into the core of his being.

Against the temptation to flinch, however, Snape brought up all the memories of the times that his mother had told him what his blood meant, all the times he had succeeded in class only to be passed over in favor of those who had higher status or looked better, all the times he had learned that his magic, his very *power*, meant nothing, that he was nothing, that he was a scrap of being.

He countered pain with pain, and he did not flinch, and he did not scream.

He looked up, and Voldemort was smiling at him. “Our next attack shall be on a family the old fool, Albus Dumbledore, would give much to defend,” he said softly.

And Snape felt something like peace.

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**Interlude: The Liberator’s Third Letter**

**August 27th, 1996**

**Dear Minister Scrimgeour:**

You may be wondering why you have not heard from me in some time. For that, I can only apologize. My family has grown increasingly paranoid over recent events. They seem to fear that the Light will lose its prominence in our world to Dark purebloods. And anyone could be a traitor selling out to the Dark, particularly their youngest daughter, who has not adopted their attitudes towards the Light and the Order of the Phoenix with as much enthusiasm as the rest of her family. So they have kept a closer watch on me, and sometimes searched my rooms for ink and parchment. My will to aid you remains strong, but the means of doing so have been almost taken from me.

I have more names for you:

- Paul Fredericks. You know him as a Granian breeder, I’m sure, and associated with Shield of the Granian. It’s true that his economic interests occupy him more than anything else, but he thinks, and is probably right, that the Light will favor his interests more than the Dark. He has been in contact with Order of the Phoenix members whom Hestia Jones contacted. So I overheard my mother saying to my father.

- Keep a close eye on Pharos Starrise. It’s true that he’s not the power his uncle was, but my father has mentioned him, and thinks that very weakness is what might make him turn to the Light in different ways than his uncle did. If his name has been brought up in my hearing, I am sure that it can mean nothing good.

- I do have more information on Falco Parkinson for you. He walks the “paths” that Lord-level wizards are sometimes tempted by.
These paths lead through Light and Dark, and both of them grant him powers in the hopes of seducing him to their sides. In particular, I have found that he can bend time. This is not exactly what a Time-Turner does; he cannot go back into the past, and he does not have to take a care with meeting himself. What it allows him to do is get from one time to another without simply waiting through the hours or days in between. He vanishes from one and then appears in another—rather like a prolonged Apparition. He uses it mainly to hide from his enemies, as they cannot find him in the wizarding world while he bends time. However, from what my parents have said, this power is not perfect. He may look for a Time-Turner or other artifact, such as one in the Department of Mysteries, to enhance it. Please watch for this, and guard your artifacts accordingly.

It has taken me five days to write all this information down, taking advantage of rare moments when I am alone, which is why the date is written last next to my signature. I sincerely hope that my owl finds you well, Minister Scrimgeour. You are the best hope of the Light, as I know that the yates cannot Declare, and Falco Parkinson is Light in name only. Like Dumbledore, he will use any means to secure his ends. And the Order of the Phoenix is022(137,226),(867,256)(137,224),(867,258)(137,223),(867,257)(137,222),(867,259) more aimed at destroying the man who destroyed their leader, or serving Parkinson, than in carrying the fight against the Dark Lord forward.

I work for freedom.

Yours,
The Liberator.

* * * * *

Chapter Nineteen: A Most Tumultuous First Day

Refusing people seems to have become a regular feature of my life, Harry thought. “No,” he said aloud.

Camellia frowned and let one hand smooth across her head. She would probably regrow the hair that had burned in Snape’s Ardesco at some point in the future, but Madam Pomfrey hadn’t managed to save it. “It’s true that we wouldn’t have much to do in the school,” she said, “but it would be a comfort for some of us to be close to our alpha. And—”

“There are many reasons I’d like you to stay away from Hogwarts,” said Harry. “Most are practical. There are parents who won’t like you so near their children. You won’t have much to do there. Where you would stay becomes a problem. What happens if someone offends you near the full moon becomes a problem.” Camellia flushed. Harry clenched his hand into a fist briefly, wishing that either Camellia or Snape would tell him what they’d said to each other. So far, though, Snape had refused with his silence and Camellia had simply refused. I cannot force it from them. “And what you would do if someone threatened me becomes a problem.”

Camellia blinked. “It does?”

“Of course it does,” said Harry. “The majority of the people who might threaten me at Hogwarts are children, Camellia. They do it because of a sudden flash of temper or because I’ve hurt a member of their family, not because they’re Death Eaters.” He resolutely pushed away the memory of those Death Eaters who had turned out to be present in Hogwarts last year. “They don’t deserve the pack to pile snarling on them for that.”

“You need someone to protect you,” Camellia said.

“I’ll have that,” Harry said. “Peter will be there. Henrietta Bulstrode, whom I believe you mentioned being impressed with, will be there. McGonagall will be there, and while she can’t protect me at the expense of other students, she won’t let them hurt me just for amusement, either.” He almost said Snape would be there, but he wasn’t sure how much he wanted Snape to think about defending him. Better for him to concentrate on his healing. “Draco will be there, and he keeps a closer eye on me than anyone else. And Connor will be there. He’s rash, but he’s got much better at dueling now, and he’s my brother.”

For a moment, Camellia paced in a circle. Harry folded his arms. They were in the middle of the large room where the pack liked to sleep all together in a pile, but it was empty now. Harry supposed the others had wanted to leave him and Camellia some privacy. That wouldn’t stop them from demanding to know what he had said when Camellia left the room, of course.

“Take a few from the pack with you,” Camellia murmured, pleading. “Including me. And Trumpetflower. She’s a pureblood witch. She could help you with your alliances. She knows things about wizarding society that I never will.”

Harry let out a long breath, doing his best not to make it sound like a sigh. “I’m sorry. No. I’ve thought about this. If the werewolf situation wasn’t so delicate right now, and if I thought I was in serious threat of bodily harm at Hogwarts, then yes, I might consider it. But not now.”
Camellia dropped to a knee abruptly and bowed her head. Harry jumped and glanced over his shoulder, wondering if someone else had come in, but the study door was still firmly closed.

When he turned back, Camellia murmured, “Loki never—separated from us for as long a period as you plan on. He understood the closeness of pack to alpha, and why we need it. Please, I beg you, Wild, do as he did.”

“Choose another alpha?” Harry asked.

Camellia jerked her head up, eyes frantic. “Of course not! Stay here with us, or allow us to follow you where you go.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry said softly. “I am willing to pass on the position of responsibility, but not to put you in danger, as you would be if you went out in public right now—especially as Loki’s former pack.” His letters and articles had not done the good Harry hoped they might. The Prophet exploded with more and more reports of fear each day, wondering if werewolves were conspiring to murder the whole of the Ministry and speculating that each unusual magical crime was the work of “werewolf anarchists.” The full moon had passed, but the hysteria had not died out. Harry doubted it would any time soon.

“Most alphas would not do this,” Camellia said, rocking back on her heels and staring at him.

“I know,” said Harry. “Which might make me a good alpha for the summer, but not otherwise. But we should discuss this with the rest of the pack, Camellia. Allow them to make the decision whether they want me to remain in this position, or choose someone else.”

Camellia bit her lip until a small trickle of blood ran down her chin. “There is no simply yielding to what we want, is there?” she asked.

Harry shook his head. “I used to do that,” he said. “I’ve even done it recently. But not only is it impossible now with so many conflicting claims on me, it’s insulting. Who am I to think that someone else can’t function without my presence? Who am I to try to just offer comfort when comfort might not be what that other person wants?” He caught Camellia’s eye. “If someone refuses to come to me and say what I can do to aid the festering wrong in her soul, then who am I to presume that I know what that wrong is and how to deal with it?”

Camellia’s face flushed utterly red. She said, “There are—links that can be made even without your being a werewolf, Wild. A share in the packmind, for example. Then you could know what we think without our having to speak it aloud.”

“I’ve read about that,” said Harry. And he had, as he spent whatever free time he had in the last few days researching on the werewolf cure potion. “It means that I would consider the pack’s priorities mine. Doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Camellia reluctantly. “Its purpose is to drown insecurities and help new werewolves feel welcome among their peers.”

Harry reached down and squeezed her shoulder. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I can’t. I can try to give you what you need, but I can’t be just your alpha.”

Camellia muttered something, but then stood, padding across the room to open the study door and summon the rest of the pack. Harry braced himself. He knew whom he would choose as alpha if the pack wanted a new one, but he had the sinking sensation that they would not.

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Draco winced as the slam of a trunk lid echoed down the hall. Harry had been packed before last night, and Draco had carefully tucked his clothing and his textbooks away this morning. That left only one candidate who would have to make so much noise.

Draco slid out through the door of his and Harry’s room and made his way towards Potter’s. It stood half-open, so, satisfyingly, Draco was able to slide around it and into the room before Harry’s brother noticed him. When he caught a glimpse of Draco from the corner of his eye, he yelped and stumbled over his feet, sitting down hard on his arse.

Draco fought to keep from laughing. In the end, he found that letting a small smirk cross his face got his point across so much more efficiently.

“Prat,” Potter hissed at him, standing up. “What do you want?”
“I thought a herd of rampaging hippogriffs had broken into the house, and I was coming to defend Harry’s property,” Draco said lazily. His hand dropped to rest on his wand. “I see that wasn’t necessary.” He eyed Potter’s trunks. One was shut, but barely so; the locking spell on it might falter at any moment. The other still stood open, and despite being filled with many shrunken packages, was near to overflowing. “Honestly, Potter, couldn’t you pack with a bit more class?”

Potter twisted his head as if he intended to gnaw at himself like a dog with fleas. Draco did so hope that was his Animagus form; it would be amusing. “Am I disturbing your delicate sensibilities, Malfoy?” he asked. “Of course, that wouldn’t be hard to do given that I’m a halfblood, would it?”

Draco felt most of the amusement leave him in a moment. He narrowed his eyes. Infuriatingly, this just made Potter smirk. “I forgot that just being in the same house with someone like me made you disgusted,” he mocked. Draco said nothing, but the effort it took him to do was enormous. “I forgot that you hate people for who their ancestors are, until, of course, you have to apply that hatred to yourself. Then you just insist the shagging didn’t happen. Too late this time, I think. What with it splashed all over the front page of the newspaper—”

“Shut up,” said Draco, and the effort it took him to do that instead of cast a curse was almost inhuman.

Potter rolled his eyes. “When you wake up to reality, Malfoy.” He took a step forward. Draco wondered if this combination of rage and frustration was what Snape had felt before he cast Ardesco at the werewolf. “It’s simple, really. You can’t go on singing about your pureblood superiority the way you used to do without being a hypocrite. What’s so hard to understand? Would you rather go on being a hypocrite? Or would you rather wake up and admit what the rest of us have known for two years—that you love someone who’s part of that world you hate so much, so singing about pureblood superiority is just a bit of a conflict of interest? Doesn’t it comfort you, your newfound heritage? It makes you more like Harry, after all, and that was what I thought you wanted.”

Draco breathed through his nose, fighting away the temptation to leap out of his body and take possession of Potter’s. Those words distracted him too much, bringing up memories of fourth year when he was desperate enough to risk his life on the chance that he could become magically equal to Harry, and made it the more likely that he would hurt the git if he controlled him now.

Potter took another step, and then his eyes went over Draco’s head. Draco knew who was standing in the doorway, even before he smelled the scent of roses. This smelled like rose petals, actually, brewing in a potion. Draco congratulated himself for noting that subtle difference. That meant that Harry was quietly angry, and incredibly disgusted.

“That will be enough, Connor,” said Harry. “Enough. Merlin. Do you use a Time-Turner that replaces you with your third-year self on occasion?”

Potter frowned, then swallowed, obviously dealing with painful memories of his own. “It was just insults,” he said. “Not curses.”

Harry came forward to stand next to Draco, and slip an arm around his waist. Draco again didn’t have to say anything. He just raised his eyebrows. Potter flushed to the roots of his hair.

“Incredibly vicious insults, aimed to hurt,” said Harry. “Aimed to push Draco over the border into striking at you, I should think. And that’s just stupid, Connor. I might end up angry with Draco, but you’d also be hurt, and I don’t think Draco would be as reluctant to tell me the truth about what happened as Snape was.”

He glanced at Draco from the corner of his eye for confirmation, and Draco shook his head. Harry let out a sighing little breath, and then turned a look on Potter that made Draco chuckle. Potter glared. Harry didn’t appear to have heard his laughter at all.

“And then I’d be angry with you.” Harry’s voice had dropped lower. “The way I am right now, as a matter of fact. This kind of stupidity ought not to happen even if you didn’t have Snape and Camellia’s example right in front of you. That you do makes it inexcusable.”

“I’m sorry, Harry.” Potter’s eyes had lowered, and his face burned with such vivid color now that Draco wished Weasley was standing in the same room for comparison’s sake. He’d always thought Weasley was the reddest blusher he’d ever seen, but now he wasn’t sure. “But he did start it. He came into my room and asked me why I couldn’t pack more quietly, and I said—”

“I heard what you said,” Harry interrupted. “And the fact remains that you went too far, Connor. And it was calculated, not something you did innocently. I hate that. I’m not in the mood to talk to you much right now.”

“I’m sorry—”
“Apologize to Draco, not me.”

Potter glanced away. Draco looked at Harry in time to see his mouth tighten.

“I thought not,” said Harry. “You really didn’t care about hurting him.” He let out a few controlled breaths, then said, “I thought the other things you did, the prank and the teasing the day the Grand Unified Theory was published, were either to try and make me have fun, or innocent, the mistakes of a child. Now I’m not so sure about that.”

“Harry, I’m sorry, I said that—“

“And not to the right person.” Harry shook his head, then turned away, speaking to Draco as if Potter had ceased to exist. “Are you all packed? I think we should leave for the station in fifteen minutes at the most. Granted, it won’t take us a lot of time to walk from the Floo connection, but—“

Draco moved gracefully along at Harry’s side, this time ignoring the temptation to glance back at Potter. Self-control made winning an argument so much more fun. His glee was the sweeter when he didn’t show it.

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Harry slipped the school robe over his head, grateful for the fact that the ride on the Hogwarts Express—the first one he’d taken since his first year—had been quiet. He doubted that would continue once he arrived at the school, but a period of time in which he could just talk to Draco, without someone appearing to demand his help or insult his boyfriend, was priceless.

He swallowed back anger at Connor. It was no use yelling. That wouldn’t work. Lashing out with his magic was even less productive. Silent treatment and cold waiting worked best with Connor, giving him nothing to latch onto so that he could convince himself he was the poorly treated one—and giving his temper time to cool down, so he could actually think.

Harry would rather the whole insulting session this morning hadn’t happened, of course. He had listened in growing disbelief; he had thought his brother more mature than that. And now it turned out he wasn’t, and it had forced Harry to evaluate several things about the last few weeks that he had thought were innocent.

He was not pleased.

To keep himself from sliding back into brooding, he laughed wryly and shook his head. Simultaneous living. That’s what has to happen. I’ll have to change my mind all the time in the process of living. I keep saying that to people. It just struck a little closer to home this time than normal.

A swift movement outside the window caught his attention. Draco had gone to the loo, so Harry was alone in their compartment. He frowned and turned, keeping his body back from the window even as he craned his neck to look. Old lessons drummed in his head. If you’re standing behind glass when it shatters, you’ll take glass in the face, and won’t be able to fight.

He could imagine that it was his own voice and not Lily’s sometimes, if he concentrated.

The large, graceful shape that curvetted past the window, moving incredibly fast, couldn’t be imagined to be anything other than what it was. A Granian, Harry thought. The swiftest of the flying horses, and probably the most beautiful; this one was dapple gray.

Harry remembered the symbol carved on the wooden coins that the attackers in the Ministry had thrown at him and Draco, and prepared a Protego to shield himself against flying glass. A hoof could cave in the window quite easily.

The Granian didn’t kick it in, however. It flew past again, or perhaps that was a different one. Harry could make out a rider in robes on its back, but not much else, given its speed. The rider had his hood pulled over his face, anyway.

Harry narrowed his eyes. What in the world are they trying to accomplish? It’s not as if attacking me would do much good now, when they’ve forewarned me. And they can’t see much through the windows if it’s simply regular spying. Accompanying the train until it enters an ambush? Once again, they shouldn’t have shown themselves. What are they—

“Harry!”

Argutus settled like a warm loop around his head and shoulders. Harry put up his hand to stroke him, while watching as the same
Granian, or another, went past a third time. *No, definitely not spying, not when they don’t slow down enough to peer in the train.*

“No, definitely not spying, not when they don’t slow down enough to peer in the train.”

“There’s an omen!”

Harry glanced down at the shimmering coils wreathed around his neck, and caught his breath. Gray shapes moved above a long, dark one vaguely recognizable as the Hogwarts Express; the vision sharpened as he watched. In the midst of it was a crouching figure with white-blond hair.

And Harry remembered the angle of the wooden coins thrown during the attack in the Ministry, and understood what Shield of the Granian wanted.

*The coins came from the side. They could have thrown them more directly at me, if I’m really the one they wanted to hurt, or at Camellia and Rose, if they were the targets.*

*They were aiming for Draco. And swooping around up here keeps my attention away from what’s happening in the back of the train.*

Harry turned and held out his hand. The door of the compartment came flying open, and almost off its hinges. Harry ducked out and past the students who were traveling from one compartment to another as the Express slowed, or seeking a private place to change into school robes. He felt his elbows impact with ribs, and he stumbled on cloth, and there was indignant squealing from throats all around him.

*Shit. They’re going to keep me from getting to Draco in time,* Harry thought.

Then Argutus reared up on his shoulder, and gave a hiss that echoed up and down the train. The students nearest to Harry wasted no time plastering themselves against the walls. Harry ran up the corridor towards the back of the train. Over the clatter of the wheels on the track and the shrill whistle, he still thought he could hear a sharp, scraping sound—like the impact of hooves with metal.

A burly Gryffindor seventh-year loomed in front of him, the Head Boy badge gleaming on his chest. Harry had no time to stop and see who it was, and he didn’t care about the arm lifted to stop him. He simply dropped and rolled under it, then came back to his feet just beyond and pounded on.

A pale flash from the side, and then he heard a fired curse, followed by one of the more ordinary variety. Harry whipped himself around, feet skidding as he halted his momentum, and Argutus hissed in protest as his shoulder impacted hard with the wall.

Draco was crouching in an empty compartment, his wand lifted and still trembling with the aftermath of cast magic. He wore his school robes, tie, and the Prefect’s badge that had come to him since Blaise Zabini had left the school last year. A small hole had been stamped in the roof above him, and Draco had probably thrown his spell through that. Given the speed of the Granians, Harry wasn’t at all surprised that he’d missed.

“Draco!”

He turned and glanced at Harry, and at that moment something small fell through the hole, aiming straight at him. Harry caught a glimpse of glass, and all his senses trembled with ringing magic of the kind he had faced in the Ministry when the Unspeakables cast a similar globe at him.

He didn’t have much time to make a decision. He thrust out his hand and shouted, “*Accio globe!*”

The glass projectile changed direction in midair and flew at him. Harry ducked to avoid letting it touch his bare skin, and heard it hit the compartment door above him and shatter.

Whatever had been inside it fell on him. Harry twisted again, trying to make sure the brunt didn’t hit Argutus. He felt some kind of wet dust drape his face, and a bruising sensation grabbed his belly.

The sensation quickly grew worse, and Harry felt his head *roll* towards his belly, as if he were a carpet. He braced his own magic against it.

And felt, impossibly, his own magic drain away from him. He might as well have tried to grip running water.
“Harry!”

Draco could have been shouting for help, or shouting his name in distress. Harry didn’t know. What mattered was that he had to understand what was happening to him before he could stop it.

His magic continued to run away from him, contracting inside him. Harry closed his eyes and concentrated on his scar. No, Voldemort was not nearby, and he didn’t think any other *absorbere* existed in Britain right now. It wasn’t that.

Golden light filled his vision, and deafening phoenix song his ears. And then there was familiar pain in his head. *The phoenix web, Harry thought in incredulity. No. How is it returning? I didn’t hear anyone say the incantation, and it would explain why my magic is diminishing, but—* And then he realized his body felt strangely light, except for an unfamiliar weight at the end of his left wrist. Opening his eyes confirmed it. His limbs were smaller, and he had—

He had two hands again.

*They’re turning me younger. And putting the phoenix web back on me at the same time.*

*The dust in the globe!*

He lifted a frantic hand to wipe at his face, and then felt a tongue sweep past his fingers, picking it up. Argutus let out a surprised hiss a moment later, and his weight on Harry’s shoulders abruptly lessened, but he didn’t stop licking at the dust.

Draco was shouting somewhere in there too, and water struck Harry’s face, sluicing off some of the dust. Harry spat, in case it had got in his mouth, and rubbed his back and shoulders frantically against the wall. He couldn’t do anything with his magic, which kept slipping away from him when he reached it. He suspected that the changes the phoenix web had gone through when he was thirteen or twelve were so numerous that his magic couldn’t keep adjusting to them so fast, and couldn’t remain available to him.

Draco shouted again, and then Harry hissed as all the moisture vanished from his skin—the dust, his sweat, the slick wetness Argutus had left behind as he licked at him. His mouth hurt terribly, as dry as it was, but he had stopped changing. He had control of his magic again.

He opened the gulf of his *absorbere* ability as wide as it would go, and began to swallow the foreign magic of the dust that still lingered on him. It was an odd sensation, as if the snake he envisioned the magic-swallowing gift as were steadily lengthening. The magic gushed into him, and Harry felt his bones creak as he grew again. The phoenix web blew past his eyes in a confused flurry of light and song, and vanished.

And the hand he had resting on his left cheek vanished.

Harry grimaced, but didn’t allow himself to stop draining the magic until he was sure there was none of the dust left. Then he could open his eyes and nod to Draco, licking his lips to urge some saliva into his mouth.

“Clever, with the dehydration spell,” he murmured. “Thank you.”

Draco nodded, and turned around to stare at the hole in the ceiling of the compartment again. “What was that?” he demanded. “Why in the world were they attacking us like that?”

Harry shook his head, unable to talk more right now. He looked at Argutus. The Omen snake was smaller, but not as young as Harry had feared. He was darting his tongue out thoughtfully now.

“It tastes like mice,” he explained, when he caught Harry watching him.

Harry snorted in helpless laughter, even as he scanned Draco once more. “They didn’t hit you with anything?”

“No, only you.” Draco had put his wand away, but the hand he touched his face with shook. “Why did they do that?”

Harry waved his hand at the wall of the compartment. “*Speculum caelum,*” he whispered, and a small, transparent mirror appeared in his palm. Harry studied it closely. It showed the sky outside the Express, and while the sky gleamed with gray clouds, as was
usual this time of year in Scotland, he could see no sign of Granians.

“I suppose they attacked trying to deage you,” he said. “But they didn’t have any other weapons that would do it, and they didn’t
want to attack the train as a whole. They probably have some children on here themselves. When they realized the attack had
failed, they fled.”

“That was aimed at me?”

Harry looked up. “Of course it was,” he said. “So was the attack in the Ministry. They threw the coins from your side. I was near
enough that I could have been hurt, but you’re what they wanted.”

Draco’s mouth tightened. “Trying to cripple you?”

“I would assume so,” said Harry, “but assumptions are stupid at this point. It could also have been a strike at your father, or trying
to remove you from the game. If someone had heard rumors of your possession ability, for example, they might think you’re too
dangerous to live.”

Draco narrowed his eyes. “I used it on the battlefield with the Death Eaters,” he said. “And I told Scrimgeour about it.”

“I don’t want to think that the Minister told anyone,” said Harry. “But with the Unspeakables involved? That globe they flung was
an Unspeakable artifact. I think we can safely assume that. They could have read it out of Scrimgeour’s mind, or he might have
told them because he assumes he can trust them.” He hesitated, then added reluctantly, “Or perhaps they sensed you moving
through their minds that day I visited Scrimgeour with the Pensieve, and just waited until now to get their revenge.”

“They can’t have been responsible for that first attack, if that’s the case,” Draco reminded him.

“I know,” said Harry. “But I think this is an alliance between Shield of the Granian and the Unspeakables. The Unspeakables
would have used a more direct kind of attack if they were working on their own, after what happened at the Maenad Press.”

Draco nodded. “So we can’t be sure what they want, but we can be sure that they want to attack me as well as you.”

“That’s right.” Harry studied him again. Draco still remained unwounded, but the look in his eyes… Harry held out his arms.

Draco shook his head, but came over and embraced him. Argutus wriggled out of the way with a complaint about being
smothered. Harry focused his magic on the Omen snake for a moment. He could sense no adverse effects from the dust. Argutus
had grown younger again, smaller, about the size he’d been before the last time he shed his skin. But the dust didn’t appear to be a
poison.

_of course not, _Harry thought, remembering the facts Honoria had learned from Hornblower. _They seek to capture, not kill._

He gave a violent shiver and tightened his hold on Draco. Draco didn’t move, didn’t object, didn’t say anything, but Harry could
feel the tension in his muscles as he leaned his head on Harry’s shoulder.

_all they’ve done is earn themselves another enemy, _Harry thought, and used that idea to distract himself from thoughts of what
would have happened if Draco had died or been captured.

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Harry couldn’t help keeping an eye on the heavens as they climbed out of the carriage near the front doors of Hogwarts, but he
still saw nothing. It was evening, anyway, and the clouds were drawing in, spitting rain. _Not ideal Granian flying weather, but
then, the Express was hardly an ideal place for them to attack._

He stepped up to the front of the carriage and spent a moment touching the noses of the thestrals who drew it. The great horses
turned their heads and watched him. Stroking their fur left a slick of cool dampness on Harry’s skin, but he didn’t mind. It
grounded him, and made the thoughts chasing around his head settle.

“I have to go to the Headmistress before the Sorting Feast begins,” he explained, when he saw Draco watching him. “She needs to
know about the attack on the Express, and I don’t think it can wait until tomorrow.”

Draco nodded. “I’m coming with you.”
Harry relaxed. Stupid as it might be, he didn’t want Draco out of his sight right now.

He strode into Hogwarts, making for the Headmistress’s office, Draco keeping pace with him all the way. People called out his name, and Harry waved at them distractedly. He wanted to talk about multiple things with everyone around him, yes, but informing McGonagall was his priority for right now.

“Harry!”

That was Connor’s voice, coming from behind him. Harry’s back tightened, and he heard Draco make a noise like a tiger interrupted at dinner. But he kept walking, counting footsteps in his mind, and ducked away neatly just as Connor’s hand tried to clamp down on his shoulder blade.

“Where were you going so fast?” Connor demanded, sprinting around in front of him. His hazel eyes were too bright, his cheeks flushed with more than the effort of running. “What happened on the train?”

“You wanted to apologize,” Connor said. “And see if you were all right. And, Harry—“

Better late than never, Connor. Come with us or stay behind.” Harry turned intently towards the stairs. He didn’t look back to see if Connor was following or not. McGonagall might already be on her way down with the Sorting Hat, and he didn’t want to delay the Feast too long, either.

He met her on the stairs a few meters from her office. McGonagall wore slightly fancier robes than she had last year. Harry wondered if she were moving slowly into the role Dumbledore had occupied before he fell, then dismissed the notion. He had a story to tell first.

“Harry,” McGonagall said, frowning. “Mr. Malfoy. Mr. Potter.” From that last, Harry knew Connor must have followed them after all. “What happened?”

“An attack on the train,” said Harry, and saw her eyes darken. This was the Headmistress he remembered from the time Rovenan had used the Entrail-Expelling Curse on him last year. “Several Granian-riders cut a hole in the compartment where Draco changed his robes and then dropped an artifact at him. I’m sure the artifact came from the Department of Mysteries. It was a small globe filled with the magic of time, and when it shattered, it dropped a wet dust that succeeded in reversing time for me to the point where I was twelve or thirteen. By the time I fought free of it with Draco’s help, the Granians were gone.” With each word, it seemed, the Headmistress’s face grew grimmer, and Harry finished with, “I’m not sure if another attack like that will happen again. I did want to warn you.”

“You did the right thing, Mr. Pott—Harry,” said McGonagall, shaking her head. She had been one of those who had a hard time adapting when he renounced his last name, Harry thought, and the habit of four years was still difficult for her to break. “We will speak more of this later, when the Feast is done. There are things I have been meaning to discuss with you anyway.” She paused, studying him. “For now, I will say that I take your safety as seriously as I take the safety of any student here. I will not tolerate your enemies following you onto Hogwarts grounds in order to take revenge or pursue their political disagreements. I ask that you take reasonable precautions, and keep your sworn companions or others with you as much as possible.”

Harry nodded. Owen and Michael would be happy to take up the slack where they could, and he had no intention of doing without their guardianship, if only because it would also provide protection for Draco. “Thank you, Madam.”

McGonagall nodded, and then swept past them. She wasn’t quite as intimidating as Snape, Harry thought, but she looked regal.

He turned around, and Connor was staring at him. “All of that really happened?” he asked in a small voice.

“Yes,” Harry said. He wondered if he should refrain from saying anything else—he was still angry at Connor because of what had happened this morning—but decided that a few words would do him more good than silence right now. “I don’t appreciate threats to Draco,” he told Connor. “Of any kind.”

Connor flushed as he had that morning, and nodded, stepping out of the way. Harry paused, but he made no apology as he’d said he wanted to. Harry hissed between his teeth and headed back down the stairs.
Draco waited until they were away from Connor to speak, at least, which was an unanticipated courtesy. “I can defend myself, Harry. Does that mean I can hex him with your approval, if he threatens me again?”

Harry glanced at him sideways. “You’re more likely to get in trouble for it here,” he said. “House points taken, and all.”

“Mother taught me to recognize that,” Draco said, his face relaxing into a smile for some absurd reason. “It’s called ‘dodging the question,’ Harry.”

Harry sighed. “As you pointed out, you can defend yourself,” he said. “And I concede the point that Connor’s motives are not what I thought they were. On the other hand, think about the consequences of hexing anyone who annoys you, Draco. There are more Slytherin ways to go about things.”

Draco considered that as they passed into the Great Hall and headed for the Slytherin table; they were nearly the last to arrive, but Millicent had saved them places next to her. Just as they sat down, the smile returned, a near-smirk this time, blossoming across Draco’s face.

“Hmmm,” was the only thing he said.

Harry shook his head and turned his attention to the first of the first-years, sitting under the Hat. He couldn’t plan ahead for what might happen between Draco and Connor. That was insulting to them, too, at least as much as to imply that Draco couldn’t defend himself. He could only react as things happened, and hope they didn’t hurt each other too badly.

And that neither of them crosses the alliance oaths, and forces me to cast them out. Connor had sworn to the Alliance of Sun and Shadow the day after Harry brought him back from Lux Aeterna.

“SLYTHERIN!” the Hat shouted. The small, dark-haired girl whipped it from her head, beaming, and ran for their table.

Harry shouted a welcome as his contribution to the applause of his Housemates, and decided to think about nothing for a time but guessing where the first-years would go.

******

Minerva nodded as the last of the first-years went into Ravenclaw, and then stood. For a long moment, she scanned the Great Hall, letting her eyes rest on an anxious face there, a perturbed one here, someone red-faced and on the verge of crying—that was a first-year in Gryffindor, obviously stunned by his Sorting into that House, whom she would make sure to bring to Peter’s attention—and then sweep down the head table. Peter gave her a calm look. Henrietta Bulstrode was grinning; she did that often. Severus sat in silence with his Seer beside him, white to the lips. That, too, had become usual in the past few days.

She looked at Harry last. He had a composed mask on, and seemed to be waiting for her speech with as much impatience as any other teenage boy, so that he could eat.

Minerva let out a deep breath, and began.

“Welcome to another year at Hogwarts,” she said. “Welcome to our new students and our old—and to our new professors as well. Peter Pettigrew will be taking over from Acies Merryweather as Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts and Head of Gryffindor House.” A smattering of polite applause for that, mostly from the Gryffindors; they hadn’t had the time to get to know Peter last year, as he’d only been at Hogwarts for a few short weeks before the Midsummer battle. “Hilda Belluspersona is our new Transfiguration Professor.” That brought some more clapping. Minerva wondered if it came from the fact that Henrietta looked more approachable, or from the fact that Peter had a criminal record.

She braced her hands on the table and leaned forward. The easy part of her speech was over.

“The events of the end of last year have revealed a few simple truths,” she said. “I hope that you will keep those truths in mind as you attend Hogwarts this year.” Albus, she reflected, would have arranged for the older students to hear this in private—but then, Albus had recruited the older students, mostly Gryffindor ones, as soldiers in the last war. Minerva did not intend to do so, and she also did not intend to let her charges die for lack of information.

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“We are at war,” she said, and heard some of the first-years suck in their breaths. “Some of you have fought in that war. Others were victims of it, or related to its victims. Lord Voldemort may attack again. The wards are strong, and our determination to protect you is stronger, but if we forget we are at war, terrible things may happen.” She suppressed a grim smile she doubted her students would understand, and made sure it came out as more comforting. Alastor Moody had spent a good amount of the
summer at Hogwarts, setting up wards that mimicked the ones on the secure portions of the Ministry. She supposed his theme of constant vigilance had worked its way into her own head.

She had reason of her own to believe it, of course. She had lived through the war with Grindelwald, though she had been a student herself at the time, and then through the First War with Voldemort. It had been Albus’s leadership she’d looked to for comfort two decades ago, but the first time, she had invented and repeated her own maxim to herself, again and again. Lions do not sleep in times of danger.

And if she was a lioness now, all these children were her cubs. She was not about to close her eyes and leave them vulnerable. Or to each other.

“Those terrible things often involve students at Hogwarts turning on each other,” Minerva told her students, who were listening to her in a silence that seemed to ring with other voices shouting her words. “Traitors can break the strongest wards, the most vigilant guardianship. Traitors are not doubters, I would have you understand. Doubting, thinking, questioning, are necessary to keep our heads in war.

“Fear makes good traitors. And anyone in the school who become so afraid as to curse another student on purpose, hurt someone else over politics, or try and give up Hogwarts to Voldemort and his servants in return for personal safety is a traitor.”

Minerva cocked her head, feeling the weight of all those stares on her. But she would not become bowed by that weight, as Albus had. She would make sure that her choices were made with eyes open.

“I will not ask you not to be afraid,” she said. “I will ask you to come to us if you fear, and talk to your fellow students instead of using your wands on them. We would always rather hear of terror now than suffer the consequences of it later. We are at war, and ripping ourselves apart from the inside, no matter how good the apparent cause, solves nothing.”

There. That speech should tell them that she wouldn’t tolerate attacks on Harry for “causing” the war, or the agitations between Light and Dark families being fought out inside the school, or those students afraid of werewolves attacking those sympathetic to them.

Harry might still hold his strength back. I will not. My school will not become a battleground.

*******

Hermione lingered at the Gryffindor table even when Ron glanced at her a time or two, obviously expecting her help with leading the first-years up to the Tower. Hermione waited until she saw Zacharias approaching her, and then made a shooing gesture at Ron. He frowned, but turned to the first-years—especially the small boy who had begun to cry when the Hat shouted his House name—and began explaining the route.

Zacharias was almost to her now. Hermione could make out the thunderous frown on his face. She braced herself. She had expected something intense to happen when Zacharias refused to discuss GUTOEKOM in his letters to her, and simply ignored her when she did try to broach the subject. From his expression, it was not going to be anything good.

What he didn’t seem to realize was that he couldn’t intimidate her.

Zacharias halted, and kept frowning. The badger scar high on his cheek, which he had received when he summoned Helga Hufflepuff’s spirit into his body during the Battle of Hogwarts, made him look stronger and more serious than Hermione remembered, as if it diminished the lines sarcasm had carved on his face. He had also grown during the summer, and stood taller than she did. Hermione didn’t care. She waited.

She had acquired a copy of the entire book about the Grand Unified Theory before she came back to Hogwarts, and devoured it in three fascinated days. If it was true—and no one had yet managed to prove it wrong—then it meant she belonged in the wizarding world just as much as any pureblood who might despise her for being born of Muggle parents. She didn’t have to keep her eyes on the ground and apologize any more for not having the right “blood,” or even have her only source of satisfaction be that she could learn the dances well and thus trick other wizards into thinking she did have the right blood.

Magic chose me to wield it, she thought, heart beating hard with wonder. Who are they to dispute that choice?

“You know what I feel about the Grand Unified Theory, I think,” Zacharias said, in that pompous manner he had.
“You think it’s a load of bollocks,” said Hermione.

Zacharias blinked, then gave a short nod of acceptance. “I do. And I just want to make it clear that I haven’t changed my mind about marrying you as soon as we leave school, Hermione.” She fought to keep from gritting her teeth at the smug assurance in his voice that that would happen. He hasn’t changed so much after all. “There’s some anti-Muggleborn sentiment running high even in my family right now, but it’ll pass. Just don’t insist that it’s true to my mother, and—“

“Why shouldn’t I insist it’s true?” Hermione asked, not loudly. Her voice was still keen enough to make him shut up, even to surprise a gape out of him. She went on. “I’ve read the research, Zacharias. It’s brilliant. And it makes so much more sense than trying to say that purebloods always breed true—except when they suddenly have Squib children, or when magic suddenly shows up in a family that’s never had magic before. They had statistics, Zacharias. The number of times that Muggleborn witches and wizards turn out to have Squib ancestors in the last five generations is just above zero. And did you know that the births of Muggleborns increased during those years when the purebloods almost interbred themselves out of existence? Magic was going to return to the world somehow, even if it wasn’t in the families who thought they should always have it.”

Hermione was aware that her voice had risen. She didn’t care. What Thomas Rhangnara and the others had done was brilliant, and she hadn’t seen any defense against it so far that didn’t consist of covering one’s ears and bawling.

Including, it seemed, Zacharias’s. He was puffed up like a cat about to attack. He snorted. “That’s not true,” he said.

“Yes, it is,” said Hermione, and took a step towards him. “Have you read the report?”

“Of course not. It’s—“

“A load of bollocks, yes, I know,” said Hermione. “I know you think that. I was just trying to determine whether that came from direct experience, or the load of bollocks that determines one can know the contents of a book without having read it.”

Zacharias’s face was such a deep red that Hermione might have been tempted to fear for his health, except that she knew he didn’t have any heart problems; he’d told her so himself last year, when bragging about the physical and magical health of his family. He’d wanted her to know so that she didn’t have to worry about her children carrying any taint, he’d said.

Except the taint of having a Muggleborn mother, apparently, Hermione thought, as she watched Zacharias try to wriggle out of it.

“It’s more complicated than purebloods never having problems, of course it is,” he said, voice obviously on the verge of snapping like rotten ice. “But that doesn’t mean the research is true, Hermione. If it were, it would mean that the old families really aren’t anything special—“

Hermione smiled.

It was all she had to do. Zacharias jerked as if stung, and said, “You can’t think that. Not with everything I told you about the Smith family, everything my ancestors have done.”

“I wasn’t impressed with your blood,” said Hermione. “Never with that. I was impressed because you were intelligent, and because you rode into battle and gave yourself over to Helga’s spirit without knowing if you would come back, and because you told me that you loved me and thought I was intelligent.” She lifted her chin. “I never cared about who your parents were, Zacharias, and I thought you didn’t care that much about mine. I was wrong, wasn’t I?”

“It’s more complicated than that,” Zacharias said.

“I can see that,” said Hermione. “That’s the great thing, don’t you see?” She had to fight the impulse to extend a hand to him. One couldn’t compromise when arguing with Zacharias, or he would mistake it for capitulation. “That magic doesn’t just follow bloodline, that it means so many different things and chooses so many different people to wield it. That’s so much more interesting and marvelous than just trotting along with blood. It’s brilliant.”

Zacharias shook his head, lips pursed and nostrils flaring, and turned away from her.

Hermione became aware, then, of how many people were watching them. She lifted her head, though she flushed when she saw Hannah Abbott’s eyes shining, and Colin Creevey looking at her the way he usually only looked at Harry or Connor. It was the first time she could remember that people had admired her for something other than her marks or how much she could help them with their homework.
And it will go on that way, she thought. I have no plans to abandon what I think any time soon. Especially if Zacharias continues to insist on the research not being true without ever having read it.

******

Draco supposed he should have helped the other Slytherins Prefects take the first-years down to the dungeons, but there were plenty of them who could do that, and it wasn’t as though the dungeons were very far away from the Great Hall. He would much rather accompany Harry to the meeting with McGonagall he had after dinner, and when he mentioned that, Harry nodded without hesitation.

“As long as the Headmistress doesn’t object,” he said.

“I can’t imagine why she would,” Draco murmured, eyes on Harry as they stood and walked towards the gargoyle again. Perhaps they would make it without being stopped by Harry’s prat of a brother this time. Draco would prefer that.

He had thought about what his vengeance on Potter should be while eating dinner—well, while he and the other Slytherins ate dinner, and Harry ate from a case of food he’d brought along with him from Cobley-by-the-Sea. (Harry was really taking this determination not to live on any house elf labor too far). McGonagall talking about what she would do to students cursing other students meant hexing was out, even before Harry had reminded him that there were more Slytherin ways to take vengeance. And Draco had to admit, his experience with Potter that morning had reminded him how enjoyable it could be to hand his victims just enough rope to hang themselves with.

He now thought he could get to Harry’s brother by flaunting how close he was to Harry, and slowly taunting Potter into rages. Much the same tactic the git had used on him, actually, but with Draco in control this time.

It would have to be a careful plan, because Harry would hate it if he found out, and there was the strong chance Potter would tell Harry if he figured it out. But it couldn’t be too subtle, or a Gryffindor wouldn’t notice in the first place. Draco found himself getting more interested in the challenge the more consideration he gave it. It would occupy him whenever he wasn’t bedding Harry, studying for classes, working his contacts in the Ministry, or trying to figure out who had wanted to kill him.

Draco frowned slightly as Harry caught the Headmistress just outside her office and spoke to her in a conversation he didn’t need to hear, since it included unnecessary apologies for the inconvenience to her. Did he really believe Shield of the Granian had come after him because of his possession gift?

No, he thought. The Unspeakables likely wouldn’t have let me leave the Ministry that day if they’d sensed me in their minds. I still think they were doing it to hurt or cripple Harry somehow. Merlin knows he goes a bit mad if he thinks I’m in danger.

“Mr. Malfoy, follow along, please.”

With a start, Draco looked up and realized that he’d missed McGonagall speaking to the gargoyle and opening the moving staircase. With a short nod, he stepped onto it after her and Harry, and heard the gargoyle grind shut behind them.

“In truth, Harry, I was concerned about your safety at Hogwarts even before you reported this attack,” McGonagall said.

Only last year, Draco thought, Harry would have done something idiotic like insist that Shield of the Granian had been after Draco, and not him. Instead, he just nodded in resignation. Perhaps he’s remembering that he actually did get hurt in the attack, Draco thought. Watching Harry shrink and lose his magical strength had been bloody terrifying.

Watching his left hand appear and then disappear again had been—painful. Draco shook his head to get rid of such thoughts and focused on the conversation in front of him.

“I don’t see what else can be done about it though, Madam,” Harry said, pushing his glasses up his nose. “We have the wards. We have my magic. We have Owen and Michael, who’ve sworn to me. We have Peter, and Mrs. Bulstrode, and Draco.” He smiled at Draco, who smiled back. “But if my enemies plan enough, then all of those advantages can be bypassed.”

They reached the office, and McGonagall walked in ahead of them, sitting down behind her desk with a nod. “I know that, Harry. But there are a few options I wished to ask you about. For one thing, Mrs. Gloryflower has contacted me. She wishes to present Hogwarts itself with a gift of artificial animals, watching over the students. They would help anyone in danger, but, of course, they would be focused on you in particular.”

“What kind of animals?” Harry asked, as he and Draco took chairs in front of McGonagall’s desk.
McGonagall reached behind herself. Draco was impressed to note that the office looked different than it had last year, when McGonagall had still had the odd artifact from Dumbledore’s days about, and plenty of his paperwork. Now she had emptied the office of the artifacts and lined the walls with neat bookcases instead. The Sorting Hat went to the highest shelf, in a place of honor. A richly-decorated sword Draco remembered seeing clutched in a phoenix’s talons in the Chamber of Secrets hung in a glass case on the wall behind her. The perch that phoenix, Fawkes, had once graced stood in a corner, in silent memorial to the bird who had died at Midwinter. Draco restrained himself from peering under the desk to see if there was a cat basket and balls of yarn there. All in all, it was a room that his mother might well have called elegant.

“Butterflies,” said McGonagall now, turning around and holding her palm out.

Harry laughed in delight. Draco snapped his attention back, and saw that the butterfly in question was silver, ornamented with delicate blue-green tourmalines along its wings. It rose into the air with a quiver, and then darted up in front of Harry, hovering there.

“They would roam about the school,” McGonagall said, “watching, and able to alert any professor at once if there was danger. Mrs. Gloryflower also said that they could harm those who might attempt to harm another, if no help can come in time.” She took the butterfly back and touched its wings. When she held it up again, Draco could see thin, sharp blades springing out from beneath the tourmalines. He blinked, then did another once-over of the butterfly sitting in McGonagall’s palm. Light families can create some dangerous creatures when they want to, I suppose.

“And they can’t be fooled into attacking an innocent person?” Harry asked.

McGonagall shook her head. “Nor is that all,” she said. “Mrs. Gloryflower said that you had written her at one point before the Midsummer battle, and asked if she had any ideas for making you appear more Light and less Dark in the eyes of your Light allies.”

Harry exhaled, and nodded. “Yes. What did she decide on?”

“She has a young cousin who has been tutored out of Hogwarts to become a war witch,” said McGonagall carefully. “I have agreed to let the girl transfer here. She would be a sixth-year, as you are. Her name is Syrinx. Mrs. Gloryflower asks whether you would be willing to accept her as a sworn companion, as the Rosier-Henlin twins are.”

Draco scowled. He had almost forgotten about the twins, even with Harry talking about them. He disliked the idea that they would be around Harry most of the time, and that now a stranger would be joining them. At least the twins were a year older than he and Harry were, and Syrinx was a girl, so they couldn’t share the same room with them.

Draco smiled. He had plans for that room empty of everyone but Harry and himself, given that Vince, Greg, and Blaise had all vanished as the years passed.

“Of course, if she was willing.” Harry’s voice was resigned, but not actually resentful. “What else, Madam?”

“I give you a certain amount of leeway,” McGonagall said. Draco looked at her, and realized her eyes were half-lidded, so that she looked more like a cat watching a mousehole than she usually did. “For example, allowing your allies to meet on school grounds, and permission to attend the alliance meeting that you organized in the spring, though it meant missing several days of classes.”

Harry nodded. “I know, Madam.”

“I will continue to grant you that leeway,” said McGonagall. “As long as you remember that you are also a student, Harry, and subject to the rules of Hogwarts, particularly the ones I detailed at the Sorting Feast. Do well in your classes. Defend yourself as you must, but I would prefer that you curse no one, and do not attack.”

Draco opened his mouth to protest. What would happen if the student in question was a legitimate threat to Harry, as several of the Ravenclaws had been last year, and twisted what had happened around to make it look as though Harry had attacked them?

Harry’s face, though, registered actual admiration, and respect. “Thank you, Madam,” he said, bowing his head. “It’s good that Hogwarts has a Headmistress who cares more about the safety of her charges than her image, as Dumbledore did. Don’t worry. I won’t have trouble restraining myself.”

McGonagall nodded, a sharp gleam entering her eyes. Draco wondered if she had already known that Harry was extremely
unlikely ever to need the warning, and had used this as a test of sorts.

He must have made some discontented little noise, because abruptly the Headmistress was looking at him. Draco strove to put his chin up, despite his discomfort. He was just as glad that he wouldn’t have to have this woman for his NEWT Transfiguration class.

“Mr. Malfoy,” said McGonagall coolly. “I am still not entirely sure how far I can trust you, but circumstances being what they are, you are also in a position to cause more trouble than the average student. I expect you to abide by the rules of conduct I spoke of at the Sorting Feast, as well.”

Draco inclined his head stiffly. “Of course, Headmistress,” he said. I’m hardly going to let you catch me, you old cat.

McGonagall went on staring at him long enough to make him wonder if she had been a Legilimens all along, and then nodded. “Good.” She looked back at Harry once more. “I think you may go to the dungeons now, Harry.”

“Thank you, Madam,” said Harry, and stood. “I’ll speak to Mrs. Gloryflower myself and thank her for the butterflies and Syrinx’s presence. I’m glad you’ve agreed to them.”

Draco kept his face smooth as they left the office. He wondered if Harry would say something to him about the attack, or the talk with McGonagall, or even her parting words to him, but Harry said, apparently out of the air, “Are you all right, Draco?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Draco frowned. Did I show something on my face? I didn’t mean to.

Harry turned to face him on the moving staircase, holding his arm and staring into his eyes. “Because you looked upset when McGonagall mentioned Syrinx Gloryflower. I wanted to make sure you’d agreed to her presence.”

Draco felt a smile tugging at his lips. He couldn’t feel bad about Harry noticing that, even though it did confirm that he needed to keep his face more controlled. He leaned nearer Harry and kissed him. Harry accepted it, languidly moving his hand from Draco’s arm to the nape of his neck, but pulled back a few moments later and gave him a serious look.

“I’ll survive,” Draco said. “And if you treat her with cool consideration, and no more than that, I’ll have no reason to get jealous.”

Harry smiled. “There’s no chance it would be more than friendship, in any case,” he said. “Why should it be, when I already have the one person I really want?” He kissed Draco again.

Draco let thoughts of vengeance go for right now. “About our bedroom,” he began.

“What about—“ And then Harry caught on, and his eyes widened. “We could Transfigure the beds, if we wanted,” he breathed. “No one else will be in there.”

“Exactly,” said Draco. “I have a lot of plans for that privacy. And a brand new book on locking charms, in case anyone interrupts us.”

Harry seemed to be trying to be serious, but his grin was fighting its way out. “We can use the privacy to study, can’t we?” he asked. “Or to discuss battle strategies no one else can overhear. Or—“

“Wanker,” Draco muttered, and kissed him again, glad that, by the time they returned to the dungeons, the first-years should have been herded into their bedrooms, and determined that not even Millicent wanting to talk to them would keep him and Harry from their bedroom for long.

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Connor punched his pillow.

Then he decided that wasn’t enough, so he pulled his wand out, aimed it at his pillow, and shouted, “Concutio!”

The pillow blasted apart in a mass of cloth and feathers. Connor stood panting and glaring as they drifted down onto his bed, now and then shaking his head so that his fringe would get out of his eyes.

Why would Harry think I was trying to just bait Malfoy into cursing me? his thoughts said, for the thousandth time. I could have defended myself, and I would have.
You didn’t let him know that, his thoughts pointed out, also for the thousandth time. You didn’t deny what he accused you of.

“I shouldn’t have to,” Connor muttered, flopping down onto his bed and making the feathers rise and flurry around him. “Why? It was just insults, and it’s Malfoy’s fault that he reacted so badly. And Harry took my side when that article about the theory came out. Malfoy’s just a wanker.”

“No arguments there, mate.”

Connor rolled over and watched as Ron approached his own bed, stretching his arms over his head and yawning. “He is,” he told Ron earnestly. “He gets me in arguments with my own brother.”

Ron gave him a quick, curious glance, started to open his mouth, then shut it and shook his head.

“What?” Connor demanded.

Ron watched him for a long moment. Connor scowled. He always hated it when Ron did that. It was the same look he gave chessboards, right before he moved his piece and won. Always won, in fact. Connor had never managed to beat Ron in a chess match, and didn’t know anyone who had.

“Well, it’s like this,” said Ron at last. “Brothers fight. All the time. We fought with Percy, Ginny and the twins and me, when we found out that he wasn’t going to take the Ministry job our dad got for him. And I fought with the twins for pranking me. And Bill and Charlie fought something awful the first year Charlie was at Hogwarts, to hear Mum tell it, because Bill didn’t like having someone there with the same last name as him. And then there was the time Fred sneezed in Dad’s food, and Charlie got blamed for it, and then Charlie came outside and found Fred, and—”

“What’s your point?” Connor demanded, knowing he sounded sulky, and not caring.

Ron shrugged. “We made up again,” he said. “We usually didn’t want to, and sometimes it took months, but we always made up again. But we did it by either explaining everything—Ginny picked that up from Mum, too, she’s an absolute terror for it—or just agreeing to forget about it. And you and Harry don’t forget it, and you aren’t talking to him about Malfoy being a wanker. And he doesn’t talk to you about this prank, either, you said, but that doesn’t mean it didn’t hurt him. He probably assumes you would have told him if you had a serious problem with his boyfriend.” Ron grimaced as if he’d bitten into a sour apple. “So talk to him, Connor. If you don’t, then he’ll just go around thinking you don’t feel guilty, and that’ll drive the fight deeper, and you’ll get upset at him for not realizing you’re upset and keep silent, and things will get worse and worse.”

He paused, a long moment, chewing his lip. Connor waited.

“And the thing is, mate?” Ron tilted his head and studied him for a moment. “You are being a git about this. Just a little. Even though Malfoy’s a wanker and doesn’t deserve him, he’s Harry’s boyfriend, and arguing with him hurts Harry. It’s like if Harry argued with Parvati all the time. You’ll have to make peace sooner or later.”

Connor’s mouth fell open. He tried to say, “Ron—”

Ron began digging through his trunk, and ignored him.

Connor fell back on what used to be his pillow and stared at the ceiling again, thinking fiercely. Could that really be true? He’d assumed that Harry knew which behavior of Malfoy’s was ridiculous and agreed to things like the prank because he agreed that Malfoy’s head needed to have the air taken out of it. He hadn’t considered it in the light of Harry trying to balance his brother and his boyfriend.

Not just his boyfriend. His partner. And that means that Malfoy’s probably not going to go away.

Connor shuddered and wrapped his arms around himself. Then he stood up, shook his head, and walked to the door of the bedroom. He didn’t want to think about this right now.

He would go and find Parvati. She always made him feel better.

He could feel Ron’s eyes on his back, but he ignored that. Ron could be wrong, too, just like Harry.

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Chapter Twenty: The Earth Will Shake

Falco brushed dirt from his hands, and grimaced. As much magic as he possessed, as much useless time as he could avoid by bending it, the fact remained that some things could not be done save with manual labor. It was only a shame that this manual labor forced dirt under his fingernails and ground it into the creases of his palms.

He looked up sharply as a shadow passed overhead, then relaxed. It was only an owl, hunting prey. And why shouldn’t it be? Evening was coming on.

Falco climbed carefully over the remains of a stone wall and slithered down a slight slope, then paused to look back. The moonlight gleamed faintly off—he could not call them ruins, not exactly. He would rather call them the remains of a house. It could be built up again, but for now, that would be counterproductive. Better to leave them exactly as they were, so that no one would suspect anything was wrong. Tampering with stones in a place where no one had a reason to come could attract the attention that Falco didn’t want.

He was satisfied, for now. He had used a tactic of the Light, honesty, in approaching Harry and telling him what would happen if he didn’t Declare. Now he had completed his use of a Dark tactic, done in subterfuge, to insure that Voldemort had a place to retreat to that would protect him from Harry’s notice and Harry’s magic. Falco was not entirely sure that the Dark Lord would trust him yet, or the promptings that Falco had tucked into his mind. But that was all right. For now, his current hiding place was certainly safe. Falco had prepared this one against his current hiding place being found out, which would happen sooner or later.

Now he would begin a tactic that was a mixture of Dark and Light, to keep the balance. He would let Harry know who was doing this to him, fulfilling honesty, but he would not let him know the purpose, fulfilling subterfuge. And the magic itself was as neutral as any magic could be, blending truth and deception together until the maker could not tell them apart.

Falco sighed. It may yet come to that, if I am to save the world. Depending on how slowly or quickly the Dark Lord recovered from his wound, it might yet come to that, yes. But Falco would do nothing hastily. He would study the situation, as he always did, and make sure that he didn’t act out of temper. That was the problem with Harry, with Albus, with Tom—they all acted out of temper, and let their emotions control them. Falco had forsaken the need for such things long ago.

He walked along a black highway for a few paces, then leaped onto a golden staircase, and then down into a quiet place that streamed with gray mist. There, he lifted his hands and brought them together.

And a dream grew out between them. Dreams were said to be foretellings, visions of the truth to come, but they hid themselves in symbols and bedazzled the ones who dreamed them. Balanced magic, Falco thought. Neutral magic. He only wished there was more like this in the world.

He let the dream spiral up between his fingers, gathering strength and speed as he fed it power, and then hover in front of him. It looked like gray smoke aswarm with images, but most magic looked like gray smoke here.

Falco smiled, and breathed.

The dream turned and flew away, seeking Harry. Falco himself reunited the rest of his mind with the shard of consciousness that floated on the surface and grew sea eagle wings, springing for the sky. It was time for him to be on his way to his next effort to keep the balance.

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Harry settled back in his chair and waited. He and Draco were both in NEWT Transfiguration, and this was the first chance he would have to see Henrietta teach—though he had heard only good things about her so far. Draco settled into the seat behind him, muttering and examining something. Harry turned his head, and frowned when he realized they were notes from the Animagus lesson they’d had with Peter last night.
“I don’t think she’ll let you study them in here,” he whispered.

“She won’t notice,” Draco whispered back.

Harry glanced around the classroom, and raised his eyebrows. There weren’t that many people in here. Hermione had qualified, of course, and so had Lavender Brown, Dean Thomas, and Seamus Finnigan. Harry recognized a few Ravenclaw girls from their year, but they understandably didn’t try to catch Harry’s eye. Zacharias sat in one corner, alternately pretending to read and scowling at Hermione’s back. Hannah Abbott and Ernie Macmillan sat next to each other, but didn’t say anything; Harry thought that must have to do with the Grand Unified Theory, since Hannah was Muggleborn and Ernie pureblood. Millicent had managed to qualify, but hadn’t arrived for the class yet; Harry wondered if she’d overslept.

“I think Henrietta is going to notice,” he told Draco.

Draco sighed and slid the notes back inside his book just as the door opened and Millicent arrived, panting. Henrietta was right behind her. Harry studied her face, then shook his head slightly. The glamour was perfect. Henrietta looked happy and approachable in ways she never had as herself, and even her walk seemed different, as if she’d Transfigured one leg to be slightly longer than the other.

Millicent sank into a seat behind them. Draco said something Harry couldn’t hear, snickering, and Millicent responded with a snarled insult.

Then Henrietta stepped up to the front of the room and claimed all their attention. It was hard not to look at her, Harry found. He wondered if she had used a subtle spell, or if this was just the effect she usually had when she wasn’t sitting in the middle of an alliance meeting and wanted to make herself look as if she were an obedient follower.

“My name is Hilda Belluspersona,” said Henrietta. “You will, of course, call me Professor Belluspersona. You will also be on time for class.” She didn’t glance at Millicent, but she didn’t need to, Harry thought; plenty of other people were doing it for her.

“I understand that, last year, your Transfiguration education may not have given you all you need to know. This time, it will. I believe in demonstrations. I will Transfigure people in this class, and challenge them to change themselves or others back. I will change you back if no one can manage it by the end of the class, but that means ten points from the Houses of both the Transfigured student and the ones who tried and failed.”

Harry blinked. Well, yes, that is rather different from the way McGonagall taught.

“We will begin with a revision of some basic concepts,” said Henrietta. “I find myself doubting that you learned what you needed to know last year.” She arched an eyebrow, and then turned and waved her wand at the board. Harry blinked again as it Transfigured into a gigantic scroll, with great golden lettering that everyone across the room could easily read. Hermione’s quill scrabbled and scratched furiously as she scribbled the notes down.

“First,” said Henrietta, “Transfiguration is the art of envisioning. You must know how many limbs a turtle has, and that it has a head, when you attempt to transform a teapot into one, but more than that, you should know the very pattern of the shell. You should know the gleam in its eye. You should be able to see how its toes splay, and the way it walks.” She turned around and gave them all another severe look. “I suspect this was not taught to you last year, either, so we will be having lessons in learning how to see.

“Second, Transfiguration is the art of knowing limitations. Attempting to change a small creature into a large one will only exhaust you, and leave the creature in a half-transformed state. The Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes in the Ministry has a sub-committee devoted only to undoing botched Transfigurations. They are constantly busy. I will not have it said that any student who passed through my class made more work for them. Do you understand me?”

Harry found himself nodding along with all the rest. She’s even sterner than McGonagall, but she does make her point. He couldn’t remember if he’d known what Henrietta was saying before. Perhaps she simply explained it more clearly than McGonagall did, or the rotating team of other professors, McGonagall, and NEWT students who had taught Transfiguration last year.

“Third, Transfiguration is the art of common sense. It may be useful to turn the ground into ice beneath your enemies in battle—but, on the other hand, if you rush onto the ice without remembering to change your shoes into skates, you will have problems. Combined with the first two lessons, Transfiguration can be wielded as weapon, as tool, and as art. Otherwise, it will fail you, but the failure lies in yourself and not your wand.” Henrietta’s eyes glittered intensely, making her look the most like herself of anything Harry had seen so far.
Harry wrote the pointers frantically onto his parchment. I’m glad Edith did decide to go to France with a tutor after all. She would be terrified if she were here.

“There is one more note that I feel compelled to give you,” Henrietta said, drawing her wand. “I know that some students are interested in becoming Animagi. If you intend to do so, you will study in private under myself, Headmistress McGonagall, or an approved and registered Animagus. This class will not include instructions on achieving a private animal form.”

Harry looked around enough to surprise a look of disappointment on Hermione’s face, but all the others seemed to have expected it. Draco just looked smug, anyway, despite the failure of his expectations that Henrietta wouldn’t mind them studying their notes from Peter in her class.

“Now, we will begin with a small demonstration.” Henrietta nodded to Harry. “If you will come here, Harry. I shall Transfigure your hand to wood, and let the others try to change it back.”

Harry nodded and stood up, grateful beyond words that Henrietta didn’t intend to favor him above the other students just because they were in an alliance together.

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Peter smoothed his robes down and wondered if he could confide his intense nervousness to anyone. Minerva, perhaps, but she was so busy that she didn’t have time for a private talk right now. And she had had faith in his teaching abilities when she hired him, so she would only tell him that of course he would be a good Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, insist he stand up and go teach, and then shove him out her office door as she turned her attention to something else.

He could probably talk to Harry, but since he had Harry in his first Defense class in the next few minutes, that struck him as a bit of an unfair tactic.

He told himself to move away from the mirror, that no one would notice a few creases of worry on his face amid the lines that age and worry had already put there, and then found the perfect excuse as someone knocked on the door. Peter felt his breathing ease as he approached it, grabbing the list of names and his textbook on the way. Someone had probably come to him with a problem, and now that he was out of the Sanctuary, he found it easier to help other people than to think constantly about his own fears. They ran in circles, anyway. Peter had to break the circle before he could do anything productive with them.

He opened the door, and blinked. Connor stood there, staring anxiously up at him. Connor’s name was also on the list in his hand, and Peter would have expected him to be already hurrying to the classroom.

“Connor?” he asked.

Connor swallowed and nodded. “I know Defense is about to start,” he said. “I—can I speak to you on the way? It’s about something important that I know I can’t discuss with Harry yet.”

“Of course.” Peter locked the door to his quarters behind him with a nonverbal spell, and then began walking up the corridor. Connor struggled to keep up. He was in that awkward stage of growth where his torso seemed to have finished but his legs hadn’t quite settled yet, Peter thought.

Connor still wasted almost a quarter of the journey—Peter had timed the distance between the Defense classroom and his own quarters very precisely yesterday—worrying his lip between his teeth. At last, though, he said, “I had an argument with Harry over Malfoy yesterday.”

Pettie simply nodded. That much had been obvious to anyone who watched the boys’ faces in the Great Hall last night. “What was the argument about?”

“Malfoy came into my room and started insulting me about how loudly I was packing,” Connor said. “I, um, I said some things that were probably really insulting, about how I would have thought he would get used to the way halfbloods packed, seeing as he was already sharing the house and a bed with one. I told him to stop being a hypocrite, and that everyone else could see the way he crowed about pureblood superiority was a sham, since Harry is his boyfriend. Harry came in and got angry at me, and told me that I had to apologize to Malfoy, not him. I didn’t want to, though, and so I didn’t say anything. Why should I offer a fake apology?” Connor scowled, and had left off chewing his lower lip entirely. His mulish expression reminded Peter forcibly of James, and the way he would look when he was sixteen and having a fight with Sirius. Sirius was much more likely to laugh it off, though, or play a prank on James and use that to get him to laugh. James did this kind of thing. “I think apologizing should wait until I really mean it.”
“That’s true,” said Peter solemnly. They were almost at the classroom now, but he saw students still pouring into it, so he felt comfortable taking Connor and urging him gently to the side. He told himself it was not because his vision had blurred and his stomach felt shaky. It was only coincidence that this would delay his getting into the classroom for a few minutes more. “But you might want to consider the situation more closely, Connor, and whether you can offer a true apology based on other things.”

Connor folded his arms. James in miniature, Peter thought, and gently tucked away the pang that memory brought him. “What other things?”

“Draco did something childish,” said Peter. “But you reacted in a childish fashion. Given that you didn’t start the fight—“

“I didn’t—“

“You might be able to say that you were sorry because of the way you reacted. You’re the more grown one, aren’t you?” Connor nodded fervently, of course. It was Peter’s private opinion that Draco had managed to file off more of his own warts than Connor had, but that the ones left were uglier than Connor’s, and Harry made it worse by indulging his boyfriend. It wouldn’t do to say that to Harry’s brother, however. “So the way you reacted is unworthy of you. You can apologize for that. And you can apologize for letting something so silly as an insult about your packing rattle your composure at all. Those are both things to feel sincerely sorry for.”

“But,” said Connor, and stopped.

Peter waited, careful to show no signs of impatience, though the time when he should begin the Defense class was getting close. He had mastered this art in his seventh year, when he had managed his own slow, painful transformation from fawning sycophant to his friends to someone stronger and better. Neither Sirius nor James had been the kind of person who responded well to the slightest sign of disinterest.

“But,” Connor said, every word dragged out of him as if on a fishhook, “Parvati said that it was Harry’s fault. That he should have made sure we reconciled right then and there, instead of leaving the issue to fester between us.”

Peter smiled. “And what would you have felt if Harry had urged you to reconcile right then and there?”

Connor ducked his head, in that way James had when he didn’t want to admit he was wrong. His fringe fell over his heart-shaped scar, and he looked like any ordinary teenage boy, angry and sullen.

“Connor?” Peter prompted after a moment.

“Pushed,” Connor told the floor.

Peter nodded. “Exactly. Harry might have asked you how you felt, but if you tell him nothing, then I think he’s right in assuming that you have nothing to say to him yet. It’s rather like the situation with Severus—“

Connor looked up with wide, horrified hazel eyes. “I am nothing like Snape.”

Peter ignored him, because that wasn’t the point right now. “Who is upset with whatever Camellia said to him, but won’t tell Harry why. Nor will he tell Harry about his dreams. He wants the perfect understanding that can only come when Harry knows all the nuances and details of the situation, but to have that perfect understanding, he would need to give the words away. He doesn’t want to.” He nodded at Connor, whose face had folded up into another scowl. “That sounds to me like what you’re doing. You have a perspective on the situation that Harry doesn’t. But for him to know what that perspective is, you need to talk to him. Otherwise, he has only your actions to judge by.”

Connor muttered something that sounded uncomplimentary, though Peter couldn’t tell whether it was aimed at him, or Harry, or Draco, or even Snape, and then ducked into the Defense classroom. Peter shook his head and focused on the task at hand, but part of his mind remained on Connor’s predicament even as he strode to the front of the room, dwelling there with both amusement and sympathy.

_Why would anyone think that someone else could understand their mind perfectly if they don’t speak that mind?_

He placed the textbook on the desk, smiled at his students, and found that most of his nervousness had blown away like mist. That always happened. Focusing on someone else’s problems was a good thing, though Harry hadn’t yet learned the balance he needed to when doing it.
“Welcome to NEWT Defense Against the Dark Arts,” he began. “My name is Professor Pettigrew…”

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“Because she just arrived at the school today,” said Harry, pushing open the door to the abandoned classroom where McGonagall had told him that Syrinx was waiting to meet him. He hesitated a moment, considering whether he could add what he wanted to say next, and then decided to, because if he couldn’t joke with Draco, who could he joke with? “Obviously.”

“She should have arrived at the start of term like everyone else,” said Draco, and didn’t seem to notice the whine his tone was taking on. “Why wouldn’t she have?”

“Why don’t we ask her that?” Harry said, and stepped into the classroom.

The girl sitting on a chair and looking out the window turned to face him. Harry scrutinized her carefully. He would have known at once that she was a Gloryflower, he thought; he had never seen hair that golden and curly on anyone who wasn’t Laura or her niece Delilah, one of three children of prominent Light families Fenrir Greyback had bitten. Her eyes were green, however, not the yellow typical of pureblood Light families. She also had only a few bells in her hair, while both Delilah and Augustus Starrise, trained as war witches or wizards, had worn far more. Harry supposed it was because she hadn’t yet completed her training.

She rose to her feet and bowed. Harry took in the efficient movement, the way her eyes regarded them without challenge or surprise, the lack of emotion on her face, and felt a tension he barely noticed most of the time relax.

She’s like me, or Doncan. Trained as a guardian. Capable of putting aside personal emotion and doing what needs to be done.

“Hello,” he said. “You’re Syrinx Gloryflower?”

“I am, sir.” Syrinx examined him right back. Harry wondered what exactly she was seeing. “Come to swear to you.”

Harry glanced back at the classroom door. Draco stood there, staring at Syrinx as if he were trying to cope with the sudden and unexpected change from—whatever he had been expecting. Behind him were Michael and Owen. Both had their arms held out so that the lightning-shaped scars on them were prominent. Harry winced and looked back at Syrinx.

“You understand the constraints of doing so?” he said softly. “That you must swear oaths to me, but that you can’t simply attack anyone who threatens me? That this is a test of judgment and rationality?”

“Of course I do, sir,” said Syrinx, a faint frown crossing her forehead. “That is part of the reason I wished to come and serve you. A trained war witch would never react out of emotions as irrationally and hastily as a Death Eater, but I am not yet fully trained, and I need more testing.”

“Forgive me,” Harry said, “but the only war wizard I knew well was Augustus Starrise, and he did not impress me as a paragon of rationality.”

Syrinx’s face cleared. “He would not, sir,” she said. “His anchor broke.”

“Anchor?” Harry didn’t know that much about what war witches and wizards trained to do, but it sounded as though it were more involved than he had imagined.

Syrinx nodded. “Many war witches choose an anchor, sir, unless they’re truly able to go through life alone. That person becomes an image in their minds, a reminder of their duty, their restraint in moments when they might lose their temper. Augustus Starrise’s anchor was his sister. When she died, then his rationality broke, and he used his training for purposes it should not be used for.

“I don’t know yet if you would make a good anchor for me, sir, because I do not know if you are likely to survive the war. But I wanted to swear to you. I wish to help defend you. As my training continues, I may come to see more in you than I see at present. And if the war finishes and you are still alive, then I will approach you and ask you to do me the honor of becoming my anchor. From the tales my cousin Laura tells of you, you are already someone I can admire.” She drew a knife smoothly from a pocket of her robe, where it had rested without Harry noticing it, and laid it along her left arm, watching him all the while.

Harry relaxed some more. He appreciated how honest she was, and her reasoning made perfect sense to him. Syrinx was a solider. That much would have been clear even if she didn’t call him “sir” all the time.
He understood people like this. He had been one until a short time ago, and in his better moments, when he could plan and think instead of simply acting on his feelings, he still often was. He almost envied Syrinx her duty, that everyone accepted her commitment to her path and wouldn’t try to talk her out of following it. *If things had been different...if no one had found me out...*

But things had changed, they had found out, and Harry had long since reconciled himself to the consequences. He watched as Syrinx cut her left arm, and listened to her words, her voice clear and strong, her eyes fixed on him and never wavering. He didn’t think he’d seen her blink yet. He wondered if part of her training as a war witch included imitating cats.

“I pledge my loyalty to you,” she said, “as the Sunrise Guard did, as the Horns of the Morning did, as the Bringers of Hope did.” Harry supposed it was only reasonable that she would choose the names of companions of Light Lords and Ladies, rather than Dark ones, as Owen and Michael had. “As guard, as courtier, as courier, as running hound, as whatever you need me to be, then I am yours, for the honor of serving someone so honorable.”

“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.” Harry gave the oath with more confidence than he had when he delivered it to Owen and Michael. Then, of course, he had not expected such a swearing, and he had wondered why anyone would want to accompany him in the first place. Now he was used to it. Besides, he understood Syrinx’s reasons better than most. If it was part of her path, then of course she would do it.

“An honor to be beside you, sir,” said Syrinx, smiling for the first time. Harry had the feeling that it wasn’t something she did often. “The oath is true.” She shifted her arm, and the white lightning bolt scar appeared where the cut had been, a moment ago. She slipped the knife back into her pocket, drew her wand, and tapped the cut, murmuring a spell Harry hadn’t heard before. It Vanished the blood.

“Have you been Sorted?” Harry asked her, wondering if he would share a House with her as he did with Owen. Michael was in Ravenclaw, and spent most of his time with that House, so far, when he didn’t join his brother in guarding Harry. Draco hadn’t yet noticed that Michael’s eyes followed him quite a bit of the time. Harry wondered why not.

“I have,” said Syrinx. “The Hat placed me in Hufflepuff. Understandable, of course, as I value hard work and loyalty.” Draco snorted. Syrinx didn’t even look at him. “Did you have a command for me, sir?”

“Only to familiarize yourself with Hogwarts, for now,” said Harry. “I wouldn’t want you to be left behind in your classes, or to get lost if I should need you in a hurry.” Those were words he wouldn’t have, quite, dared to speak to Owen and Michael, but he would have appreciated them when he was still mostly a guardian, and he knew they were the right ones for Syrinx. Her face brightened into another pale, distant smile.

“Yes, sir,” she murmured. “I am in sixth year, and have passed my OWLs, but I would not mind more time to know the school.” She bowed her head and kept it bowed for a long moment, then turned and strode to the door. Draco made another sound in his throat, but Syrinx didn’t look back at him as she vanished.

“She was strange,” said Draco flatly.

Harry shrugged. “That must be what someone in the throes of the war training is like, Draco. I know Augustus had violent emotions, but his anchor was broken. Delilah has emotions, but she’s passed through the whole thing.” He took Draco’s hand and squeezed it, wondering why Draco looked so desolate. He had told Draco, and meant it, that there was no way Syrinx could have more of his attention than his partner did, sworn companion or not, and having met her, Harry wouldn’t have wished to interfere in her training the way that excessive attention would have done in any case. He liked her and wished her well, and the best way to do that was to let her go about her business in the shadows. “We’ve met someone in the middle.”

Draco grunted for a moment, staring at his feet, and then looked up abruptly at Harry. “I’m going to study my notes on Animagus training,” he said. “Are you coming?”

Harry shook his head. “I’m afraid not. I have to talk to the werewolves again.” He restrained a sigh. He would have preferred it if the pack had chosen Camellia alpha, or let him appoint her. But they had wanted to keep him, and Harry had accepted the responsibility. He couldn’t complain now. At least he had taught them the Rosier-Henlin phoenix song spell, so they didn’t have to rely on owls to communicate with him. They did want to talk to him every evening, though.

“Hmm,” said Draco, and turned his back. Harry took him gently by the shoulder.

“You are all right?” he asked. He would not let his bond with Draco become the morass his bonds with Snape and Connor had of
late. For both his sake and Draco’s, Harry intended to talk about what was bothering them.

“I am,” said Draco firmly, and that was that.

“Will you let Michael go with you?” Harry asked quietly. Perhaps it was silly, but he couldn’t forget that Shield of the Granian and the Unspeakables had aimed at Draco first.

“If he must,” said Draco. Harry saw Michael’s eyes light up. He shook his head, and watched as his sworn companion followed his boyfriend away.

“My brother has a crush on your partner, you know,” Owen said, when he was obviously sure that both Michael and Draco were out of earshot.

Harry nodded to him. “I know. But Draco hasn’t realized it yet.”

Owen raised his eyebrows. “And you don’t mind?”

Harry tipped his hand back and forth. “It’s not that I don’t mind, it’s that—I don’t know, that I trust Draco? I can’t see him flirting with Michael to make me jealous. I can’t see him seriously returning Michael’s affections. I’m sorry, he’s your brother and wonderfully level-headed, but—“

“It’s more than all right,” Owen said calmly. “You and Draco have between you a version of what was between our parents.”

Harry swallowed, nodding. He still missed Charles Rosier-Henlin. Owen had told Harry about finding his father’s charred bones. He had worked a spell that killed himself and two Death Eaters, one of whom was Karkaroff. Owen could only guess why, but said that a threat to his children from Karkaroff would have done it.

“Did I tell you,” said Owen, “that our mother is pregnant again?”

Harry laughed, his mood turned around again immediately. “That’s wonderful! If you did tell me, I can’t remember.”

“She is,” said Owen. “She conceived just before the battle, so the child won’t be born until next year, but Michael and I will have a little sibling at last. It was something our parents wanted—badly.”

Harry questioned Owen more about Medusa’s pregnancy as he went back to the Slytherin common room to communicate with the werewolves in relative privacy. It made a wonderful distraction from Connor, from Snape, from the fact that he knew Camellia would plead with him to come back for a visit this weekend, and from the fact that he had so far received only cold refusals from the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts in response to his attempts to help them.

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Draco was now aware that Michael Rosier-Henlin was staring at him. They were alone, and Michael wasn’t standing behind his older twin the way he often did.

What Draco hadn’t figured out yet was why. The reflected glory of the Malfoy line? The reflected glory of being Harry’s partner? The fact that Draco was beautiful and confident, and knew both things?

They sat at a table in the library while Draco studied his notes on envisioning one’s Animagus form, something he was still infuriatingly unable to. Most of the tables around them were crowded with students doing homework. Draco sniffed. He’d moved that out of the way already, so he could concentrate on more important matters. You would think that all of them except the first-years would have noticed by now that the professors always give more homework the first week of the year, and adapted accordingly, instead of waiting until Friday afternoon.

Draco yawned and stretched his arms above his head. It gave him the perfect excuse to almost close his eyes, but keep them open just enough to see where Michael’s stare went. Sure enough, it slid up his arms. Draco concealed a smirk.

“It’s solely the way he evaluates me, then.”

He leaned back, and scowled slightly at the notes. Michael immediately leaned forward. “Is there something you need help with?”

Draco tilted his head, letting his hair slip down his cheek. “Well. You see, I’m studying to become an Animagus, but I can’t seem to master envisioning the transformation, even though I did well enough at Transfiguration on my OWLs. I wondered if you knew
any techniques that might help me. You did attend Durmstrang, after all.”

Michel hesitated, then nodded. “There’s one thing we learned that might be useful,” he said. “Maybe a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher here mentioned it, but we learned it in the regular Dark Arts courses.”

Draco moved his tie around as though he were hot, revealing his pulse point, and reveling in the way that Michael couldn’t seem to take his eyes off it. “What is it, then?”

“A—meditation, or a cousin of it, so that the Dark Arts don’t corrupt your mind,” Michael whispered. His dark eyes had gone wide, and he didn’t seem to realize how obvious he was being. Draco concealed his amusement and delight. Harry still regarded him too rarely with looks of sheer physical desire; he was more interested in what Draco said and did and thought. “We would separate out what we wanted to see from what was actually there, inside our heads.”

“I ought to be able to make use of that,” Draco mused. “I’ve studied my own thoughts enough, to understand my possession gift.”

“Possession gift?” Michael’s eyes widened further.

Draco nodded. “Yes. A rather wonderful gift, I think, though not one that I can brag about. I can read the thoughts of others, and control their bodies if I want.” He drawled that out, watching as the fascination on the other boy’s face simultaneously deepened and became mixed with panic. “It was what finally convinced my father to confirm me as magical heir.”

Michael blinked. “I—I see.”

Draco smirked at him, and then looked back at his notes. “Now, what were you saying about this technique that you learned at Durmstrang?”

He listened carefully as Michael explained. It didn’t sound that difficult, though it did involve giving thoughts their own shapes—as animals, as clouds, or as natural formations, mostly—and pushing them gently out of the way. It sounded a great deal like Occlumency training, in fact, at least the kind Snape had given Harry. Draco thought he could master it in no time.

He responded, but let his mind wander away, circling around the problem that had settled there for hours now: Syrinx Gloryflower.

He honestly didn’t think Harry would be attracted to her. It wasn’t her face he feared. It was her mind. She had been a guardian, a soldier. Harry had been like her. Draco had seen a too-familiar expression on Harry’s face when Syrinx spoke up in that calm, austere manner she had. It was the look of longing he wore when he thought about how much he wanted to go back to being a defender, rather than a leader—the look he had worn last year when Voldemort cursed him to spend time in a dream-world he wouldn’t want to come back from, and Harry had dreamed himself into a Hogwarts where everyone ignored him unless he could be of practical use.

Draco wondered if that would happen now. Syrinx might not mean to, but she shared a connection with Harry that Draco never would, rather like his brother, and she could nudge Harry back in the direction of his training.

Draco decided firmly that he wouldn’t let that happen. It would be subtle, but he would keep an eye on Syrinx. At the same time, he would be starting his subtle plan to take revenge on Potter, and play with Michael.

_I am going to be busy_, he thought, as he gave Michael a warm smile and pretended he didn’t notice his reaction. _Good thing that my parents raised me to attend to several things simultaneously._

******

Lucius put the finishing touch on his letter and softly called Julius, the great horned owl he kept to deliver truce-dance gifts and other messages of extreme importance. Julius had consented to be Lucius’s messenger to the Unspeakables without fuss. He seemed to find something important about flying directly to the most notorious, and dangerous, Department in the Ministry. He extended his leg now, and flew out the window of the Manor the moment Lucius finished binding on the envelope.

Lucius knew the answer would come in the form of another piece of gray parchment with an hourglass sigil, probably placed discreetly under his door, on the table beside his bed, or another place where Narcissa would be unlikely to discover it. He could not respond in the same way, and he did not know how the Unspeakables were reaching him so directly. He had to trust that they would not harm him.
He could feel himself smile, though he knew the expression would look more like a snarl to any observer. *Or, rather, trust in the Manor’s wards to protect me if they ever do try to harm me.*

He hoped the Unspeakables would accept his latest offer. He had led up to this little by little, making reasonable requests he knew would be denied, asking questions he knew wouldn’t be answered, and suggesting delicately that he feared for his life and influence over Harry if Harry discovered what he was conspiring at. The Unspeakables had responded as Lucius hoped. They would use what he had finally offered to distract Harry so thoroughly that he would be busy dealing with the consequences of the offer, not who had made it.

Lucius was sorry to do it; he would not have if the Unspeakables had not approached him, because then there would never have been the chance of Harry finding out about the torture of his parents and the subduing of Auror Mallory. And he knew that it violated the terms of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, and if Harry found out, he would drain his magic.

But that only made it more exciting. And besides, with this person firmly removed from the Alliance, then Lucius’s influence over Harry could only grow.

He let his gaze go to the front page of the *Prophet*, and narrow. The anti-werewolf hysteria had finally subsided enough, as they moved into the second week of September, for the news about the Grand Unified Theory that supposedly proved purebloods were inferior to Mudbloods to return. And now Thomas Rhangnara was suggesting that there really was nothing purebloods could do to control the magic in their children. In fact, he said, magic responded badly to most forms of restriction. It respected the choices of mothers, it respected bloodline to a certain extent and the place and time the child was born and a few dozen other factors, but it wanted to have its own will, too. It came especially to those individuals who showed through their lives that they valued freedom.

*Ridiculous,* Lucius thought. *If that were true, my father would never have become magical at all.*

But that only made him remember the claims that Abraxas was halfblood, infused with what Rhangnara chose to call “hybrid vigor,” and that only made him murderous once more. Lucius rose to his feet and paced towards his library.

He knew killing Rhangnara would do little good. It was too likely to reveal him, and in any case, there were many other “research wizards” willing to claim the same nonsense that Rhangnara believed.

But Lucius knew a certain set of spells that could make Rhangnara retract what he had said. And some spread like a disease; those Rhangnara argued with would be more likely to begin believing his new version. Start a split in the so-far-united ranks of those studying the Grand Unified Theory, and others would doubt.

The spells were dangerous, powerful, and difficult to work properly, but Lucius intended to try them.

*He will be quiet, our family will be free from the taint of Mudblood heritage, and my influence over Harry will increase as Rhangnara’s star falls. There is no battlefield on which I do not win.*

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Warmth. Darkness. Confinement. Comfort. She did not *want* to rise. Why should she? She was comfortable where she was.

But a prickle on her left side kept waking her up, like the sudden stab of a thorn through her flesh. She remembered the oath she had sworn, the debt she owed. She sighed, and at last she stretched her arms and *woke*.

Dirt shifted above her. Tendrils tore around her, birthing her suddenly back into light brighter than any she had seen in months. She shook her head and raked dirt out of her hair and eyes with carefully moving fingers. Her eyes watered and ran with the light, but they adjusted quickly.

Indigena Yaxley blinked and looked down at herself. She smiled slightly as she saw that the shadow of plants under her skin was no longer faint. Now she looked like a construct of blossoms, bushes, and leaves wrapped in a human form that could burst at any moment. The thorny rose wrapped around her wrist, the poison of which could kill in a few hours, had sprouted more thorns and dug in further, even as the petals turned a deeper blood-red. The flower rustled and lifted in response to her gaze. Indigena nodded. As if it had spoken to her, she knew how else it had changed. It was more sentient now, and the poison it delivered through its thorns would kill in a few minutes instead of a few hours.

That was a common trait of all the magic she bore, she found, when she examined the rest of her body. The long slumber underground had changed her, indeed, but not only physically. She felt more *connected* to the plants she had put into her skin, and to the great gardens and greenhouses of Thornhall, as if they and she together formed an ecosystem of their own. Her brown-
Blonde hair had streaks of vines, now, and she knew that her dark eyes probably had no pupil, only a drowning well into green. Thorns on thin tendrils wrapped her shoulders, glittering silver projections that slid into sheaths within her skin like claws. Indigena willed them to lash in front of her, and they did, with frightening speed and quickness, impaling the remains of the cocoon she had used to recover from Hawthorn Parkinson’s blood curses.

The only part of her unchanged was the Dark Mark on her left arm, and it called her now. Her Lord had need of her. As Indigena was the only Death Eater he had trusted with the knowledge of his secret resting place, she wasn’t at all surprised. The rest of the Death Eaters had probably died in the assault on Hogwarts. She suspected that she would die, too, before all was done.

But none of that mattered to the debt of honor she owed, and none of that mattered to the instructions her Lord had given her for this eventuality.

She spent a moment stroking the plants that had cradled her, giving them instructions to regrow the cocoon in case she ever had need of it again. Then she strode rapidly into her house, nodding in approval as she found it bereft of dust thanks to the house elves, and retrieved several objects.

One was a roll of parchment, with a Never-Ending inkwell attached to it. Indigena had often found need of it, and that would be especially true in the coming months.

Another was a Pensieve. Her Lord would want to study the battle, and whatever had happened afterwards, so that it could not happen again.

Another was a list of names. Karkaroff and the other Continental Death Eaters had made contact with many, many people in various countries of Europe who had shown some interest in supporting the Dark Lord. Not all of them had received Voldemort’s personal approval to become Death Eaters, and not all would, Indigena knew. Some only wanted to join for money, or because they felt the Light was growing too powerful in their own homes, or because they were fearful of the sheer concentration of Lord-level power in Britain and wanted to disrupt it. But any number of them could be useful.

Another was the set of books she had found to have information on Falco Parkinson. He was an enemy to her and her Lord, no matter what he might do to aid them. Indigena was determined to stop him, once she found out what he had achieved in the few months she had been underground.

And last but not least was an ancient book her Lord had last discussed with her a few days before the assault on Hogwarts. Indigena did not know how her grandmother had come to have possession of it, but she had, and it had been treasured just as all dangerous and beautiful objects were treasured among the Yaxleys.

Its cover said Odi et Amo in tiny letters. Indigena blew the dust off it, and placed it carefully into her trunk.

Then she shrunk the trunk and went to give final instructions to her house elves. It didn’t take long. They were well-trained and obedient, and the more willing to serve her because Indigena had always treated them well. She didn’t see the point to some of the mindless cruelties her peers indulged in.

Then she was on her way, stepping out of Thornhall to take in the wide sweep of moor beyond. It was a misty day in early September, the sun barely peering through a mass of silver. The primary colors were gray and green and brown. Indigena took a deep breath, smelled all the things growing, and felt her heart swell.

I will die, she thought, because everyone does. But first I’ll live.

She walked a few steps on the moors, absorbing the sunlight and loving it, before she Apparated to her Lord’s side.

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Intermission: Disaster, Thy Name Is Regulus

“Severus.”

Snape stiffened at the sound of his first name, and glanced over his shoulder. Regulus Black stood behind him in the early summer darkness, his head cocked and his eyes gleaming with intensity. Snape didn’t remember that intensity from school. Granted, Regulus had been a year younger than he was, even if they were in the same House, but Snape had made it his business to know him, since he was Sirius Black’s brother. He should have noticed something like this.
“What are you doing here?” Snape asked. “Here” was the remains of a wizarding community just past the Scottish border. It was the closest the Death Eaters had yet attacked to Hogwarts, but Snape knew that would change. Besides, angering Dumbledore and panicking his followers hadn’t been the main reason they staged this attack where they did. It was a sufficiently isolated place to test the Black Plague spores that Adalrico Bulstrode had finally managed to create. The Dark Lord was not entirely pleased with the results, however, so it would be some time before the spores saw use in formal battle. Snape nudged the remains of a swollen body with his foot, and wrinkled his nose. His Lord had ordered him to search for tatters of bubo-marked skin which he could brew into a potion to neutralize the plague. It would be important to have that for the Death Eaters once the spores worked properly, Snape knew, but he found the task distasteful. The bodies stank.

“I’m out of Hogwarts now.” Regulus leaped lightly over a body and joined Snape, giving a peculiar shudder as he landed. The smell did take getting used to, Snape thought. Regulus rolled up his sleeve and thrust his left arm under Snape’s nose, forcing him to confront the Dark Mark. “And I chose to follow our Lord.”

Snape glanced quickly at Regulus, then away. “Of course you did,” he said. He wondered why the news should have surprised him. Everyone knew that Sirius Black had run away from home at the end of Christmas holidays in their sixth year, and that his parents had disowned him and settled on Regulus as their heir. Of course the Dark Lord would court the only heir of such a prominent, Dark, pureblood family, since the oldest son was beyond his reach and firmly wrapped up in the webs of the Order of the Phoenix.

“Yes.” Regulus kicked at a body, then shook his head. “How do you stand the smell?”

“Not easily.” Snape saw a woman with a still-intact black bubble on her chest, and knelt, using a Cutting Curse to remove the patch of infected skin. Blood spread where it had been in a sluggish, disinterested stain. He rose and wrapped the skin in a bit of cloth, tucking it into his robe pocket. “Did the Dark Lord send you to find me?”

Regulus jumped a bit. “Oh! Yes, he did. He said that he wanted you to return to him as soon as possible. Something even more urgent than creating a potion to resist the plague has arisen.” His voice fell into a stentorian imitation of Voldemort’s tones. Probably unconscious, Snape decided. At least, he hoped it was unconscious. He would not live long if their Lord decided that Regulus was mocking him.

“Then we must go to him at once,” said Snape, and turned to stride over the ground paved with sprawled limbs and burst organs.

“Yes,” said Regulus again.

It took Snape a full three minutes to realize he had reached the edge of the village and Regulus wasn’t with him. He turned around, an impatient comment on his lips.

He saw Regulus kneeling over a woman whose head had leaped off her neck when the spores landed, carefully aligning the broken pieces of skin once more and closing the head’s eyes. Snape wondered, incredulous, if he would say a mending spell, but Regulus seemed to realize how inappropriate that would be. He just stood, nodded a moment at his handiwork, and then hurried after Snape. He even took the lead a moment later, in fact; Snape had to stand still and stare after him, wondering what in the world had prompted him to make that unnecessary gesture.

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“He’s dead.”

Snape came very close to breaking his glass stirring rod on the side of his cauldron. He tended to enter brewing so deeply that he was not aware of what was happening around him. A weakness, he knew, and one that he must take steps to correct. He laid the stirring rod gently aside, without letting his hand tremble, and turned to face Lucius.

“Do you think I keep track of your comings and goings, Lucius?” he drawled, and had the satisfaction of seeing Lucius’s triumph-flushed face turn red for a different reason. “Who is dead?”

“Gideon Prewett,” said Lucius, with savage satisfaction. “And his brother Fabian. It took us five of them, but we brought them down.”

Snape nodded curtly, to keep from saying something unfortunate, namely how pathetic it was that it had taken five Death Eaters to kill two Light wizards. Yes, the Prewett twins were famous, respected wizards, but the Dark Lord’s followers were supposed to be more powerful—those who had the desire and the will to conquer death.
“Enjoy your prize, Lucius,” he said, as he turned back to his potion. Voldemort had wished for a potion that would allow anyone
to mimic the effect of the Dementor’s Kiss. So far, Snape was having no luck. There was simply not enough information available
about Dementors, even in the vast libraries he had access to as Voldemort’s trusted servant; few wizards had ever been interested
in them.

“I will,” said Lucius, his voice gone languid and content. “This is the last of the major attacks for a month’s time, and Narcissa is
waiting.”

Snape heard the pop of Apparition from behind him, and returned to his cauldron. Or, he tried to return to his cauldron. In a few
moments, he had to put the stirring rod down and pace in a circle. He made sure it looked as if he were trying to stretch muscles
tense from the bowed position the brewing had put him in. He was largely alone in this wing of the Riddle house, but one never
knew who might be watching. And, of course, his Occlumency barriers were up, as they always were.

He could not show that the tension in his muscles came from wild contempt, of the kind he had felt a year ago for the Mudblood
children killed in his initiation.

He had known when he came into the Death Eaters that few were like him, either in level of magic or level of dedication. They
were there because they feared death or wanted to follow the Dark Lord on his quest to create a pureblood world free of taint.
Snape had accepted that he would have to work beside people he did not understand and did not like. That had always been true,
because there was no one in the world like him.

He had not known that he would despise them so much.

They bragged when their own blood pride should have told them to keep silent. They resorted to ugly and obvious spells where
simple, elegant ones would have done—in fact, where their Lord had commanded them to be careful, because he did not want a
certain attack to be revealed as a Death Eater one yet. Then they seemed surprised when the Dark Lord kept his word and tortured
them for their failures. They made the same mistakes again and again. They denigrated the care Snape took over his potions and
did not understand why their Lord valued him, even when he explained. They smashed interesting magical treasures recovered in
their raids as easily as they smashed the skulls of Mudbloods.

Snape had never known there would be so little grace in what he had become.

“Severus?”

That would be Regulus, the only one who persistently called him by his first name other than the Dark Lord—and since the first
time he had met Voldemort, Snape had never failed to sense his magic and be kneeling when Voldemort entered a room. He cut
off his circling at once and faced Regulus, his robes snapping to behind him. “What?” he snarled.

Regulus blinked, then held up his hand. “I thought you might want to see this,” he said. “I just came back from a visit to my
parents, and they agreed that I could take it to show you.”

Snape drew breath to bark a retort, and then the silver globe lying in Regulus’s palm came to life. It opened its sides as wings
made of light, and Snape saw the gleam of stars on deep, velvety blackness. In the center of them was a golden dot of sunshine,
and the planets of their solar system dancing around it.

He came closer, and stared. He had never seen any magical device so intricate on so small a scale. Whoever had made this had
replicated the colors of Saturn perfectly on a globe the size of Snape’s thumbnail, and the others were smaller. Yet, when Snape
murmured a spell that sharpened his eyesight, he could make out the gleam of green continents on the Earth globe. It was perfect
down to the last and the smallest.

This was what Snape had once believed all magic should be: calm grandeur, going about its beauties, not even noticing the efforts
made to hinder it.

He gazed, and gazed, and when he looked up, Regulus was watching him. His face had relaxed, though, and he said nothing, only
nodded with a small smile before he gathered up the globe and took it away with him. He could get away with the smile, Snape
thought. Regulus was known to smile and joke like that—it was put down to him being both young and the spoiled heir of a
prominent family—and appreciation of art was not disapproved of among the Death Eaters, though many of them didn’t see the
use of it, and lacked the wits to do it themselves.

Strange, Snape reflected as he began brewing again, that the only Death Eater who seemed to show him something of grace and
beauty was Sirius Black’s brother.
“Amputo!”

Snape roared the word, and the Order of the Phoenix witch facing him fell screaming, trying to lift her wand and unable to do so. Of course, it didn’t help that the spell had wrenched her left arm away from the rest of her body and left it lying on the ground, and that her left hand clutched her wand. All that remained sticking out of her left shoulder was a bag of bone and flesh about the size of Snape’s wrist.

He could have left it there. The blood loss and the shock would have finished her, and he was needed elsewhere in the battle; he could hear spells exploding around him as the Death Eaters fought to turn the Order’s ambush into a victory for their side.

But he could not leave yet, because it was not enough.

He focused on the witch again, and whispered, “Coquo.”

The spell curled around her legs first, and the woman began howling, a noise of pure misery that didn’t sound human, but reminded Snape irresistibly of a werewolf’s cry. He shuddered, but he didn’t look away from his victim. It wasn’t the full moon, and in any case Fenrir Greyback had been assigned to a different part of the battle, as he always was at Snape’s request. He had the leisure to stand still and watch as digestive acids consumed the woman’s feet, then her thighs, then her groin. The howl as she was eaten below the waist made something like peace come back into Snape’s heart.

She was a torso with a right arm and a head now, and still alive. Snape wasn’t done with her yet. “Torridus.”

The Dehydration Curse wrinkled her skin, and the woman tried to cry out again in misery, but she had no saliva left in her mouth, and therefore could make no sound. Her eyeballs rolled crisply in her head. Her hair crackled as she waggled her neck. Her skin gleamed with a dull patina in the firelight behind her; Snape had taken her sweat away.

Snape smiled. He saw, from the corner of his eye, someone who had been approaching him back away. He didn’t blame that person.

He finished it. “Extorqueo.”

Giant, invisible hands grabbed what remained of the witch and began twisting her head in the opposite direction from her body. Snape saw her mouth moving as her head traveled in a circle, and then the clean, crisp snap of her neck rang a good distance across the battlefield. A moment later, the invisible hands pulled her body and her head apart in a spray of blood. Snape blinked as blood flew across him, pattering his face, soaking his robes, and shards of bone rang past him like shrapnel. One sliced his cheek open.

He smiled.

“Severus?”

And then he turned and then he saw Regulus—Regulus, whom he had thought dead at the witch’s wand—and then he fell to one knee, overwhelmed, and Regulus was there, one hand tentatively resting on his shoulder.

“I—you didn’t need to do that,” Regulus whispered. “I was all right. And even if I hadn’t been—” Snape looked up to see him shaking his head, and he said no more, but Snape knew what he meant, as clearly as if he’d finished the sentence. Even if I hadn’t been, you shouldn’t have used those spells. You know more of grace than that. Clean kill, and move on.

Yes, Snape thought, he should have done that. He should have. Pleasure in torture was a refined amusement in the proper place.

A battle was not the proper place.

He felt a shifting as of continents inside him, and that was the first time in nearly two years that his scorn turned on himself, pouring over him like the flood of digestive acids from the Coquo spell. He should have known better. He knew how to take revenge. One took it in the best and safest way, and in the coolest frame of mind. One did not succumb to rage like a—

Like a Gryffindor.
That was the first time that Severus Snape looked at himself with clear eyes, and saw what he had become, and despised it. There
was nothing of the grace or beauty or grandeur there should have been in the Death Eaters, and none in the Dark Lord, and none
in him. The notion that he could walk through ugliness and remain untouched by it was gone. The notion that he could turn ugly
and not care about it was gone.

And it was Regulus’s fault, for retaining a note of grace that he probably didn’t even realize he possessed, for calling Snape by his
first name and trying to share beauty with him and advocating a cleaner revenge. He was the reason it all tumbled apart in Snape’s
mind, two years after his first meeting with Voldemort, and refused to put itself back together again.

* * * * *

Chapter Twenty-One: Confluences

On the day the article in the Daily Prophet came out that proved Aurora Whitestag and Philip Willoughby had decided to work
together, Harry decided that he’d had enough of this nonsense and wanted to talk to people.

He came into the Great Hall to find people staring at him. Harry rolled his eyes. When they do that before breakfast, one thing is
usually the cause: an article in the paper. He didn’t think it was the Vox Populi, though. Most of the students still took that less
seriously than the Prophet, and anyway, Hornblower was busy cutting his way through a forest of supposition about the Minister
and his fitness to do his job right now. He hadn’t published anything concerning Harry in the last five days.

Harry sat down at the Slytherin table. Millicent tossed a copy of the paper to him without a word. Harry nodded to her, and let his
Levitation Charm catch it, holding it in the air in front of him while he spooned up porridge and poured pumpkin juice for
himself. The shop in Hogsmeade he’d paid to deliver breakfast to him each day had proven less than imaginative about their
choices, not that Harry minded the bland food that much.

**VATES NEEDS MONITORS, OPPONENTS SAY**

**Monitoring Board May Be Best Compromise**

By: Melinda Honeywhistle

“I have been worried that we haven’t done the right thing so far,” said Aurora Whitestag yesterday. “After all, the vates needs to
concentrate on fighting the war against You-Know-Who. But I hope this new solution will be an acceptable compromise to both
parties.”

Whitestag was referring to the new petition brought before the Wizengamot yesterday, which asks for a monitoring board to be
established on the former Harry Potter’s activities. The members of the monitoring board would consist mostly of those parents
whose children Harry killed before the Battle of Hogwarts, but a few Wizengamot members and a professor from Hogwarts
School of Witchcraft and Wizardry would be welcome as well, Whitestag said.

“Harry obviously needs some supervision,” she said. “He trained during the summer, but I think he returned to the wizarding
world before his training was complete. He needs more. We can suggest tactics to him, and make sure that he isn’t using his
magic irresponsibly. He benefits from our presence, and the whole of our world benefits from making sure the Boy-Who-Lived is
properly trained. And properly watched over, of course.”

Philip Willoughby, whose daughter Alexandra died in the attack on Hogwarts, and who has petitioned to bring Harry to trial,
appears to have thrown his support behind Whitestag.

“I’ve given up hope that I’ll ever see Potter put in Tullianum for his crimes,” he told this reporter yesterday. “But a monitoring
board is a good idea. I’ve been beyond grateful that so many people in the wizarding world have paid attention to me, a Muggle
father whose daughter was still looked upon as inferior by many of her peers. I’ve made good friends, and those friends will
stand behind me to put the monitoring board in place, even as they stood behind me in the petition about the trial.”

Whitestag says that her own motive, and the motive of many of the parents of the Dozen Who Died, as the children have come to
be known, is not vengeance for the dead, but simply making sure the entire wizarding world survives.

“There’s a good reason that no teenager has ever been a Lord,” she says. “They cannot be trusted with that much power. It’s not
Harry’s fault that this happened to him. If anything, I think it’s our fault, the fault of parents and professors, for leaving him with
abusive parents who twisted his sense of honor and justice. Under our care, he will learn more about what he can be, rather than
just growing into whatever monstrous form he might achieve without us.”
Harry finished the article and shook his head, laying the paper on the table. Draco promptly snatched it, and Owen settled into place on the other side of Draco, patiently reading around the jerking motions of his hands.

Draco said nothing when he’d finished. Harry went on eating, and waited for the storm to break.

“Why aren’t you upset about this?”

At least Draco had hissed that into his ear, not shouted it to the Great Hall. Harry arched an eyebrow. “I am,” he said. “But yelling about it won’t do any good. They might not even get the Wizengamot to decide on this any time soon, given that they’re occupied with deciding what to do about the werewolves. At least I’m forewarned. And I accepted consequences like this when I mercy-killed those children, Draco.”

Draco shook his head. “You are infuriating,” he said, but his voice was more resigned than anything else.

“I’m trying not to be,” said Harry firmly, and pushed his porridge bowl away, standing. Draco stared at him. “I’m going to find Snape,” Harry explained to that stare, “and ask if he’s far enough along in his healing for him to want to see me.”

“After what he said to you in Potions class the other day?”

“Yes,” said Harry mildly. He had been hurt when Snape criticized his potion as he had never done in Harry’s years at Hogwarts, casting aspersions not on his training—that training would have included Snape’s teaching, of course—but on Harry’s desire to experiment by himself, and implying that Harry thought himself too good to brew ordinary class assignments. It was such a reversal from a few weeks past, when Snape had trusted Harry with Potions work enough to lend *Medicamenta Meatus Verus* to him. Harry had thought about it for a while, though, and managed to calm down. It had been hurtful, but considering what Snape was going through right now, it was a miracle that he was rational enough to teach classes at all, never mind speak politely to a student. Harry thought that it could even be an honor, though dubious, that Snape cared enough about him to single him out. Usually now, Snape just paced in circles around the room, having put the instructions for the potion on the board, and stared at everyone.

“Why?”

“But because I want to see if I can help him in his healing, and I want to see if I can have my guardian back.” Harry said, and smiled at Draco before he trotted out of the Great Hall. Not surprisingly, Snape hadn’t been at breakfast. He avoided them now, since the first day of term when he’d come near to Transfiguring a Hufflepuff girl into something embarrassing. Harry thought that meant Snape was listening to Joseph’s advice, and that was a hopeful sign.

He made his way to Snape’s quarters, all the time counting the minutes in his head before Potions. It should be enough time. He’d made sure to come to breakfast early, and the Potions classroom wasn’t that far from Snape’s rooms. He had half an hour.

He had opened his eyes this morning, lain staring at the ceiling of their four-poster for a moment, listened to Draco’s soft snores, and realized that gestures of reconciliation wouldn’t go amiss. Waiting to discuss things because he didn’t want to infringe on someone else’s free will was only making assumptions, again. How could he knew whether pride held them back, or anger, or simple misunderstanding of Harry and his motives, unless he asked? He hadn’t asked Snape what had happened between him and Camellia since that initial question. He hadn’t persisted in visiting Snape because he thought it might hurt him.

But it might hurt him if I stayed away, too. And I’m never going to know if I don’t ask.

He reached Snape’s door just as it opened. Joseph stepped out, his gray robes swirling around his ankles as he shut the door gently. He saw Harry, and frowned, shaking his head.

“This is not a good time, Harry.”

“Why not?” Harry tilted his head and waited. He felt poised, calm, balanced. He had accepted that there was no direction he could move in that was free of mistakes. He could make a mistake in pressing the matter when Snape was so wounded. He could make a mistake in waiting to press the matter, because then Snape would assume Harry didn’t care about his suffering. He could make a mistake in any tiny gesture or word that someone took the wrong way. He had to be willing to make those mistakes, and bear the consequences of them, and keep moving forward with a little more knowledge under his belt, eyes a little more open. If Snape’s moods really did change as rapidly as the weather, then Harry would have to keep considering them, that was all.

“He had a very bad dream last night.” Joseph murmured as if his words would hurt the air—or as if Snape were listening from inside the room, which Harry thought was much more likely. “A dream that involved memories he had not only pressed down to
the bottom of his mind, but tried to destroy. He did give me permission to tell you they involved Regulus Black. And since Regulus is not here at the moment, there is little I can do to help him.”

“And how is he in general?”

Joseph sighed. “The same. Willing to give me scraps and bits of information, but not explain specific twists in his soul. Convinced he is vile. Hurting and unwilling to show his pain, but wishing there was someone in the world who knew of it.”

Harry nodded. “And is there anything that you think I can do, even if he doesn’t want to see me or talk to me?”

“I don’t see what,” Joseph said. “Even I can see that he needs your presence, but I will not admit you to his rooms when he has asked me not to.”

Harry bit his lip. “What about a letter?” he suggested. “That comes to him and lets him know that that I’m here and waiting, but he doesn’t have to write back, or even read it, if he doesn’t want to.”

Joseph blinked. “That—that might work. But you know that he could write a letter full of the most violent abuse back to you?”

“I’ve taken worse.” Harry found himself grinning. He was always happier when he had a plan, a way to move forward after being stuck in place. “And I want to speak to him, Joseph. If you don’t think it will hurt him more than help, I’ll take the chance.”

Silence passed for a moment, while Harry went on gazing expectantly at Joseph and the Seer mulled it over. Then he nodded. “If you believe that you can stand it,” he murmured.

“I can,” said Harry. “And anyway, he needs it. And I love him, so there you go.” He smiled at Joseph one more time, then turned and made his way towards Potions class, already composing his letter in his mind. When he was far down the dungeon corridor, he heard the door of Snape’s quarters open and then close, but he didn’t look back. If Snape had come out to peer after him, Harry would let him have the sight of Harry he seemed to want, without forcing his guardian to meet his gaze.

Does it really matter who makes the first gesture of reconciliation, who reaches out first? No. This isn’t a sacrifice, and I’m not doing it to be a sacrifice. Snape can tell me to fuck off, and I’ll fuck off. He can yell at me, and I’ll accept that.

Now, after Potions class, I’ll find Connor and approach him. I think I can catch him on the way to Defense Against the Dark Arts. Really, the fight he had with Draco was silly, and I should have given him the chance to tell his side of it long before this. At least arrange a time for us to use a Pensieve.

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Snape did not feel human.

He also did not want to go into the dungeons and teach the Potions class.

But McGonagall had given him the terms for his remaining at Hogwarts, and this was one of them. And if he was forced to leave Hogwarts and go elsewhere…Snape did not know how he would survive. He knew he would be less than he was here, a sack of blood and bones and charred memories. He had essays to mark and classes to teach as long as he remained Potions Master.

The only advantage being away from Hogwarts might offer was being away from Harry.

Since he had started dreaming of Regulus and the part Regulus had played in driving him back to the arms of the Light, he had found it harder to tolerate being around Harry. He wanted to see Harry. He watched him when he ate in the Great Hall during lunch and dinner, talking with the other Slytherin students or lost in contemplation or arranging dueling club meetings. He wanted Harry to come to him, to apologize for sending Snape away from Coblentz-by-the-Sea, and explain that he had punished Camellia and she would never touch Snape again.

But he did not want Harry near him at the same time. He could not forgive him for being absent as he suffered the dreams, or summoning Joseph and leaving him to the Seer’s nonexistent mercies. He wanted Harry to understand, but not ask questions. He wanted Harry to realize what the dreams were doing to him, but he didn’t want to have to tell him about the dreams.

He knew that was irrational. That only made the pain worse, particularly when days passed and Harry made no effort to seek him out at all.
And then, today, Harry had come and spoken to Joseph outside the door, and Snape had listened. Harry spoke of writing a letter to him. Snape hated the thought of it, at once. Harry should have known better than to reach out to him after the dreams of Regulus that tormented him night after night.

*Harry doesn’t know about the dreams of Regulus,* whispered his saner mind.

Snape didn’t care. He should have known. Harry was a Legilimens. He could have met Snape’s eyes and read the dreams out of his mind. That Harry wouldn’t do such a thing because of his dislike for compulsion of any sort was worse, because it suggested Harry prized his precious principles above Snape, and only confirmed another old truth his mother had told him: that no one would ever love him above anything else. Harry had only cared when he was essential to the cause, and now that Snape had revealed his wounds and his bitterness, he had turned away.

The thoughts, mad and sane, and the bitterness made a rope so strong that Snape nearly let himself hang from it rather than listening to the words Harry spoke to Joseph. And then he laughed aloud when it was done, because Harry expected vileness from him.

*How can he, after all I have done for him?*

But if Harry had not, then Snape would have despised him for not learning the lessons he had tried to teach the boy. Only a fool would assume he would write a calm, coherent letter back in this state, or even try to communicate at all. No matter which way Harry turned, he was a fool.

“Are you fit to teach today?”

Snape looked up. Joseph had come back through the door, and stood leaning against it, watching him thoughtfully.

“I must be,” Snape rasped out.

Joseph nodded. “And if the letter comes and you don’t want to read it, you can always burn it.”

So Joseph knew he had overheard—or he guessed it, because it was the kind of thing someone with Snape’s pitch-colored soul would do. Either assumption was unacceptable. Snape snarled at him and turned away.

Joseph said nothing else, which Snape was grateful for. He prepared for the Potions class in quick, efficient movements. He had already memorized the recipe for the potion. He would put it on the board and leave his students to follow it as best they might. A glare from him was usually enough to put even the most confident and skilled of the sixth-year NEWT students off their careful following of instructions. Hermione Granger had made small mistakes in each class since the start of term.

He strode into the corridor, his face formed into a cold mask, his hands clenched around his wand. If he had met anyone on the way there, he didn’t know what would have happened. But he did not, and he opened the door of his classroom and swept in, coldly pleased to note that a few talking students scrambled into their seats.

“Twelve points from Hufflepuff for slowness,” he said coolly, because Susan Bones hadn’t moved fast enough. She lowered her eyes, her face the picture of misery.

Snape waved his wand, and the Potions recipe appeared with a short *bang* of colored smoke. He turned around and let his gaze sweep across their faces menacingly, silently instructing them to get to work. Most of the students ran for the ingredients closet at once. Only three didn’t move: Draco and Granger, who always copied down the instructions or checked them against their books before they did anything else—

And Harry, who sat calmly in his seat, staring at Snape with large green eyes.

Snape stared, unblinking, pouring all the malevolence of commingled pain and hatred into his gaze, using it as a blade to slice at Harry’s Occlumency barriers. Harry gave a small smile, and then his barriers fell and Snape found himself in a mind he barely remembered.

Harry’s thoughts had changed since the last time he had seen them. Then, they had resembled a steel skeleton barely touched with leaves. Now they were a living tree, and the dark spaces between the branches that had once been filled with uncertainty curled with new twigs and new leaves—emotions and experiences Harry had had no context for, before. Snape stared.

Harry nudged softly at his Legilimency. Snape complied, so caught off-balance was he, and found himself looking straight into
Harry’s love for him.

It cut like sunlight and hurt like blades. Harry didn’t expect that Snape would wake up from his pain one day and return to the person he had been. He knew the healing might last the rest of his life. He knew that Snape might never be his guardian again, might never speak to him directly again, might be useless to the war effort and Harry’s path from this moment forward.

That didn’t matter. Harry’s love for him would still exist, because Harry’s love for him didn’t depend on any of those things.

Snape felt his carefully constructed reality sliding away from him. He had known, even as he raged about Harry refusing to speak to him more directly, that he had no right to expect this kind of devotion. Eileen Prince had been right. That kind of devotion didn’t exist.

And here it was, staring back at him.

Snape snapped his gaze away and snarled, “Mr. Potter. Do you wish for the low mark you will receive if Mr. Malfoy does all the work? Begin.”

And he could feel Harry smiling even as he rose from his seat to obey, because Snape had slipped enough to call him by the last name he had discarded.

Snape didn’t need to open Harry’s letter. When it came, he would burn it, but not because he didn’t want to read it. He would burn it because he already knew what it would say.

*Why should this change things?* he thought, scrambling to rebuild the mask Harry had destroyed. *After all, his love could still be a sham, or a lie. He could still love you mainly because of what you have been to him, and not for the person you now are. He has made no effort to learn what you are now.*

But Snape doubted that any rationalization he could make would dent or damage the fact of that love. He could change his mind. He could rage. He could storm. He could drive Harry away, or attempt to split open his heart with the cruelest words he knew. He could decide that he would never see Harry again.

None of that would change the fact that the love existed, and would go right on existing, in spite of him.

******

Harry caught up with Connor just as Connor was about to duck into the safety of the Defense classroom. The first thing Connor knew of his presence was the hand on his shoulder that tugged him gently to the side and leaned him against the wall. “Can I talk to you?” his brother asked him.

Connor thought of refusing. He should, he knew. Parvati was right. Harry could have solved the whole problem between him and Malfoy by demanding Connor’s side of the story when the argument had first happened. Connor would have given in with just a little more pressure. He wouldn’t have wanted to apologize to Malfoy, but doing that and explaining were two different things.

On the other hand, Harry had caught him. Connor didn’t want to yell at Harry in front of the other NEWT Defense students. Parvati would want him to avoid making a scene.

“I suppose,” he said, ducking his chin into his chest and scowling up at his brother from beneath his fringe.

Harry just nodded. “I wanted to know if I could hear what happened between you and Draco,” he said. “If you don’t want to tell me or can’t remember everything, I can get hold of a Pensieve, and you can put the memory in there. Then I can watch it and make my own decisions.”

Connor blinked, his mouth coming slightly open. “Did you use Legilimency on me?” he snapped.

“What? Of course not,” Harry blinked back at him. “Why would I have?”

“That’s what I wanted to do!” Connor exclaimed. “Tell you the truth, everything, with just a bit more prompting. But instead it lapsed into silence for two weeks, and you didn’t make any effort to pick it up again.”

Harry winced. “I know, Connor,” he said. “I’m sorry. That was a mistake on my part. If I really want to consider myself as respecting the free will of everyone, then I need to know more about those people and what they want, and I need to approach
them instead of letting the wounds between them and me fester.” Connor nodded in approval. That was something like the
apology Parvati thought Harry should have given, though not as detailed. “Now. Can I hear?”

“After class,” said Connor. “In a Pensieve,” he added, because he didn’t think that he could recall all the details of the
conversation, and he didn’t want Harry to think of him as biased.

Harry nodded, and then Malfoy arrived behind him and took his arm, giving Connor a condescending look. Connor just rolled his
eyes and made his way to the back of the class. Malfoy might be with Harry from now on, as his boyfriend, just the way Ron had
said, but he didn’t have to like it.

And after what Harry sees in the Pensieve, then he probably won’t like Malfoy quite as much, either.

Connor settled into his seat and contemplated that pleasant prospect as Peter entered and swept to the front of the classroom. He
was much less nervous today, Connor noted absently. Teaching did seem to agree with him, the longer he did it.

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Harry pulled his head slowly out of the Pensieve he had borrowed—Draco’s, used when he invented the spell that let one person
experience another’s mindset—and blinked, shaking drops of silvery liquid from his hair. Connor sat on his bed in the Gryffindor
sixth-year boys’ room, watching him anxiously. Harry sat back and shook his head again.

“I think we were all three at fault,” he told Connor.

His brother’s mouth fell open, and Connor spluttered, kicking out a foot behind him with such violence that it got tangled in the
bed hangings. Harry waited, watching in silent amusement as Connor shook his head and clenched his jaw. Connor had not grown
up all the way yet. Such a child, still, sometimes, but I know he’s capable of better things. And that hope tempered Harry’s anger,
and really, he should have allowed it to do so earlier. He knew how much good was in people. He was supposed to look for it, as
vates. He should never have allowed his silent treatment of Connor to last so long.

Really, why do I lose my temper? It only does more harm than good. Accepting what other people do, and trying to talk to them
about it, and accepting it if they get angry at me, are all more productive than offering them cold shoulders or harsh words.

“I wasn’t!” Connor burst out at last. “He came into my room just to taunt me!”

“Then you taunted him back,” said Harry, calm as steel.

“He didn’t have to say what he did!”

“No, he didn’t,” Harry agreed. “And neither did you.” He leaned forward, stretching out his hand to clasp his brother’s. “Connor,
did you think it would make him more sympathetic to halfbloods, to say that he would have to accept them?”

“No,” Connor said sullenly, avoiding his handshake and looking at the floor. “I wasn’t—I wasn’t thinking about making him
accept halfbloods, or arguing him into it. I just wanted him to shut up.”

“And would you say that was childish?” Harry asked.

“No more childish than what he did!”

Harry leaned back against the pillow—he sat on Neville’s bed, since Neville was in NEWT Ancient Runes right now—and
tapped his fingers on his chin. Draco’s ring caught the light and sparked it back at him, making Harry blink. Diamond afterimages
raced across his vision as he glanced back at Connor. “But do you really want to be a child all your life, compared to him? Do you
really want Gryffindors to seem childish next to Slytherins?”

“I suppose not,” Connor said, staring at the floor. “I just don’t see why I have to be the more mature one all the time.”

“Oh, not all the time,” said Harry. “But Draco is more mature most of the time.” Connor sat up, his mouth flying open in protest,
but Harry shook his head at him. “You know he is, Connor. He was trained to keep his composure. He’s hexed you and attacked
you, but you’ve done the same thing to him, and more often. He says horrible things about you, but to me or in his head. You tend
to say them to his face.”

“I thought you said we were all three at fault there, and not just me,” Connor said from between gritted teeth.
Harry nodded. “I know. I was at fault for speaking to you so abruptly, and believing that the words I overheard were the whole story.” They certainly had not been; according to the Pensieve memory, he had missed more than half the conversation. “I’m sorry for that. And Draco was at fault for intruding in the first place. He could have ignored you slamming your trunk.” He took a deep breath and braced himself for Connor’s anger. “But I think you were more at fault than he was.”

Connor stared at him. Then he leaped to his feet and stalked towards the door.

“How can you stand him?” Harry did not raise his voice, and Connor halted, holding the door handle, scowling ferociously. “Will you hear me out?”

Connor gave a quick, jerky nod. Harry nodded back, and then spoke his thoughts as carefully and honestly as he could.

“It wasn’t honorable to attack Draco that way, Connor,” he said. “It wasn’t Gryffindor. You knew how upset he was about the Grand Unified Theory. More to the point, you knew I’d sided with you over him, because I thought he was going to physically attack you that day in the kitchen, and you knew what had happened a few days before between Snape and Camellia. What you did was cruel and calculated and horrible in its timing.”

“He has to learn to accept what you are,” Connor ground out. “I don’t see why you stay with him, Harry. He hates you for being a halfblood.”

“No, he doesn’t,” said Harry, a bit surprised that Connor saw it that way. “Why would he? I think he loves me more than any notion that purebreds are perfect. But everything changed so suddenly. And that is my fault, for not preparing him properly. I don’t think he realized that Thomas thinks—and I think—that pureblood culture is still a wonderful and valuable thing. Our main disagreement isn’t about the culture or the rituals. He thinks there’s a genetic difference between someone like him and someone like Hermione, and that the difference makes him superior. I don’t agree with that, but I can live with it. If he takes years to change his mind, so be it.”

“That’s disgusting, though.” Connor’s face had wrinkled itself up like the face of a small dog about to bark at someone. Harry entertained himself for a moment with the notion that his Animagus form might be a dog, then pushed it regretfully aside. He had to be serious right now.

“No more disgusting than what I did to both of you.” Harry cocked his head at him. “Or taking advantage of an opponent’s weakness.”

Connor’s eyes fell, and a blush of shame worked its way across his face. Harry waited. His brother might still have some trouble admitting he was wrong, but he couldn’t hide behind the notion that he was right any more.

Connor’s next words still caught him by surprise, though.

“How can you stand him?” he demanded, eyes flashing as he took a step back towards Harry. “Forget about the Grand Unified Theory, forget about blood. He’s cruel and mean-spirited and takes advantage of you. Why do you love him, Harry? Do you know that?”

It was Harry’s turn to flush as he remembered Christmas last year. He had told Draco why he loved him, an incredibly long list of reasons. He managed to give a short nod. “I do.”

“Then tell me.” Connor’s eyes narrowed further.

Harry looked away. “I don’t want to share that with you, Connor,” he said.

“Then I don’t see why I should forgive him.” Harry heard a rustle of cloth that he knew was Connor crossing his arms. “It sounds as if you are ashamed of yourself for loving him, really. You know that he’s everything I said he was, and you’re still attracted. Well, I can understand your bonding to him because he was your first friend here, but really, Harry, spending the rest of your life with him because of that?”

Harry felt angry heat fill his chest. He stood. “Are you willing to tell me all the reasons you love Parvati?” he demanded.

Connor shut his mouth so hard he nearly bit his tongue. “Well, no,” he admitted at last. “It’s a private thing.”

Harry nodded. “And it’s the same way with me.”
“But no one cares why I love Parvati!” Connor took an insistent step forward. “I want to know why you love Draco. I’m asking you. I want to know. Why won’t you tell me? Shame is the only reason I can think of. You’d think Draco would be happy to hear you reciting all the reasons—”

“There’s no way I can win this game,” Harry said quietly. “Don’t you see that, Connor? If I tell you, then I’ll betray Draco’s privacy, and he’s asked me not to do that.” It was one of the requests Draco had made of him last year, his head pillowed on Harry’s chest, his eyes soft and content. “If I don’t tell you, you’ll go on thinking I’m ashamed of him, or that it’s just lust.”

“I know it’s not lust,” Connor said dismissively. “Not with your training. But I really don’t think he’s good for you, Harry. How can I keep quiet when I think that? How can I not try to separate you from him? And how can I believe that you’re not just blind if I don’t hear your reasons for loving him?”

“I wouldn’t try to separate you from Parvati, even if I thought she wasn’t good for you,” said Harry. “I accept that you love who you love, Connor.”

“She’s not the daughter of a Death Eater,” said Connor. “She’s not even a Dark witch. Has it occurred to you, Harry, that you could take a lot of hurt from Draco if he does decide that he would rather believe in pureblood superiority than in you? And what happens if he Declares for the Dark?”

“The same thing that happened when you Declared for the Light, I imagine,” said Harry. “I still won’t feel compelled to choose a side.”

Connor was breathing fast, his face flushed with frustration. “I just wish I knew why you would choose him over me,” he said. “That’s all.”

“I don’t want to choose him over you,” Harry whispered, holding out his arms. Connor didn’t move into the embrace. Harry winced and dropped his arms, telling himself he had no right to feel angry or disappointed. His anger or disappointment would just cause so many more problems in the long run. “And I don’t want to make you choose Parvati over me.”

“I won’t,” said Connor. “I can balance. But I don’t think that you can balance between us, Harry. We’re too different. And I think you could be in danger from him.” He gave a little nod, as if someone had offered him a command, and stood straighter. “I love you, Harry. I want to make sure you’re safe.”

“I don’t need protection from Draco,” said Harry, feeling tired.

“I think you do.” Connor gazed at him, eyes wide and earnest. “I’ve thought about it a lot over the past two weeks, Harry, and I’ve talked it over with Parvati. But we had to wait and see what you would say. If you’d forgiven me and agreed that Draco’s attitude was dangerous, I wouldn’t have to do this. But I think he is a danger to you, and you’ll only wind up getting hurt. I’m sorry.”

I should have talked to him before this, Harry thought. I left it too long. It’s my fault.

He took a deep breath and tucked the blame away, because unless the guilt could help him not to make the same mistake a second time, it was useless. He knew how Connor could change, wavering from moment to moment, abandoning prejudices that solidified in his mind when new information came along and seeing his way to clarity when he realized he’d made a mistake. He had nearly done that when Harry pointed out that attacking Draco via his pureblood beliefs wasn’t honorable. Give it a few weeks, and he would probably change his mind again.

Connor seemed confused when Harry gave him a politely determined smile and walked past him to the door. “Harry?” he asked his back.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said. “We’ll have to agree to disagree on this, Connor. Just know that I love you both. I wouldn’t give up contact with you to please Draco—I didn’t do it in third year—and I won’t give up being Draco’s partner to please you. I’m sorry. If you can’t live with each other, I understand that. I won’t make you act like best friends or brothers. I do love you both.”

Connor tried to say something, but when Harry paused and waited, nothing emerged. He sighed gently and shut the door behind him.

This time, though, I won’t just wait and wait for him to say something. I’ll talk to him every day. I’ll let him see that I’m happy with Draco. I’ll show him the truth until that overcomes his willingness to embrace a lie.
Draco glanced at Harry curiously. Harry had seemed unusually fidgety that evening, even as Draco studied his Animagus notes some more and Harry tried to read information on place magic that Granger had researched for him. He’d said something about “entering the dream” when Draco asked, and Draco didn’t understand what that meant, so he’d been willing to let it drop. He was more interested in how close he could come to the visualization now, anyway. He knew his form was four-legged, relatively small, and not bulky, but not what it was, yet.

“What is it, Harry?” Draco asked, his eyes roaming his partner’s face. Harry was flushed, and the flush had crept everywhere except his lightning bolt scar, which stood out as a pale line on his forehead. Draco was just as glad not to see that turn red.

Draco blinked, but he was hardly about to object to this, so he responded, grabbing at Harry’s shoulders and hair and pulling him forward. Harry pulled him backward, so for a moment they engaged in an undignified tug-of-war, and then they sprawled in the middle of the bed. Draco muttered a protest as his teeth hit Harry’s, and Harry gasped an apology, but didn’t stop kissing him.

Draco kicked out, trying to find a way to get a better purchase on Harry and stop just scrabbling around in the middle of the bed. Then the room smelled of roses, and Harry rolled him over again, with magic rather than a hand, and Draco found himself on his back, gasping as he stared up at Harry.

“Will you let me touch you?” Harry whispered to him. “Just—touch you? That’s what I want to do right now.”

It cost Draco actual physical pain to remove his hands from Harry’s skin, but he nodded. Harry murmured a thanks and then pulled at Draco’s tie and his shirt, taking them off so smoothly that Draco barely felt a brush of cloth across his skin. He thought Harry must have used magic, but it was very hard to look away from those green eyes, so he wasn’t sure.

“I love you,” Harry murmured, bowing his head and beginning to kiss his way down Draco’s chest. Draco gasped, wondering why he couldn’t speak, wondering why he wasn’t more panicked by the feeling of not being able to breathe, wondering why he suddenly seemed to be lying in a bed of summer sunlight. “I don’t care if someone else disapproves, I know it might cause problems but that doesn’t mean I’ll stop loving you, and this sounds so stupid Draco but I don’t know if you’re listening to me right now anyway—”

Draco might have told him he was listening to him if Harry would just stop touching him. But he wasn’t, he was nipping and kissing and licking and sucking, and Draco’s skin felt taut and stretched, as if all of it were ready to slip off his body and fly into Harry’s mouth. It was an effort to keep his hands at his sides, and he didn’t succeed, though they only flew up in loose fists when Harry stripped him of both trousers and pants, as efficiently as he’d stripped him of shirt and tie.

“Love you,” Harry said softly, and then took Draco in hand, stroking him and rolling over so that his hip lay against Draco’s, as if he wanted to surround him as much as possible with Draco still flat on his back in the bed, watching his face all the while.

Draco closed his eyes. He was adrift in gold. It altered and rippled in his mind, like sunlight changing through moving leaves. He had thought, foolishly, that the pleasure he shared with Harry would not change in essentials from one bedding to the next. It seemed he was wrong. This pleasure was keener, sharper, than that which they’d shared while tumbling on the floor in Silver-Mirror. Draco found he couldn’t keep his hips still as they rolled up in short jabs into Harry’s hand. He knew his breath was leaving his mouth in gusts of hot air, too. Light traveled past his eyes. He had lost track of the rest of his body. Mouth and eyes and cock—did he need to worry about the rest?

When he came, he heard Harry’s voice say something, but he couldn’t hear it under the intense pressure and pleasure inside and out. His head grew too heavy for his neck as he trembled out the last spasms of light and warmth, and then he knew where his hands were. He reached up and gripped Harry’s shoulder, pulling him down, managing to open his eyes just enough to whisper, “What did you say?”


Draco tried to answer, he really did. But a huge yawn escaped his mouth, and the thought of moving hurt. He wanted to sit up, though, and reach down to touch Harry. He wanted to give him some hint of the pleasure he’d given Draco.
Harry kept his hand away when he tried, though, the metal of the ring on his finger cool against Draco’s palm. “I’ll be fine,” he whispered. “I wanted to do that, to remind myself that you’re real, that you’re not just sitting on the other side of the bed and studying notes, but actually in my arms if I want you.” Draco could hear him smiling, though he couldn’t open his eyes to see it. “And in my hand.”

Draco attempted a protest. “But, Harry—“ He thought it should be stronger, and maybe it would really have been, but the warmth had traveled back into his limbs, puddling them. He could feel Harry rolling them over, so that he lay fully within Harry’s embrace, and then he was fussed about until he didn’t think any part of him was touching the blankets, but draped fully over chest and hips, groin and arms.

“I’m here,” Harry murmured. “We’re both here. Nothing’s going to separate us, Draco.” His arms tightened possessively around Draco’s chest. “Go to sleep.”

And Draco did, letting his head bob down until his nose rested in the crook of Harry’s neck. The last thing he heard before he fell asleep was the soft, contented purring of Harry’s magic, like the rumble of a great cat, and the last thought he had, absurdly, was, *His Animagus form is a lynx.*

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Harry took a deep breath and shook his head before he walked into the Great Hall the next morning. He had something to say to his brother, and he had thought long and hard about the right words as he lay with Draco cradled in his arms last night, still a bit stunned by his own desperate need to feel Draco and be assured he was there and real.

Draco came up, brushing his shoulder against Harry’s. Harry smiled at him, then moved towards the Gryffindor table.

Connor was sitting head-to-head with Ron, planning Quidditch strategies by the sound of it. He looked up in surprise at Harry, and then his face tightened in an expression of resignation.

“Come to scold me about yesterday?” he asked.

Harry stood surveying him for a moment. Connor looked as if he hadn’t slept well, but still stubborn, still determined, still trying to do what he thought was right. Just like he had been in third year, come to think of it, when he thought Harry was going to kill Sirius, or just like he had been in fourth year, when he was trying to go through the Triwizard Tournament despite being terrified of it, or just like he had been in fifth year, when he had chosen to testify at Lily and James’s trial and hadn’t told Harry about it beforehand, in case Harry tried to stop him.

_We both think we’re right. This time, though, I’m not going to let misunderstanding get in the way, or sympathy for him make me look past it. He’s doing what he thinks is right, but that doesn’t change the fact that it’s fucking stupid._

“No, actually,” Harry said. “I’ve come to tell you that I’d like us to get along, Connor. I know that probably can’t happen yet, but it will in time. If you decide to marry Parvati, I’d like to be able to talk to my sister-in-law without screaming at her. And to my brother without screaming at him, as it happens. And I’d like you both to be able to talk to your brother-in-law without screaming at him.”

Connor’s face tightened with distaste. “Harry, Parvati told me some things about him that you should know—“

“And I’m going to listen to them,” said Harry with a nod. “But you should know, Connor, that I’ll never stop loving both of you, and trying to balance all three of you, making sure that you have what you want and what you need as far as that’s possible. And I won’t believe that Draco’s going to turn against me until he actually does.”

“Harry—“

“I’m not leaving him,” said Harry plainly. “He’s my partner. He’ll stay that way until the day he says he doesn’t want to be any more. You can argue and I’ll listen, Connor. But I won’t obey.”

Connor’s face tightened again, this time with frustration. “Harry, you could solve this whole dispute by telling me why you love him.”

“He doesn’t want me to. I don’t want to.” Harry cocked his head, watching Connor closely. “And I don’t think it would solve things; you would come up with another objection, Connor. I won’t ask you to love him. I will ask you to accept that I do.”
“If you would listen—“

“If you would,” said Harry, “you would hear what I’m trying to tell you. I love him. I won’t leave him. He’s mine, and I’m his. That’s the way it is.”

He paused, but apparently Connor didn’t have a counterargument for that right now; his face expressed nothing but dismay. Harry nodded once and turned away from the table.

On the way, he caught Ron’s eye. Ron raised his brows, then clenched his left hand into a fist in front of his heart. Harry smiled and returned the gesture of respect as best he could; it didn’t have exactly the same meaning, but since he lacked a left hand, he could tell Ron accepted it. He lingered long enough to hear Ron say, “You’re being a right idiot, mate,” which caused Connor to gape at him, and then he made his way back to the Slytherin table.

He met the owl who delivered his morning porridge from Hogsmeade, and stared unlading her. He merrily ignored Draco’s stare for quite some time, until Draco said, “So you had an argument with your brother about me.”

“Hmmm,” said Harry, pouring the porridge into the bowl it came with, and reaching for the vial of juice. Orange juice this morning.

“And you fought with him for me,” Draco said. “Why?”

Harry looked up. “What do you mean, why?”

Draco’s face changed slowly, as if clouds were moving across it. Then he put his hand on Harry’s arm and leaned in to kiss him.

Harry accepted it for a moment, returned it for a second moment, and then pulled back and sat down to eat his breakfast.

He kept feeling Connor’s stare from across the way, and when Parvati joined him for breakfast, the stare redoubled. Harry didn’t care.

Some of the people I love are being stupid right now. That’s all right. They’ll get over it, and I can wait for as long as they need.

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Chapter Twenty-Two: Terror Runs On Four Legs

Harry heard Connor muffle a surprised squeak when he caught up with him and Parvati on their way to Care of Magical Creatures. “Can I walk with you?” he asked them, as politely as he could under the circumstances.

Connor just stared at him. Parvati leaned around Connor’s shoulder and gave him a far more pointed stare. Harry bore it. She’s concerned for Connor, he told himself. If Draco had a brother who ignored him most of the time, and that brother was dating a Dumbledore supporter, wouldn’t I be concerned?

“You don’t have Care of Magical Creatures,” Parvati said.

Harry inclined his head, smiling. “No. But I have a free period, and I know Connor said Hagrid’s lesson would be short today.”

The Magical Creatures classes had been abbreviated since Hagrid had taken a sting from a mysterious, and probably illegal, creature he was keeping in the Forbidden Forest. “So I thought I could speak with you after the lesson, if that’s all right.”

Parvati laid her hand on Connor’s shoulder. Connor stopped walking and turned to look at her. Parvati whispered to him, suspicious eyes on Harry’s face.

Harry waited some more. And waited. Parvati had a lot to say, but he would have had a lot to say, too, under similar circumstances. He plucked at some kind of flying bug who obviously thought his skin was a flower, and then they turned towards him, both faces gone equally resolute. Harry was glad that Connor had a girlfriend who could match him for determination.

“We’ve decided that you can talk to us after Hagrid’s lesson,” Connor allowed, voice and stance still wary. “But you have to be as open as you can, Harry. Don’t start ranting the moment one of us says something you don’t like.”

“I promise,” said Harry. He was glad that Draco wasn’t present; trying to have all four of them together for this first extended
conversation with Parvati just wouldn’t have worked. Draco had free time as well, but he’d chosen to spend it working furiously on visualization of his Animagus form. Michael was with him, so Harry didn’t have to worry about his safety. “Should I meet you at Hagrid’s hut, or somewhere else?”

“On the way back to the school,” said Parvati, her hand still on Connor’s shoulder. Her eyes remained hard as flint. “As we approach the entrance hall.”

Harry nodded. “That’s fine.” Parvati blinked, but Harry meant what he said; he wanted both of them to be comfortable, so that they would talk with him instead of shouting, and he didn’t care where they met, so it meant nothing that he’d given up control of that aspect to Parvati. “I’ll see you in a short while.”

He nodded to Connor, but gave Parvati a sweeping bow that he knew she would recognize, since she came from a Light pureblood family. The bow ended with a sweep of his hand at the level of his throat. Once, it had granted a sibling’s consort power to mercy-kill one if necessary. Now, it was meant as a formal welcome into the family, a sign that he didn’t object to Parvati’s presence.

Connor was already walking on. Parvati lingered, staring, then shook out her long dark hair and hurried after Connor. Harry watched the way she took his arm. He smiled. She loves him, at least. She’s not just playing with him.

He turned away. He would go back near the entrance hall and wait. For once, he had nothing else to do. He’d written his letter to Snape, concentrated dutifully on his Animagus transformation, talked to Camellia, read some more on the place magic information that Hermione had obtained for him, and finished his homework. There were advantages to feeling uneasy with laziness.

The owl met him as he entered the section of the grounds just in front of the castle. Harry looked up curiously. From the direction it was coming from, it might have just flown from the Owlery, but it settled onto his shoulder with a weary hoot. Harry clucked to silence the hissing Many snake around his throat, and took the envelope from the bird, stroking her feathers. She buried her head against the side of his neck, trembling.

The envelope was actually the message itself, Harry saw, the parchment folded into the shape of a letter. The ink dashed across the paper, splattered with terror.

Dear Harry:

I was one of those who kept silent when your first offer of help arrived, because I didn’t think I would need it. And now I do. September’s full moon is rising, and I don’t trust the Ministry to keep me safe anymore.

I am one of the three hunters who killed the werewolves in July. I know that you don’t have any reason to like me, but the stories about you say you help even those whom you have a reason to dislike. So.

I want to come to you and shelter under your protection for the three nights of the full moon. I want to make sure Loki doesn’t kill me. I saw what he did to Felicia. In return, I’ll bring you information about the policies on werewolves that the Department plans to pursue next. You can demand other concessions of me if you like, but please, please help me.

Kieran Morologus.

Harry caught his breath. His hand crumpled the parchment, and a stir of magic rose around him that made the owl stir, as well, spreading her wings and hooting uneasily.

Harry had to work to catch his breath and calm down before he could think about the request, and even then, his first impulse was to refuse. Kieran had brought this on himself by hunting werewolves and scalping them. Harry thought he might even have been the hunter in the Daily Prophet photograph who had held Briar and Gudrun’s scalps in the air, grinning. It would be a betrayal of the pack and a betrayal of the dead to help him.

But, Harry reminded himself reluctantly, as his ethics tugged at him, he had reached out to the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts after Loki’s attack and informed them that he would try to heal the damage wrought. He hadn’t warned them well enough, not if Loki could still take them so entirely by surprise. And he had managed to ignore the horrible things that his former Death Eater allies had done. And Loki’s vengeance, if achieved, would only make things worse for his pack. It certainly had last month, as more and more people became in favor of restricting werewolves. If Loki hadn’t sworn himself to revenge, then some of the hysteria might have died away, and they might be further along the path to a peaceful solution by now.
It didn’t take Harry long to make up his mind. He could do nothing to bring back the dead, but he could try to spare the living. And if Kieran would give him information on the Department’s policies, then he could protect his pack. There was still the chance that they would view it as a betrayal, of course. In that case, Harry would step aside as alpha and hope they appointed Camellia.

He cast the Summoning Charm to bring him ink, parchment, a quill, and owl treats from his room. The owl on his shoulder shivered again as the items zoomed past her, but ate the treats gratefully from his palm. Harry supposed she must have picked up on part of her owner’s terror, and he was sorry for it. Whatever Kieran might have done or not done, she didn’t deserve the fear.

“You’re beautiful, aren’t you?” he murmured, running his fingers through her feathers. And she was; a barn owl, but nearly as pale as Hedwig on the belly and under her wings, while her golden eyes had a hint of green. “You don’t mind taking a reply back?”

She already sounded better as she gave a little hoot and traced a strand of his hair through her beak. Harry smiled and sat down to write the letter, telling Kieran that he would protect him, and giving him a detailed description of Wayhouse. They certainly could not face Loki at Hogwarts, Harry wouldn’t ask the pack to leave Grimmauld Place or Cobley-by-the-Sea, and Silver-Mirror had too many treasures in it that he could see Kieran handling “accidentally,” or Loki breaking when he attacked.

Harry handed the letter back to the owl, and spent some time coaxing and petting her before she would take off. Then he sat back and summoned a mental calendar into his head. He nodded. The first night of the full moon was the twenty-fifth, and it was the eighteenth now. That should leave him plenty of time to prepare, including strengthening Wayhouse’s wards to meet the assault and contacting Gloriana Griffinsnest to see what she could tell him about werewolves on the vengeance-path.

“Harry!”

When he looked up, Connor and Parvati were approaching him. Harry stood to meet them, but Parvati shook her head, gesturing him back onto the steps. “You’ll want to be sitting down for the vast majority of this,” she said, grimacing. “You won’t like what we have to tell you.”

True, but probably not for the reasons you think, Harry decided, and sat down, giving her an expectant look. Parvati arranged herself in front of him. Connor stood beside her, clutching her hand. Parvati squeezed back, now and then running her palm over his.

“You may not know all the details of the crimes that Lucius Malfoy committed,” Parvati announced. “My father fought in the First War. He knows. He testified at Malfoy’s trial, trying to get him convicted. It didn’t work, of course, because he managed to convince the Wizengamot he’d been under Imperius all along. But my father knows the details.”

“So do I,” said Harry, a bit surprised. Didn’t Connor tell her I studied the history of the First War as part of my training? “I know that he was involved in the death of Edgar Bones, of the Prewett twins, of the Nascent children. There are other allegations that can’t be proven, but I don’t have much doubt they’re true. He was at the Battle of Valerian, for example, according to the Ministry’s reports.” He grimaced, feeling a sour taste fill his mouth. Along with Lily, he really preferred the title “Slaughter of Valerian” to the official name. The inhabitants of the village had had no chance to fight back against Voldemort’s flesh-eating rain.

“And you aren’t at all worried that the father’s tendencies have passed on to the son?” Parvati’s eyes were sharp, her mouth very wide. “Particularly given that he has hexed Connor more than once, and he used Dark Arts in the battle?”

Harry gave her a hard look. “There’s a difference between using Dark Arts, and using them maliciously.”

“They’re still Dark magic,” Parvati insisted.

“I know,” said Harry. “But I’ve used them myself. I’ve taught the members of the dueling club how to use them, including you and your sister. Did you really forget that?” Disappointment was welling up in him, no matter how much he tried to push it back down, tell himself it did no good. “Ardesco, which I demonstrated and which a lot of you picked up at once, is a Dark Arts spell.”

“I found them hard to use,” said Parvati quietly. “And so did Padma. But Malfoy uses them well enough. And he’s frightfully vengeful and jealous over you.” Harry only nodded; he couldn’t really disagree there. “Aren’t you worried that he might use Dark Arts on someone else, just because that person insulted you or—or was less than perfectly kind to you?”

Harry blinked as his estimation of Parvati turned a corner. “You’re afraid of him, aren’t you?” he whispered.
Parvati gave a violent shiver, then lifted her head. “I’m Gryffindor,” she said. “So I won’t run. But yes, I am afraid of him. Connor’s told me that Malfoy almost physically attacked him a number of times, and that he’s killed in battle. I won’t stop defending Connor.” She leaned her head against Connor’s neck, never taking her eyes off Harry. “It’s a small thing for him to decide that Connor’s girlfriend is just as annoying as he is, and to decide to hurt me.”

“And you think it would be simpler for both of you if I just stopped dating him,” Harry said, voice flat.

“Not only simpler, but the right thing to do.” Parvati was recovering now, as if her admission of fear had given her back her strength. “Family is important, Harry. And you have so little family left now. Your parents were horrible to you. Your guardian is acting like a madman. Connor is lonely.”

“I am,” Connor volunteered. “Who doesn’t talk to their brother for two weeks because they’re angry at him over a fight with their boyfriend?”

“I can think of two people like that,” Harry said.

Connor flushed, but tried to persist. “We are brothers, Harry. We should spend more time together than we do. But I know Malfoy’s going to object to that, because he wants you all to himself.”

“If and when he objects, I’ll call him on it,” Harry said. “But I apologized to you yesterday for making mistakes, Connor, including not bringing this up sooner.” He faced Parvati. “I can promise that I’ll never let Draco hurt you. But that doesn’t mean I’m going to give up dating him, or that I’m going to hold him accountable for what his father did. Lucius Malfoy is one person. Draco Malfoy is another.”

“I don’t see how you can think he’s more important than your brother.” Parvati looked fretful, and she nodded at the ring on Harry’s hand that Draco had given him during their Walpurgis joining ritual. “Blood is more important than a circular piece of metal.”

Harry cocked his head. “Does that mean that you would choose Padma over Connor in a heartbeat, if you had to choose between them?”

Parvati froze. Connor took a step forward. “It’s not fair to ask her things like that,” he hissed. “I thought you were trying to keep the peace between us, Harry, not start more arguments.”

“I think everything should be out in the open, that’s all,” Harry told him, never taking his eyes off Parvati. “I want to understand what’s going on. And I’m most interested in what she has to say. Come on, Parvati. What do you think? Would you choose your sister over your boyfriend?”

Parvati unfroze. “I’ll never have to make that choice,” she hissed. “Padma is part of the Light, and she would never hurt me. She approves of Connor. She gets along with him. But your Malfoy might curse anyone he thinks is taking up too much of your time and imagination. That’s what Dark wizards do.”

“A family gathering, Harry? And you didn’t invite me? I’m feeling left out.”

Fuck. Harry stood, not coincidentally placing himself between Draco and Parvati as he did so. “Draco.” He reached back, looping an arm around his partner’s waist and dragging him to his side. “I don’t think you’ve been formally introduced, though you certainly know each other. This is Parvati Patil. Connor’s girlfriend.”

Draco resisted the pull of Harry’s arm. Harry darted a glance at his face. It was flushed in a way it usually only got after sex, and Draco seemed on the verge of drawing his wand. He gave a tight little nod.

“My condolences on your lack of taste,” he told Parvati.

Parvati let out a little squeaking hiss; Harry was suddenly and absurdly sure her Animagus form would be a mongoose, rearing up to attack the nasty snake. “How dare you, Malfoy,” she said. “And to think that I assumed your parents would have taught you manners. I suppose any Malfoy prefers torture to courtesy.”

Harry felt the shift against his side as Draco’s hand plunged into his pocket after his wand.

Harry spun, putting himself between Draco and Parvati again, but this time facing Draco and holding his wand hand so that he couldn’t draw it. “No,” he hissed into his ear. “Don’t move it to curses.” He looked over his shoulder at Parvati, sparing a hiss to
calm down the Many snake, who appeared to have decided that the nervous owl was a forerunner of the kind of day he was going to have. “I think you should apologize,” he told her.

Parvati tossed her hair, and Harry felt a surge of frustration. **Connor’s found a partner who’s his match in stubbornness, too.** “No,” she said. “What if I don’t want to? What if I think that Malfoy going for his wand only proves that, in fact, he knows nothing of manners, and proves all the things I said about him? That he would as soon curse me as look at me, and he’s going to hurt me someday, and he’s going to hurt your brother?”

Draco struggled, nearly managing to haul his wand hand from Harry’s hold; that Harry had only one hand didn’t make it any easier. He leaned forward, bracing himself against Draco, hip to hip, chest to chest. He would use his magic to bind Draco if he absolutely had to, but he would prefer to get through this without it. “He did it because you insulted him,” he said.

“No,” she said. “What if I don’t want to? What if I think that Malfoy going for his wand only proves that, in fact, he knows nothing of manners, and proves all the things I said about him? That he would as soon curse me as look at me, and he’s going to hurt me someday, and he’s going to hurt your brother?”

And a normal person would have insulted me back, not reached for his wand,” said Parvati. Her eyes shone. “Don’t you agree, Connor?”

Harry looked at his brother, only to find Connor’s face pale. **He’s probably thinking of Snape and Camellia, or what I talked to him about after his and Draco’s fight.** Harry did not blame him.

*He is stubborn, he is stupid sometimes, but he can see what’s in front of his face.*

“Parvati,” Connor began in a low, troubled voice.

Draco moved so fast that Harry had no time to react, stepping back and making Harry stagger. Then his hand was free, and he whipped it out of his pocket, his wand aimed directly at Parvati.

Harry said, even as his magic reared up around him in the form of vine-green snakes, **“Stop it right fucking now, Draco.”**

Draco’s mouth clamped shut after the first syllable of a spell; Harry wasn’t sure which one it had been. He stared at Harry. Harry snarled at him, and the snakes writhed around his body, awaiting a command to attack.

Draco went on staring. Harry knew that he recognized the snakes as an extreme manifestation of anger. He must be wondering what in the world he could have done to make that fury be directed at him.

Harry turned, the snakes coiling around his arms and neck. Parvati had gone silent, eyes wide and face almost white. Connor was the only one there who seemed capable of looking at him and not cowering or flinching.

*I don’t want to make them afraid. I don’t. I don’t.* Harry swallowed several times, and some of the magic drained away, the snakes losing form and lapsing into a bright green glow around his body. He shook his head. **I should not have done that. I should not have frightened them.** He dragged his hand through his hair, aware it was shaking. He thought of hiding it, then realized it might help the point he wanted to make. He held it out, and let them see his wrist tremble.

“I don’t like getting angry,” he said. “I’m not interested in keeping track from moment to moment of who’s trying to pull whom apart, or what all the old wounds are.” He sent a hard glance at Parvati, hoping she would understand his reference to Lucius Malfoy. “The same thing I said yesterday remains true. I’m going to keep talking to you both. I still love you, Connor, and I still want to welcome you into my company, Parvati, even if we can’t be best friends. But I’ll have to change my manner of dealing with you.” He swallowed the other words he wanted to say: **I thought I was dealing with adults. I see I was wrong.** That would only escalate things unnecessarily. He had already gone too far by showing the snakes. Balance had to be maintained, if at all possible. “And both of you will have to get used to Draco.”

“But he would have cursed me,” Parvati pointed out.

Harry kept himself from yelling by a serious effort that made him feel as if he were choking. If he gave the reply he wanted, then Connor would only get upset with him again, and they would have another fight on their hands. Harry imagined his mind as the serene silver surface of an Occlumency pool, and made it be so. He had never been so grateful to Snape for teaching him self-control as he was now.

“Because of what you said,” he replied, calmly, when he was sure that his voice would not shake or hint at unguessed-of depths of anger. “I won’t go into who started this. But insulting words are just as dangerous as curses, in this kind of situation. And given that I know you’re afraid of Dark Arts from him, I don’t know why you would give him a reason to want to curse you.”

“I was showing you his true colors,” Parvati said.
Draco uttered a low, squalling sound of outrage. Harry stepped back until his back was pressed to Draco’s chest, and silently promised himself that if Draco reached for his wand again, he would find his hand full of something disgusting.

“I know him,” said Harry quietly. “You don’t. The problem has been that you don’t know him well enough, and neither does Connor, and neither of us know you. So. I’d like to propose having a few weekly conversations until we do know each other well enough.”

Parvati shook her head, frowning. “You have to schedule Connor into your life, Harry? I find that disappointing.”

“I find everything about you—“ Draco started.

Harry squeezed his wrist, and he stopped. “No, I have to schedule both of you,” he said, and that seemed to make Parvati stop and think. “This is the way I should handle it, I think. I’m vates. I won’t abandon Draco, and I don’t want to abandon either one of you. Yes, it’s artificial, not spontaneous, but we’ve seen what spontaneous conversations between us are like now. I don’t want anyone hurt.”

“But you want to protect your boyfriend more than you want to protect us,” Parvati probed.

Harry raised his eyebrows. “Don’t you want to protect Connor more than you want to protect me?”

Parvati scowled and kept silent. Harry wondered how much of that had to do with the fact that Connor was curled around her shoulder, whispering into her ear.

“So.” Harry gave a tight nod. “I know for a fact that all four of us are free on Thursday evenings. Would that be acceptable? Thursday evening at seven-o’clock, in the Room of Requirement?”

Parvati and Connor exchanged glances. Then Parvati nodded, and Connor said, “We could make that work, I think.”

Harry let a little of the iron bands of his self-control fall away. “Good. We’ll have one conversation, and try to get through it without insults, or curses, or screaming of any kind. Does that sound like an acceptable goal?”

Again, they both nodded. Parvati’s face remained pale, and Harry hoped that he might have reached her with the comment about Connor, or the one about Padma, or the one about her and her twin learning the Dark Arts. She wasn’t a complete hypocrite. He could coax her into reasonableness, he hoped.

“Good,” said Harry, and held Draco back until both of them were inside Hogwarts and out of sight. Then he turned to face his boyfriend.

“That bloody hurt,” Draco complained, wringing his wrist where Harry had gripped it.

“Good,” said Harry, and then swallowed. No. His voice wanted to be low and savage with Draco, but that wouldn’t do any good. My anger just isn’t productive, not with this. “Draco, I want this to work. I agree that she was wrong to insult you. But what were you thinking, flinging a curse? You remember what McGonagall said about students hexing other students. She would consider them traitors.”

“I considered,” Draco said stiffly, “that she has no right to say that kind of thing. I was going to teach her a lesson, that’s all.”

Harry closed his eyes and pushed up his glasses. “She doesn’t,” he said. “But you didn’t have the right to throw a curse either, Draco.”

“You can’t be on both our sides at the same time, Harry,” Draco said, sounding hurt. “That’s not possible.”

“It is when I’m more interested in solving the problem than placing blame,” said Harry, and again swallowed back more anger, like bile. “I want this to work, Draco. I’m willing to work my arse off so that it can. Please don’t spoil it.”

Draco just looked away from him.

Harry breathed out gently, and counted to three in Mermish. That ought to be enough. “I don’t really care who started it, not any more,” he said. “I don’t really care about what might happen in the future. I only care about what will. And one of the best ways to alter that is to attack those problems at their roots.” And to be patient. I might want to tell them off for being petulant children,
but that would only cause more problems. And I would be excluding myself from blame, in that case. My silent treatment of Connor played an enormous part in this. “Conversations between us are the only way I can think of to get us talking, rather than flinging insults or hexes.”

“She wants you and I to stop dating,” said Draco. “I think she won’t give up.”

“Wait until Thursday, and see if she still says that,” Harry said.

Draco turned to go back into the castle. Harry followed a few paces behind him, rubbing at his brow. He had a headache that had nothing to do with his scar, or the odd dreams he’d been having lately. He was angry at everyone, including himself, but anger that took the form of blame wouldn’t help. So he would keep it to himself.

But he wasn’t sure even that would help. Maybe expressing open anger with Connor would impress the seriousness of the situation on him. Maybe he was being remiss in not scolding Parvati, in not being more openly annoyed at Draco.

But he couldn’t be sure, especially since every time he got angry, he made the situation worse. So accepting the consequences of what he had done so far, and insisting on rationality rather than anger at all, from anyone, seemed like the best thing, the only way to allow the clash of free wills.

A particularly vicious bolt of pain shot up from his jaw. Carefully, Harry unclenched his teeth.

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Harry eyed Wayhouse’s wooden wall. “Be still,” he said.

The wall grew a mouth, a pair of large lips blue as if with cold, that pouted at him. Then a tongue popped out, and the wall blew him a raspberry.

“Stupid house,” Harry muttered. A pair of eyes grew above the mouth and the tongue and crossed at him, then vanished back into the wood. But when Harry listened, the wards held. So Wayhouse had decided to shelter both him and Kieran until morning. Harry nodded.

He turned to Kieran, who hovered anxiously behind him. “We’ll do this each night of the full moon,” he said. “I’m surprised that your last fellow hunter didn’t want to shelter with you, however.”

Kieran gave a quick, nervous smile. He was a tall man with fierce brown eyes whom Harry supposed might have been handsome once, before fear had charred him hollow. “He has family in France,” Kieran responded. “He took refuge there. He doesn’t trust you to protect him.” He paused, hands twisting together. “Thank you for doing this,” he whispered. “I know you don’t like me.”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t like Loki’s vengeance even more,” he said. *I’m in the same room with a murderer, but when has that ever been new?* He wasn’t betraying the pack, either, because Loki wasn’t part of the pack. Both Camellia and Remus had tried to convince Harry that interfering in Loki’s vengeance was a bad idea, but Camellia’s arguments consisted only in warning him that Loki couldn’t be stopped—which Harry thought was nonsense, as long as Wayhouse’s wards held—and Remus’s had escalated into a shouting match before long, because he said Harry was betraying all werewolves by associating with a hunter in the first place. He hadn’t seemed interested in the argument that Loki’s vengeance would make things worse for all the werewolves in Britain.

Between the shouting match and the two conversations with Draco, Connor, and Parvati between the eighteenth and now, Harry’s head felt as if it were about to split open. He’d become an expert in burying his temper, and not just in Occlumency pools. He knew numbers in Mermish up to a hundred now; he’d had to learn them for the times when he and Draco went back to their bedroom and lay in rigid silence, Draco upset with him for conceding anything to Connor and Parvati, Harry upset with himself for being upset.

Protecting Kieran was almost a relief. Wayhouse’s wards were incredibly strong, tied to both the house itself and the determination of the Black heir. Harry was not going to let Loki kill anybody tonight, so that was no problem.

He had not asked anyone to come with him, because they either had good reasons not to—asking other werewolves to side against Loki was madness, and most of his allies were busy watching the London packs or accomplishing the tasks Harry had asked them to do—or they could do nothing that Harry’s magic and wards couldn’t. Connor and Draco would both have been willing to accompany him. Harry didn’t want them there. If it came down to a duel against Loki, which Harry didn’t believe it would, they weren’t strong enough to battle a werewolf who had been a pack leader, and would only make distractions for Harry’s attention.
And if it came down to sitting in Wayhouse behind wards all night, Harry would rather not share conversations with one of them about the other.

Having them *together* in the same place all night was not even to be considered.

But they had made some progress. Harry had to admit that. It might cost him headaches, but he had kept the paths of conversation between all four of them open and moving, and forced all of them to reconsider their assumptions, including Parvati’s assumption that Harry didn’t value Connor enough because he wouldn’t spend every minute with him and Draco’s assumption that Parvati’s fear of him was based on nothing but hearsay. They would get there in the end. Harry reminded himself of that whenever he was sure that these conversations would last for years and do nothing. Two only so far. He could do more.

“Harry?”

Harry looked up in surprise; he’d almost forgotten about Kieran. He shook his head. “You promised me that you would tell me something about the Department’s politics concerning werewolves if I protected you,” he said. “So, tell me.”

Kieran nodded and took a seat in one of the chairs Harry had provided. This room had once been a kitchen, and it was on the second floor of Wayhouse. Harry thought it was as good a place as any to wait out Loki’s arrival and useless dashing of himself against the wards. “The Department plans to collar all werewolves soon,” he said.

Harry snorted. “They already said that would happen.”

Kieran shook his head. “No, they just said that all werewolves had to wear collars, by law. They’re smart enough to know that most of the werewolves in Britain aren’t registered, and there’s no way they could make them register.” Kieran paused, licking his lips. “Except now, they’ve found a way to make that not matter.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “Tell me.”

Kieran shrank back in his chair, intimidated. Harry tried to make his face relax. Kieran stuttered, but got back on track. “Th—they plan to send out the werewolf tracking spell across Britain, in a pulse that will surround them and linger. So anyone who’s a werewolf, whether or not they’re registered, will be instantly identifiable. The ones who come in of their own free will have to wear collars and remain under the Ministry’s eye. Those who have to be dragged in will take the collar, but be put into Tullianum.”

“Fuck,” Harry breathed.

“Most of the werewolves Loki turned in his attack on the Department are there already,” Kieran added. “The Ministry declared that they wouldn’t be able to keep themselves safe enough, and the walls and wards of Tullianum will do it for them.”

Harry closed his eyes. “So that’s why none of them have answered my letters.”

Kieran swallowed, an audible click in his throat. “The Ministry had no idea what to do with forty new werewolves. They caged them up and hoped for the best.”

“Do they have Wolfsbane?” Harry asked, opening his eyes.

Kieran shook his head. “A few do, but most of them couldn’t afford it.”

Harry winced, remembering Hawthorn’s account of what had happened during her one transformation, the first after Fenrir Greyback’s bite, when she went without Wolfsbane. *And the first transformation’s always the worst, and it always kills some of the newly-bitten. Fuck.*

“If they hate them so much, why are they capturing and collaring them?” he asked. “Why not just kill them?”

“Because the Unspeakables want to use them,” Kieran whispered, as if the walls had grown ears.

Harry felt his heart stop.

“Why?” he breathed. “For what?”

“I don’t know.” Kieran shook his head wildly, but the words spilled forth from him as if he were glad to give them up at last.
“When I was a hunter, they told us to capture a few werewolves if we could in the attack on Loki’s pack. We didn’t manage it, though; we just killed those two. But there was a family whose son had just been turned. It was his first change, and they drugged him with some sort of incredibly strong potion. It didn’t put him to sleep, or calm his mind, but it made him docile enough that the Unspeakables could handle him. I know they took him down into the Department of Mysteries. I don’t know what happened after that. But if they have a lot of werewolves in Tullianum, they can take them conveniently, and no one will really notice or care.”

Harry curled his fingers around the arm of his chair. Both Tullianum and the Department of Mysteries were far beneath the rest of the Ministry. He wondered how short a distance it was between them, really.

“And you swear that you have no idea what they’re doing?” he demanded of Kieran.

Kieran shook his head again. “No. That I heard that much at all was the result of people gossiping who shouldn’t have been. Felicia—” He swallowed, and Harry told himself to remember that he was talking to a man who had seen many of his comrades turned into werewolves and another ripped apart, and told that his fate on the next full moon would be Felicia’s. “Felicia had a relative connected to the Department of Mysteries. He passed the rumors along to her, and she told me. And for all I know, they may be wrong.”

Harry half-lidded his eyes and fought to control his breathing. The urge to do something to get the werewolves out of Tullianum, to brew the cure for lycanthropy, to find out what had happened to the young werewolf captured during July’s full moon, was struggling in him. He wanted to push to his feet and go flying out through the door of Wayhouse. He felt as if he were useless if he weren’t doing something. He had spent too much time in the last few weeks on his bonds with Draco, Connor, Parvati, and Snape. How could he have?

He put the emotions back under the serene surface of his mind again. He could do this. He could stay here and protect Kieran, his duty for the night. He opened his eyes, and asked, “Was there anything else you could tell me?”

“Well, some older Department policies, but they’ve changed now, with so much of our strength turned into werewolves,” said Kieran fretfully. “They mostly concerned—“

Loki howled.

Harry knew in a moment who it must be. The howl rang through the wards, though they should have been able to hear nothing from outside—feel Loki’s impact on them, perhaps—and echoed in his ears. His mind flashed with images of darkened nights around campfires, his ancestors crouching and shivering in fear while howling creatures prowled just beyond the flames and stared with red eyes and cried out their hunger.

He heard a strangled sob, and smelled piss, and knew Kieran had just wet himself. Harry turned to face the wards, ready to put his own strength behind them if it were needed. He had linked chains of Shield Charms up already. He had trusted to the combination to keep them safe.

Camellia’s words echoed in his mind again. You can’t stop him or turn him aside, Wild. Not a werewolf on the vengeance-path. Please, please don’t try. You have no idea what will happen if you do.

And there was the fact that Loki had crashed into a Department of werewolf hunters, turned forty of them, torn apart one, and escaped.

But Harry told himself not to be ridiculous. None of the Department hunters had been Lord-level wizards, and they hadn’t been expecting the attack; they had been getting ready to go hunt the London packs. He knew what was coming. He—

Wayhouse shook. Harry staggered. He felt as though he’d just met a score of charging knights. The howl came again, louder and closer and from every corner of the sky this time, like thunder.

Kieran was screaming mindlessly. Harry shook his head and called his magic, pouring it into the wards, weaving more chains of Shield Charms, slightly reassured as more and more moments passed, and nothing happened.

Then he felt Loki break the wards.

It should not have been possible. But Wayhouse was wailing in anguish, and Harry knew the feeling of magic failing to stop an assault; he knew it from countless hours of practice as a child, when pain curses would make it through his shields, and from the Quidditch pitch in his first year, when Bellatrix Lestrange had thrown curses so strong they cracked his wandless Protego. These
wards parted, and slid in jagged edges like the broken glass of a window pane around Loki’s body. He was within them, padding forward.

Kieran moaned. The sound couldn’t cover the noise of great claws ripping through a wooden door.

“Stay here!” Harry yelled at Kieran, though he doubted he needed to give the warning, and stepped out of the kitchen, shutting and locking the door firmly behind him. Now he could hear the sound even more clearly, rending and tearing from downstairs. Harry took a deep breath and wrapped his magic around him in a tight ball.

Gloriana Griffinsnest hadn’t been able to tell him that much about a werewolf hunting for vengeance because of his mate’s murder. She had said that she’d heard tales about no one being able to stop such a werewolf, but she didn’t believe them. Why should she? Kill a werewolf, and they were dead.

Harry touched the silver knife hanging from his belt. He hoped he wouldn’t have to use it. He would kill Loki if he must, but he would prefer this night pass with no loss of life.

The next howl knocked knickknacks juddering from their shelves. Harry saw a frightened face form in the wall, and knew Wayhouse itself was on the verge of panic. He whispered soothing words, while he walked slowly down the stairs and faced the front door. The shimmer of wards and Shield Charms between him and it was almost a solid wall. He could see, blurred and dizzy as if moving underwater, the black, hooked nails and the edge of the paw, and then came a glimpse of a furred shoulder, shoving hard.

The door did not so much break as disintegrate. And then Loki stood there, staring at Harry.

Harry had never seen him in werewolf form. He understood now why Camellia had told him Loki’s “surname,” on the rare occasions he chose to use it, was Palefire. His coat was white, the hardly-gold color of his hair, and thick as a snowdrift. The light sent up a faint halo around it. His amber eyes glowed like suns from the middle of a head that came up to Harry’s shoulder, bigger than any other werewolf he had ever seen.

Harry knew from the shine in those eyes that Loki had taken Wolfsbane, or had otherwise arranged to have his intelligence unfettered. He held up the silver knife in silent warning, and reared his own magic. Black snakes unfolded around him, hissing.

Loki opened his mouth. The howl that came from it shook the world.

Then he jumped at Harry.

He passed through the wards and Shield Charms like water; they melted and rippled around his body. Harry dropped to one knee so as not to meet the full weight of that leap and aimed the silver knife so that Loki should impale himself on it.

But a werewolf was not a wolf; Remus had told him that more than once. Loki snapped his body sideways in midair, bending his belly away from the knife; it carved through some of his fur, but did no worse damage. He landed with a thump that made Wayhouse tremble again, shook his fur as if shaking off water, and turned towards the stairs.

Harry shouted and threw the silver knife straight at him. Loki ducked, bowing his head to his paws, and it went over him and rang off the wall. He placed one paw on the bottom step.

Harry, frantic now, opened his absorbere gift. He would have to make sure that he didn’t swallow Wayhouse’s magic along with Loki’s, but if spells and wards weren’t going to stop him, draining his magic would have to.

What he swallowed made him gag. It wasn’t like the foul, tainted magic of Voldemort and the Death Eaters; it was solid instead, so that Harry couldn’t absorb it. He tried, and tried, and it was like choking on a stone each time. He saw Loki turn his head, glancing at him with amber eyes full of pity, and then he rose up the stairs like an avalanche in reverse, going for Kieran.

Harry lunged again, this time summoning magic to flood his muscles. He would grab Loki and wrestle him to the ground if he had to.

Jaws closed on his leg and spun him around. Harry fell, gasping. Looking up, he saw a shimmering, silvery shape hovering over him, a werewolf as pale as Loki.

Gudrun.
Gloriana hadn’t mentioned that the ghosts of the murdered werewolves hunted beside their mates. Harry wondered bitterly if it happened all the time, or if it was just the magic’s way of making sure he couldn’t get in the way and interfere tonight.

Frantic, he tried to call on the rage that had once made him will Fenrir Greyback out of existence. But panic didn’t provide the same kind of anger that fear for Draco’s life had. The ghost of Gudrun simply looked at him, and then tucked her tail to her belly and flew towards the stairs.

Harry remembered where his real battle lay then, and called out, “Ardesco!”

Loki’s fur smoked, and then stopped. Harry tried three more spells, casting them so fast he could hardly tell them apart. None of them worked. They melted and splashed against Loki, exactly as the wards and the Shield Charms had. Loki had reached the top of the staircase.

Camellia’s words came back again, damning. You can’t stop him or turn him aside, Wild.

Harry had never imagined that that meant he just wouldn’t be able to. Please, he thought, dropping Wayhouse’s wards so that he could Apparate into the kitchen. Please, don’t let him bite Kieran.

He appeared between Loki and Kieran, crouching on the floor, using his body as a shield. Loki padded forward a few steps and stopped, amber eyes filled with emotions Harry couldn’t understand.

“Please,” Harry whispered. Helplessness beat at his ribs like wings. The only time he had ever felt this bad was when he lay strapped on an altar stone in a graveyard, his wandless magic bound inside his body by the power of Midsummer, and watched Fenrir Greyback and his consort devour a child. “Please, please, do not. I know you can understand me, Loki. Please, give it up. Your people’s future may depend on it. Every bite you give sends the wizarding world further into the depths of madness and terror. And if that doesn’t convince you, I promised to protect Kieran. Please. Please.”

A movement off to the side made Harry look up. The ghost of Gudrun hovered there, watching him. She had been beautiful, as pale as her mate, with large, intelligent eyes and long legs that made her body look more graceful than an ordinary wolf’s, instead of monstrous.

“Please,” Harry told her.

She looked down at him, amber bleeding into her eyes, taking over from the silver color of ghosts. She bowed her head, and Harry heard a cold, distant whine, a sound that could have come from the Thorn Bitch’s briars rubbing together.

He felt wind pass over his head.

Loki leaped and came down precisely behind Harry, pinning Kieran to the floor and tearing him away. Kieran screamed in utter terror, and then Loki raked up with his front legs and down with his back ones, ripping open Kieran’s chest and disemboweling him in the same movement.

Harry nearly vomited, not from the smell but from the powerlessness. He reached out with his magic and simply flung it at Loki, not bothering to shape it into spells, just wanting this to stop.

The magic parted around Loki. He moved his hind legs again, and blood sprayed Harry’s face and glasses, blinding him and dripping into his mouth. He spat, pulling his glasses off, trying to see what was happening, cursing the lack of a left hand.

He blinked his eyelashes rapidly to free them of caked gore. When he could see, he knew he was too late. Loki had crushed Kieran’s skull in his jaws and ripped his head free of his neck.

I promised to protect him. And I could not.

The pain of his failure scooped into Harry like his own Exsculpo spell, leaving him hollow. He found himself leaning forward, hand out, and did not even know what he was reaching for. He knew his body shook with sobs, though, sobs of unleashed mourning.

Loki bit down, and rent Kieran’s body into two pieces. Harry wondered if he would ever be able to see a werewolf’s strength as beautiful again, or only as horrific.
Loki stepped delicately away then, and turned to face him. Harry knelt there, staring at him. He knew Loki could tear him apart, or make him into a werewolf, and thanks to the protection Loki had gained by swearing himself to this vengeance-path, Harry wouldn’t be able to stop him.

He cannot be stopped. He cannot be turned aside.

Gleaming amber eyes watched him from a field of blood and snow, and then Loki slipped past him and padded down the stairs. Harry felt him pass through the remains of Wayhouse’s broken door, and then the broken wards. The ghost of Gudrun lingered for a moment, and Harry sensed the wet touch of a tongue to his cheek.

Then they were gone, and he was alone with his frightened, whimpering house and the broken body of the man he had promised to protect.

Harry folded his arms on his knees and bowed his head into them. Tears made slow progress against the blood on his cheeks. His shoulders shook with his sobbing. Blame boiled in his stomach until he felt as though he’d swallowed poison.

For a moment, he wanted, with a simplicity and clarity he hadn’t felt since he’d mercy-killed the children outside Hogwarts, to die. There were some mistakes that could not be forgiven.

Then he took a few deep breaths and drove the emotions back into the places they belonged. If they acted as lashes on his soul, to drive him out of inactivity and into doing something about this, then he could use them. If not, then he had no time for them. This was battle, and he couldn’t pause to attend to his own wounds.

He rose to his feet, and, waving his hand, gathered the broken bits of Kieran’s body back together. Then he prepared to repair Wayhouse’s wards. When that was done, he would make a firecall to the Ministry, trying any and all Departments until he found a Floo that was open—or he would wait until morning, if none of them were. He knew from Kieran’s last name that he’d relatives at the Ministry at one point. If none worked there now, the Ministry would at least know how to contact them.

His balance wavered for a moment, when he saw how many scraps of flesh Loki had torn loose from Kieran’s body, but he could not afford to fall, so he did not.

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Harry returned to Hogwarts just after noon the next day. It had taken him that long to locate Kieran’s relatives—he no longer had anyone working at the Ministry—and turn the body over to them. It had been a cousin who came to collect him, Jenna. Her shock and her slowly widening eyes and her vomiting had been no less than what Harry expected. He had asked if she wanted to know anything else about her cousin’s death, but she only shook her head and turned away from him. He could not blame her for that.

A few Ministry officials had acted as if they would like to interrogate him, but they couldn’t figure out what to do or who should do it. After all, Harry had been protecting Kieran, by his own story. And the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts was in limbo at the moment, due to the destruction of so many of its members. This was only a late casualty.

In the end, after a confused hour in which Harry was shuttled between Amelia Bones’s office and one in the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures, he was released to go home.

He Apparated to the edge of the Hogwarts wards, on the road to Hogsmeade, and used the walk to get used to the knife-wound that seemed to have taken over his soul. No, it felt more like a sword-cut, he decided. Horror was part of it, but so was guilt, and so was his half-panicked determination to make sure this never happened again.

He had learned his lesson after the mercy-killing; Vera had taught him better. He would not tumble into depression, not when other people were depending on him. He had wrought this situation, and while looking back on it and lamenting it would satisfy one part of him, it did nothing in the long run. Eventually, he would make the wound stop feeling like a sword-cut and make it into another whip in his soul, driving him forward so that he would not collapse.

Harry wasn’t sure what he used to keep on his feet long enough to reach the entrance hall: the lessons learned in the Sanctuary, Lily’s training, his own innate stubbornness. Whatever it was, it worked. He was breathing more easily by then, and felt ready to face others. He had used the communication spell to let Draco, Connor, Joseph, McGonagall, and others know he was well, and, briefly, what had happened. It helped that he’d had the chance to cleanse himself of gore. That helped a great deal.

He lifted his gaze as a shadow moved in front of him. It was McGonagall who came to meet him, her face ashen as he had never seen it before. She clutched the Daily Prophet in her hand.
“Mr. Pott—Harry,” she said. “I told the others to stay where they were. I thought you should hear this from me.”

“What is it?” Harry asked quietly. He hadn’t had time to glance at the newspaper this morning. He wondered if they were reporting Kieran’s murder and him as an accomplice in it. *Willoughby might have the chance to see me on trial after all.*

McGonagall took a deep breath and stood straight as a blade. It struck Harry, for no apparent reason, that this was the way she might have looked reporting to Dumbledore in the First War.

“They’ve declared open hunting season on werewolves,” she said. “Any of them can be killed without penalty, provided that the killer can confirm they’re werewolves afterwards. And they’ve arrested Hawthorn Parkinson.”

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**Chapter Twenty-Three: At Daggers Drawn**

The news made Harry want to collapse. But he knew he couldn’t. For one thing, if he did, he probably wouldn’t be able to get back up again. And even if he managed it, then other people would try to make him lie still and—and rest, or something. He couldn’t do that.

He turned the shock into another whip, driving him on. He fastened his eyes on McGonagall’s face and said, “And we don’t know anything about who betrayed her?”

McGonagall shook her head. “Only that the Aurors came and arrested her early this morning. She was taken to Tullianum under suspicion of being a werewolf. Ownership of the Parkinson estates was stripped from her.” Then she pursed her lips, making her look more like the stern Professor he was accustomed to, and held out the paper. “This is what it said.”

Harry took the paper and studied it. But McGonagall had already told him all the essentials; the rest was just the usual fluff that the *Prophet* tucked around the Ministry’s declarations to make them seem less blatant than they really were. “Safety of the public” mingled with “best way to handle them” and “done for the rights of werewolves as well as others” in his eyes. Harry blinked, and realized the words were dangerously near to blurring and swimming.

No.

He nodded and handed the *Prophet* back to McGonagall. “I’ll go and speak to Scrimgeour about this,” he said.

A new shadow moved across McGonagall’s face. “Are you sure that is wise, Harry?” she asked. “The arrest is new, and the Minister may be unable to do anything about this until the emotions in the Ministry calm somewhat. In a day, perhaps two—”

“No.” Harry shook his head. “From this point forward, it’s only going to get worse.” He felt weariness push at him like a tide, but he ignored it. He had hoped to avoid this. He had hoped matters wouldn’t come to this head. But they had, and unless he managed to persuade Scrimgeour to move against the edict right away—which he didn’t expect to happen—then he was headed for a course of open rebellion against the Ministry. He had tried, and others had tried, but it wasn’t enough. “They’ve passed a law making werewolves unsafe *everywhere*, Madam. It’s not going to die in a day or two. It’ll build from this point forward, and if no one does anything to oppose them, because they want to wait and see what happens, or because they’re afraid, then the Ministry will pass more laws against werewolves. And who knows who it’ll be next? Dark wizards, maybe. There were a few laws like that on the books already.”

“They will not pass laws like that, Harry,” McGonagall whispered, as if she wanted to reassure him. “Dark wizards are still too much a part of the population, and too in control even now. There are small numbers of werewolves compared to Dark wizards.”

“But werewolves can make more of themselves, fast,” said Harry flatly. “And there are still two nights of the full moon left, during which werewolves can transform and wreak all sorts of havoc.” He stared directly into her eyes. “Madam, do you think rationality is involved here? I don’t.”

McGonagall looked away from him. Harry could feel her own fear and determination as if she were speaking into his thoughts. She was concerned for her school, worried about what would happen to her students if she tried to shelter werewolves or take a side in this conflict.

Harry gripped and squeezed her arm. “I’m not asking you to take my side,” he said. “You have responsibilities that I don’t. What I’m doing is easier, actually, because I don’t have hundreds of young wizards, and their parents, depending on me. You can step
back, Madam, and tell anyone who asks that I’m not doing this with your good grace or your permission.”

“You are still one of my students, Harry,” McGonagall said, pulling herself upright like an offended cat, and Harry realized he’d mistaken the source of her concern.

It warmed a few of the icy whips he had to worry about now. Harry smiled at her. “Thank you, Madam, but from this point forward, I don’t want you to worry about that. I don’t think I’ll be coming back to Hogwarts for a good while, if ever.”

“Harry—“

He gently shook his head at her and held out his hand. “Pack Harry’s things,” he said clearly. “Accio.”

Then he had to wait while the charms packed his trunk and flew it to him. Harry shrank the trunk when it got there and tucked it into his robe pocket. The only thing he had left was the Firebolt, which waited for him in the Quidditch shed.

“I hope the Slytherin team can find another Seeker in time,” he told McGonagall. “No offense to your House, but I still want mine to win the Cup.”

McGonagall went on staring at him.

“And take good care of Snape,” Harry added, starting to turn on his heel.

“Wait. Harry—wait.” McGonagall spoke as if the words had been torn out of her. “You aren’t asking anyone to go with you?”

Harry glanced back at her over his shoulder. “There are a few people I’ll ask to join me, if what I fully expect happens and the Minister can’t help me,” he said calmly. “But it has to be a choice, and I want them to have time to think about it, not be swept away in immediate outrage over Hawthorn’s arrest and the announcement of the hunt. It’s not going to be easy, and I don’t think some of my allies, like Snape, can manage it at all. For me, there’s not a choice.” He lifted his left arm, shaking back the sleeve to show her the scar of the formal family oath he’d made with the Parkinsons. The scar was burning and tingling. “It’s not just the promise I made to help the werewolves that drives this forward. It’s the promise I made to the Parkinsons. Hawthorn is the last member of her family left alive. Other than Falco Parkinson, Harry supposed, but he didn’t think that counted, or the old wizard wouldn’t have been able to act against him. Besides, the oath hadn’t affected Henrietta when he first knew her, even though she was part of the Bulstrode family. “I’m going.”

“Surely, Mr. Malfoy, your brother—“ said McGonagall, still sounding as if someone had slammed her over the head with a Beater’s bat.

“I’ll speak with them later,” said Harry quietly. “As I said, I don’t want them pulled along by runaway emotions.” And I want them to have time to think about this and what it really means. Being my brother and my lover, even being my allies, is one thing. Joining me in a rebellion is quite another.

He nodded one more time to McGonagall, and then turned and began walking back towards the Hogsmeade road, with only a short stopover at the Quidditch shed. Meanwhile, his mind calmly listed the places he could go for sanctuary, and the best choices among them.

His allies’ houses were out, of course, until he found out how much they wanted to be involved in this; Hawthorn was the only one he could be sure of on that count, and the Garden would be swarming with Aurors, and probably Unspeakables. The Black houses held the pack, and Harry suspected Shield of the Granian, if they had received information from Falco and were working with the Unspeakables, might already have passed that tidbit along. They would wait a short time before moving, since invading the estates of a prominent pureblood family wouldn’t look good even now, but surely no more than a few days.

So he needed a place that would shelter both him and the pack, and he needed it ready in no more than a few days’ time.

Harry felt a smile pull at his mouth. There was only one choice, really.

The emotions he felt had changed, he thought. Now they felt less like whips driving him forward, and more like a wind tugging him on, pointing the way towards his ultimate goal.

He reached the outer limit of the wards, and Apparated, the hills of Woodhouse clear in his mind.

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Harry arrived at the Ministry’s front entrance without fanfare, but also without attempting to hide. He was waiting to see what would happen when he approached. Did he still have any allies in the Ministry? He didn’t know, at this point.

His magic lapped around him, thick washing waves of it that made the checkpoint wizard stare at him. Harry raised an eyebrow, pointing out the utter folly of asking for a wand. The checkpoint wizard nodded quickly and let him through.

Harry walked to the lifts that would take him to Scrimgeour’s office, all the while reaching out with his magical senses, delving deeper into the stones of the Ministry than he had ever done before. When he sensed the faint traces of buried spells, he murmured the incantation that Millicent had taught him once upon a long time ago. “Aspectus Lyncis.”

The world around him turned almost white with radiance. Harry nodded slowly. When he squinted through the radiance, he could make out the buried traces of the Unspeakables’ wards. They were not really undetectable, but they were made of spells not usually used for defensive purposes, and so twisted on one another that Harry thought they would hurt the eyes of most wizards looking, and buried so deep that most people wouldn’t find them.

Harry gave a tight little smile. The wards ran everywhere, and vibrated with sound, bringing it to some central place below the rest of the Ministry. He supposed the Unspeakables sat there in the middle of their web and listened, and there really was nothing they didn’t hear.

Let them listen all they want, he thought, as he rode in a lift to the top of the Ministry, and then stepped out and into the corridor that led to Scrimgeour’s office. Let their ears ring. I’m not hiding.

He recognized neither Auror on the door to Scrimgeour’s office, and wondered if that meant Wilmot had already been captured. McGonagall hadn’t mentioned the Department’s plan to send out the werewolf-tracking spell and surround every lycanthrope in Britain with a blue fog. Perhaps they were waiting to do it until the full moon had passed, or perhaps the declaration of the hunting season had replaced Kieran’s old information.

Harry knew he would have to be prepared to react when the information came along. He also knew that he could probably know just by going to Amelia Bones’s office and using Legilimency on her.

But he didn’t want to. He was going to war like a vates, not otherwise.

The two Aurors on the door got more and more nervous as they watched him come closer. Harry stopped in front of them and surveyed them. Both men, both ordinary in appearance, one with slightly nicer robes, perhaps a pureblood. He wouldn’t want to kill them.

“I need to see the Minister,” he said, and let a snake of golden light curl around his shoulders. It didn’t strike, it just watched them, but one of the men began sweating, and Harry suspected he’d stumbled into a phobia. “Now.”

“He’s with other people at the moment,” said the Auror with slightly finer robes. The other one watched the snake and made a faint gargling noise that might indicate his tongue was stuck to the roof of his mouth.

“What kind of other people?” Harry asked.

He found out in a moment, though, because either the Minister hadn’t set up the wards that blocked sound or the shouting had grown too loud for them. And, what was more, he knew the voice doing the shouting.

“—not close! I don’t care! I know you have your reasons, Minister, but I have mine, and I can’t do this any more! It just—it isn’t what being an Auror is about! This is the last straw! And for you to sit here and say that you won’t do anything about the hunting season, that you can’t do anything—” The shouter stopped and audibly drew in her breath, but then continued in a voice that sounded no softer than before. “Then you will be pleased to accept my resignation.”

The Aurors moved out of the way like a pair of well-trained dancers as someone flung the door open. Out stepped Nymphadora Tonks, her hair flaming red with orange streaks, her eyes wide and blue and bright as lightning with emotion.

She caught sight of Harry, and stopped. She blinked a bit, then said, “Oh. Erm. I just joined your rebellion.”

Harry smiled in spite of himself and held out his hand. “I know. I heard,” he said.

“Well, they were going to sack me anyway for shouting at the Minister, weren’t they?” Tonks muttered, and stepped forward to
clasp his wrist. She stumbled on the way, but steadied herself against the doorframe, never taking her eyes off Harry. “So, when do we leave?”

“Right after I talk to Scrimgeour,” Harry said.

Tonks scowled, transformed in a moment from bumbling girl to someone far more dangerous. “He’s insufferable, Harry. It’s not going to do any good.”

“I’ve got to try,” said Harry, and then remembered the wards that ran everywhere, and the fact that a few minutes of waiting in the hallway for him could put Tonks in danger. He laid his hand on her arm and concentrated, closing his eyes. The Imperturbable Charm leaked into her skin and surrounded her with a glowing cage of purple light.

Harry opened his eyes to see her poking at it, and explained, “So that no enemies can touch you while I’m gone.”

Tonks swallowed, and then her face hardened, and Harry suspected he was seeing the battle-trained Auror. “Right,” she said, and stepped aside. Harry went into the office, and shut the door behind him with a gentle gust of wind.

Scrimgeour sat at his desk. Percy sat at his, behind the ward that probably protected him from the notice of most people, his hand clutching his wand and a hostile expression on his face. Harry eyed him sideways and shook his head. He would be sorry to alienate Percy, but there was no help for it, not if Scrimgeour was going to present a public face supporting the hunting season and Percy was going to stand by him.

“Minister,” Harry said, crossing his arms and inclining his head. “You know why I’m here.”

Scrimgeour flicked one eye towards the walls. Harry snorted. So he knows about the wards, and he’s afraid to say anything in front of the Unspeakables? Well, I’m not. And the best way is to destroy their advantage of secrecy. He glanced at the walls, found the Unspeakables’ listening wards shining in the stones, and opened up the absorbere gift. The magic ran down his gullet, and the wards vanished.

“Your Unspeakables have betrayed you,” he told Scrimgeour bluntly. “They want werewolves captured and brought to Tullianum to use for experiments. They have the forty werewolves from the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts there already. And anybody captured in this hunting season will benefit them more. Meanwhile, they can use the cover of fear the hunting season provides to work against me, and anyone else who opposes them. The public’s attention will be on werewolves, not wizards in gray cloaks. And why shouldn’t it be? You know as well as I do what kind of opposition this hunting season is going to raise among the packs. All the peace that we tried to keep in London, gone. The alphas will have to strike, to insure that their packs are safe, to protect them if someone comes hunting, to find new hiding places. The Unspeakables just lit our world on fucking fire. And it will get worse if you don’t help me, if you wait for some imaginary day when opposing them will not cost you.”

Scrimgeour’s face had gone the color of ashes. Percy was on his feet, glancing back and forth between the Minister and Harry, nearly vibrating.

“You took down their wards,” Scrimgeour whispered.

Harry nodded, his attention on the walls. The Unspeakables would be weaving wards again soon, but Scrimgeour’s office was nearly as far from the Department of Mysteries as one could get and still be in the Ministry. It would take at least a few moments before the wards arrived, and when they got near again, he would destroy them once more. “Yes, I did. That’s the reason that you were afraid to speak with me openly, wasn’t it? Fear of them?”

“Minister,” said Percy, stepping out from behind his desk.

Scrimgeour had recovered something like sense and courage, though. He folded his hands in front of him. “It was.” He stared at Harry with a calculating eye. “And what do you intend to do? Burn out the Department of Mysteries?”

Harry half-closed his eyes and reached, out and downwards. He could feel magic pulsing through the Ministry in a thousand directions; he knew and dismissed most of the spells that powered it. Wards slid over his consciousness and faded into the background. The magic protecting Tullianum became meaningless noise. As he dived further and further towards the Department of Mysteries, though, the magic thickened, and the number of unfamiliar spells increased.

And in the center and the heart of it all waited something that slammed like a stone wall against Harry’s awareness. He felt it as a hunter’s cold, bright, sharp mind. It turned to face him, and he knew it saw him.
He had known something like it once before: the Maze in Lux Aeterna. A mind vastly stronger than any wizard, an alien uncompromised magic. But this was wilder, and stranger, and Harry knew in an instant that he could not fight this thing, not yet. It had had centuries to lie in its place and grow strong. Invading the Department of Mysteries and trying to tangle with it was a suicide mission.

For now.

He opened his eyes, trying to shake the sensation of watching eyes in the back of his own mind, and said, “Not yet. What’s in the center of the Department of Mysteries, Minister? Can you tell me that? Something from another world?” He thought he knew, from his last conversation with Scrimgeour, but he wanted to be sure.

“The Stone,” said Scrimgeour. “It’s what chooses them, and what they swear their oaths to.”

Harry nodded. He couldn’t guess the true nature of the Stone from that brief glimpse, but he knew it was probably the reason the Unspeakables were acting against him. An oath sworn to something like that would be obeyed, and if it decided to send its servants after Harry, they would go.

“So you have a choice now, Minister,” he said. “To oppose the hunting season, or not. You told Tonks you wouldn’t. Why?”

Scrimgeour’s face contorted into a helpless snarl. Harry, as he ate an Unspeakable ward trying to reach up to him, was impressed.

“Because I am this close,” Scrimgeour said, holding up two fingers, “to becoming a figurehead in my own Ministry. I move a step out of line, and Amelia Bones can strip me of power. Granted, I don’t think she’d last long. None of the other Department Heads would do what she told ‘em. But they don’t want me commanding ‘em, either, at least not without bargains that will take months to work out. And while she was in charge, the Ministry would burn. If you think the wizarding world is on fire now, Harry, it’s nothing compared to what would happen if she took it over.”

“They’ve made you into a figurehead already, if you’re too frightened to move on provocation like this,” Harry said softly. “Don’t you see that, Minister? You have nothing to lose now. You can’t play your games in the shadows and hope that none of them will notice you any longer. If you stand up and declare martial law, you stand a chance—“

“Of getting nothing done,” said Scrimgeour harshly. “The Wizengamot chose to pass that hunting season, Harry, in a secret meeting last night to which I was not invited. They also left out a few other key people who might have objected, Griselda Marchbanks, for example. But there’s nothing I can gain by opposing them at the moment. They’ll cast a vote of no confidence, and put Amelia in as temporary Minister. I’ve already told you what a disaster that will be.”

Harry eyed him for a moment. “But if all that’s true, sir, then what do you think you can accomplish by staying in office?”

Scrimgeour’s face altered, showing an unholy joy Harry had never seen from him before. “Because this hunting season is the beginning of the end,” he said. “They’re overstepping their bounds, now. A few potential friends I had will fall into my hands like ripe fruit. They didn’t think the Wizengamot would go this far. They see now that they will. I can pressure the Department Heads once that happens. A few more pushes, and then a few more, and they’ll fall down.” He met and held Harry’s gaze. “We can keep this conflagration from spreading. We can remove Amelia and other Wizengamot members rotted by fear and replace ‘em with new ones. They can still turn me into a figurehead if I object immediately. But a short wait, and I’ll have ‘em.” He narrowed his eyes at Harry. “And of course I said I was supporting the hunting season in front of Tonks. Not stupid, am I?”

Harry let out his breath and ate another ward. He wondered if the Unspeakables were on their way up from the Department of Mysteries, yet. “And what about the Unspeakables, sir?” he asked. “Do you really think they’ll let you do this? They can still use their artifacts to change your mind, as long as you remain in the Ministry. And they can corrupt new members of the Wizengamot with fear, the same as they corrupted the others. This hunting season is what they wanted, for whatever obscure reason. They won’t let you destroy it.”

“The second edict we make is going to be against gathering so many magical artifacts in one place,” said Scrimgeour. “The first will be against the hunting season.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” said Harry softly. “I don’t believe this can work. You want to remain within the bounds of law, or at least propriety—“ he suspected some of the allies Scrimgeour was talking about were those who would have the power to bribe new friends into joining their side “—and the Unspeakables are already defeating you there.”

“I don’t want it in the sense of panting after it,” Harry said. “But I think it’s necessary, yes.”

Scrimgeour shook his head slowly. “And I am not doing this for power,” he said. “If I thought there was a chance that Amelia wouldn’t damage the Ministry too badly, or that someone other than her would take my place if I abandoned my post now, I would join you. But there isn’t.”

Harry felt a rush of compassion overtake him. Scrimgeour still thought things wouldn’t change too much, that he could reform instead of revolt. And perhaps he was right, at least on his own scale. Perhaps he would be able to pursue the path he preferred and still get things done.

But that ability would come from Harry distracting the Unspeakables and shaking things up.

Harry didn’t mind. At least Scrimgeour hadn’t dived so far into fear that he was supporting the hunting season blindly. And, he told himself, he had known this would fail. He let the possibility of cooperation with the Minister fall to ashes in his mind, and bowed his head.

“I’m not doing this for power, either,” he said. “I’m doing this because I think it’s the right thing to do. Good day, Minister.” He turned to face the door, eating another ward on the way. Let Scrimgeour have a few more minutes of peace and privacy in which to compose himself.

“You’re not going into Tullianum, are you?” Scrimgeour’s voice was unmistakably apprehensive.

Harry turned back. “No.” Not yet. When that happened, he would have a plan that would let him succeed the first time. Perhaps he could win right now if he went to Tullianum and tried to free forty-one, or more, werewolves, but some of them would certainly die on the way, and innocent Ministry people caught in the way might be hurt. And there was the very simple truth that Woodhouse wasn’t prepared to receive them yet. Harry would do what would give his people the best chance of living, not merely of escape.

He needed information, first. He needed to plan. And for that, he would need Tonks and Moody, and anyone else who might be able to tell him more about the Ministry.

He had already tried to communicate with Hawthorn, and received no answer. That didn’t surprise him. The wards in Tullianum blocked post owls from reaching the prisoners. Surely they wouldn’t allow anyone to simply speak with one, either.

“I wish you would not do this,” said Scrimgeour, but his face was relaxing. Given that Harry had said he wasn’t going into Tullianum right now, Harry thought, he must reckon there would be no jailbreak at all. He probably still has trouble imagining me in a full-blown rebellion against the Ministry.

“I wish I didn’t have to,” said Harry, and then turned and left. He knew Scrimgeour could feel it when the wards came back up. Let the man do what he could to reform the Ministry. That wasn’t Harry’s task.

He found Tonks waiting, unbothered, in the hallway. She smiled when she saw him, and Harry nodded and took her arm.

“I’ll take you to a place you’ll be safe,” he said. “And then I have to go see a man about some words.”

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Lucius had expected it: the wards twanging as a sign that Harry had Apparated to the Manor. The only suspense was the specific aid that Harry would ask of him. In any case, his price would be the same. Lucius leaned back a bit further and read more of his Daily Prophet, humming. Terrible news about the hunting season, simply terrible.

He heard footsteps, and looked up to find Harry standing in the entrance to his library. Harry inclined his head. “Lucius.”

“Harry.” Lucius watched him. Harry’s eyes shone with more raw power than he had let loose in a long time. The air around him rippled, as if he stood in the center of a heat haze. Lucius found it difficult to see the walls and furnishings through the sheer magic. “Did you want something?”

“Yes, I did,” said Harry, coming forward a few steps. He didn’t sit. He didn’t need to. Voldemort would have, Lucius thought, during the First War, but the Dark Lord had possessed the power of making every chair a throne. Harry didn’t, not least because he projected the conviction that he didn’t think of himself as anything very special. Lucius knew, now, that Harry wouldn’t torture
him. It removed a certain edge. “You’ll have heard the news, of course.”

Lucius nodded.

“I’d like to ask you to work for me within the Ministry.” Harry’s eyes were fastened on him. “Discourage people from participating in the hunting season, and go against the Unspeakables, and trade favors for as much information as you can. I need a finger on the Ministry’s pulse, since there’s no way I can be there myself for a while.”

Lucius smiled at him. “I would be delighted to do that for you, Harry.”

“Good,” said Harry in relief, and turned towards the doorway.

“If,” said Lucius.

He saw Harry’s back tense. The heat haze of power rose into pain. Lucius grimaced and rubbed his forehead. The more time he spent around Harry, the more he could go without those twinges, but it never lasted long.

“You are my ally,” said Harry, without turning.

“I know that,” said Lucius, and it came out sharper than he intended, because of the pain. He rushed to correct his mistake. “I am, of course, Harry. I will obey the Alliance oaths. But using the Malfoy contacts to benefit you is a different thing altogether. Especially over something in which I have as little—interest as I do in the werewolf problem.”

Harry spun on one heel. “It can’t benefit your family, you mean.”

Lucius smiled slightly. “Someone must think of these things, Harry. Narcissa is unlikely to. Draco is too young.”

“Name your price,” said Harry.

“You withdraw your support from the Grand Unified Theory,” said Lucius. “I am not asking you to exile Muggleborns—“ a struggle, but he managed to use the right word “—from the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, or stop fighting for their rights. But claiming that there is no difference between us and them, and trying to grant them rights based on that alone, is doomed to failure. Quietly, make it known that you don’t believe in the theory. Whisper the right words into the right ears. Remind them that you have a pureblood partner, that you were born of a pureblood line though you renounced your last name, that you are now the legal heir of a very old family. I suspect taking the surname of Black might be necessary, in the end. A simple gesture, but it will accomplish much.”

“There is a problem, Mr. Malfoy,” said Harry, clenching his jaw while his magic rippled around him. Lucius remained unafraid. Harry was not about to cast *Crucio*. He knew the signs of that. “I do believe in the theory.”

Lucius chuckled softly. “And do you also believe that a new theory is enough to erase a thousand years of culture and ritual?”

“Of course not,” said Harry. “The dances, the rituals, the naming traditions, the political loopholes—all of those are valuable and should be protected. Respected. But what it *means* is that no pureblood family can cling to a supposed genetic difference any more. If someone who wasn’t born into the culture learns it, they should be accepted as fully a wizard or witch, just as much as someone like Draco.”

Lucius had to restrain a flash of anger. Not only was Harry being unreasonably stubborn, he was *daring* to compare a trained monkey of a Mudblood to Lucius’s own family. A comparison to a family like the Rosiers would have been acceptable.

Keeping his voice calm, Lucius murmured, “And that is what we do not want to see happen. There is a difference. Make it clear that you are aligning yourself with us, that you accept this culture as your own, and that you are reaching out to Muggleborns only for political reasons, and you will have more than you can imagine—not only my help in the Ministry, but the help of pureblood families in other wizarding communities who have hesitated, unsure of your direction.”

Harry breathed in and out, eyes fastened on his. Lucius waited. He was sure he would win. He was not asking a sacrifice of Harry that would hurt anyone else, and the boy didn’t really care about the power of his name and reputation. He would choose the surname of Black for a good cause, unaware of all the repercussions.

“No,” said Harry.
Lucius paused. He could not have heard what he thought he heard. “Excuse me?”

“No,” said Harry. “I will not. I support the Grand Unified Theory, Lucius, and the conclusions it reaches, and the changes it will make in our world. If I cannot have your help, then I do not have it. Good day.” He nodded once, then turned and began walking in the other direction.

“So changing your name is too great a sacrifice to make?” Lucius mused aloud, not letting his posture alter. His father’s lessons had not been learned in vain.

*Even if he was a halfblood.* But Lucius had had a lot of practice strangling that particular thought, and he did it now without pause.

Harry halted, looking over his shoulder. “I don’t think you know what I’m proposing, Lucius,” he said. “Open rebellion against the Ministry. Open defiance of the hunting season. Open protection of werewolves, and those who wish to join me. The Alliance of Sun and Shadow remains what it was—an organization to encourage thinking. But this is the beginning of a revolution.”

Lucius felt as if he were tipping, falling down the slope of an abyss. It was not a pleasant sensation. The last time he had felt anything like it was when Draco came to him to be confirmed magical heir.

Harry must have seen the twitch of an expression on his face, because he smiled, and the smile was feral. “Yes. This is the beginning of the end. They’ve finally pushed me too far. I won’t be going back to Hogwarts for a while. I’ll be in a sanctuary with those who can fully commit to joining me.” He breathed in and out, his eyes never leaving Lucius’s. “I knew you wouldn’t be one of them, so I didn’t see the point of asking you for anything but what I did. That you refused me makes the task a little harder, but not impossible. I’ll still do this.”

Lucius imagined everything he had worked for upended, and he could not restrain a snarl. *This was not supposed to happen.* *Harry was supposed to panic just enough to become amenable to guidance, and remain within the limits, as he always had.*

His voice was snowfall, however. “And you are not worried about overstepping the bounds of your *vates* task?”

Harry laughed. The sound was like wind in the treetops. “Hardly. This hunting season, if allowed to go unchallenged, is the beginning of a whole new oppression of free will, the kind that we haven’t seen in four hundred years. I am allowed to push back when someone tramples on free will. That is when they give up their ability to do as they like.”

Lucius watched him. Harry gave him one more fierce smile, and then Apparated out. The gift that Lucius had given him at the end of their truce-dance linked Harry to the wards of the Manor, and he could pass in and out of them at will, like a member of the family.

At the moment, Lucius had never regretted any gift more.

He only sat still for a few moments, however, breathing. Then he spoke to his left wrist, reciting the communication spell that Charles Rosier-Henlin had invented.


“Draco, this is your father.”

His son shut up.

Lucius continued, half-wishing this was a firecall. He wanted to see Draco’s face. On the other hand, by the time he could arrange for his son to reach a hearth, either through the Headmistress’s office or through Severus, Harry might have spoken to Draco, and then the decision made would be irrevocable, Lucius knew.

“Harry is becoming a rebel against the Ministry, against pureblood tradition, against everything that is right and true,” he told his son. “He supports the Grand Unified Theory to an extent that will destroy our culture and make us no different from Mudbloods. He will not agree to the completely reasonable compromise I tried to offer him. *Listen to me, Draco. I forbid you to join him in this mad rebellion.*”

“Father,” Draco said faintly, “if you’re trying to say that I shouldn’t court him, then—“

“Not at all,” said Lucius. He didn’t want to lose the hold his family had on Harry, and whether Draco agreed to break the joining
ritual or not, that was what would occur if he pressed this issue. If he pursued Harry against his father’s express permission, then he would be breaking his ties as a Malfoy. Lucius would not let that happen. Draco was his heir, as well as his son, and he would stay that way. “I wish for you to join with Harry when he comes to his senses. But until he comes to his senses, I wish you to stay away from him. Do not join him in his flight. Do not join him in raising wands against the Ministry. Do not protest publicly against the hunting season, or the arrest of Mrs. Parkinson.”

“Father,” Draco whispered.

“This is my command, Draco, in the name of Lucius and Abraxas,” said Lucius, invoking the old, formal terms. “On pain of disownment.”

Draco’s breath rushed noisily in and out of his lungs. Lucius waited. He knew he would win. If he had allowed Harry to reach Draco, or Draco to argue and build up a head of steam and exercise his impulsive temper, then it would be far more in doubt. But by giving the threat first, he had controlled the interaction.

“I—I understand,” Draco said at last.

“Very good,” said Lucius, and ended the communication spell, because there was no more to say. He reached out to take up the book he had been studying on mind control spells again, his heartbeat already restored to normal. Things with Harry had not gone exactly as he had hoped, but if he had won no advantage for his family, at least he had contained the damage.

Such a shame about Hawthorn, he thought. Such a shame, indeed.

******

Narcissa stood outside the door of the study until she could be sure that Lucius had finished the communication spell, until the turn of a page signaled that he had resumed his book. Then she turned and began to climb the stairs to her room.

Her back was straight all the while, her neck so stiff it almost hurt. But when she reached her room, she could close the door and lean against it, letting it take some of the weight from her shoulders, and shut her eyes.

She wondered if Lucius had thought she would not find out about his threat to Draco, or whether he had planned to come and tell her later, with just enough honey in the words to sweeten it.

She wondered why he did not see that he had overreached himself, that Draco had said only that he understood, not that he would obey, and that forcing his son to choose between his family and his lover was a test not even Lucius had gone through.

She wondered if Lucius really thought she would simply stand silent throughout this, playing the part of good little wife, as Muggles were said to do.

Narcissa opened her eyes and moved across the room. It was the one place in the house that Lucius never intruded without her express permission, but since he had been in here so often, he assumed he knew the contents. He did not know, or he had forgotten, about the trunk at the back of the closet.

Narcissa gazed at the trunk. It bore her maiden initials, not the married ones, and it bore memories. Her mother had given it to her when she left for Hogwarts, nervous, but not too nervous, for surely she would go into Slytherin, the House where she had two older sisters already. It was made of polished ebony, the initials worked near the lock in silver, and no one but Narcissa could open it.

She opened it now. Unpacked, save for a single folded robe of gold and green. Narcissa had left many of her belongings there when she still considered that perhaps one of the fierce fights she and Lucius had had in the first days of their marriage would send her fleeing home. She had assumed she would not have time to pack completely, but she had wanted something to wear.

As she had learned to trust Lucius, she had removed more and more of the old clothes from the trunk.

Save this one.

Narcissa shut the lid and turned away. She was waiting. She had to wait. She had already made her own decision, but what action came out of that decision would be determined by someone else.

She wondered, while she drew her wand and began to practice dueling spells, why Lucius had never noticed that all their fiercest
battles had been about Draco, and that she had won all of them—giving him his name, sending him to Hogwarts instead of Durmstrang, delaying his training in the pureblood rituals until he was of an age not to be broken. She wondered why Lucius had never thought that, if it came to a dispute between her husband and her son, she would side with her son.

She loved Lucius, of that there was no doubt. But she loved Draco more.

******

Draco felt as though the world had changed into a carousel while he wasn’t looking. He lay in the center of his bed, the bed that he had shared with Harry just yesterday. He had given up asking Harry to let him go with him to Wayhouse and guard Morologus. Harry had refused and explained the reasons, and they were good enough reasons. Or they had seemed good enough reasons yesterday, when Draco was sulking from the latest fight they’d had over Harry’s brother and his girlfriend. He’d fallen asleep assuming he would see Harry in the morning, and wondering if Harry knew how infuriating it was for him to hold back on his anger, always, and be the calm and sane voice of reason. Draco wanted to see his eyes flash, if only for the possibility that anger might turn into arousal.

And now.

And now.

Draco wondered if the fates had thought him too blind. Obsessed with the argument with Potter, with flirting with Michael just enough to lure him along without breaking his heart, with the utter bitchiness of Potter’s girlfriend, and with pushing Harry until he lost his temper and admitted he was human. Had it too been too small a scale of suffering? Had it tempted them too much?

So they had taken it all away—not by killing Harry or wounding Draco, but by giving him a choice between lover and family.

It was not a decision Harry would want him to make, Draco knew. He would say unhesitatingly that Draco should choose his family, because Harry’s own rebellion could survive without Draco, but Lucius Malfoy’s anger would refuse to blow over, perhaps for the rest of their lives. Harry would hate it, Harry would want Draco at his side, but he would still let him make the choice. Not only would his vates principles demand it, but Harry would consider his personal reasons for wanting Draco at his side not as important as Draco’s for wanting to remain where he was.

His father did not even think there was a decision to be made, or he would have pressed Draco for his word.

That meant it was truly Draco’s choice.

He had never been so sure that so much depended on his will, and never so unsure that he could make the right decision. He wasn’t a Malfoy just then. He wasn’t Harry’s friend or lover, the role that had most defined the last five years of his life. He was himself. He felt as if he stood on a mountain in the sunlight, but the sunlight was unforgiving, and rather than the view, Draco was more aware that he could be seen for miles and miles.

Whatever he picked, he was going to be different from now on. This choice was going to prune more of his childhood away from him. It was already doing so.

Draco put his hands over his face and lay there, breathing.

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Chapter Twenty-Four: Called Woodhouse, Called the Ancient Vale

Minerva sipped her tea. It made her look dignified. There was no one around to see, but that didn’t matter. Her parents had once told her that she should be dignified even if she was nothing else, and at the moment, Minerva feared she was dangerously close to being nothing else. She sipped. The teacup trembled in her hand, and threatened to send hot tea sliding over her fingers.

She set the cup down at once, and stared at it grimly.

“He will do the best he can.”

Minerva was glad that she wasn’t holding the cup now, or she would have surely spilled the drink all over herself when Godric appeared, the Founder’s shade looking both stern and hopeful. “I know that,” she snapped. “That’s not what I was worried about. His best still might not be good enough, and he will not be going to war in the same way he went to war all the other times. He’ll
be fighting defensively, not offensively. The last time he had to withstand a siege, he did not do it well."

“He will not be withering under a pitched grief this time,” Godric murmured. “Nor with people who blame him for what has happened.”

Minerva frowned, remembering the expression she had seen on Harry’s face when she had told him about Hawthorn. For a moment, it had been frighteningly empty, like looking down a mine shaft, or into Voldemort’s eyes. Then she had seen guilt and self-loathing of the kind she was familiar with from last term climb into the expression. And then it had all changed, with a speed that was equally frightening, into determination.

“I think he has transformed his grief,” she told Godric quietly. “He will use it to drive himself forward.”

The Founder blinked, then spread his hands. “But that is a good thing, surely?”

Minerva couldn’t explain why she thought it was a bad thing. It was certainly something she would have been proud of one of her Gryffindors for doing. And it was a far more healthy tactic than Harry had used to cope the last time he blamed himself for something.

Yet the unease remained.

And so did the bitter realization she had suffered as she looked into Harry’s face: she could do nothing to help him without jeopardizing her school and the position of responsibility she had chosen, but if he had asked, she would have tried to do—something. She did not know what it would have been, but it would still have been done.

She scowled into her tea.

It was not pleasant to know that, after Albus and after her knowledge that she had to care for the students of Hogwarts when no one else would, she had found a leader who could have commanded her to follow him with a word.

******

Harry was impressed with the speed that the southern goblins used to get him into a room alone, especially since he hadn’t come to see the hanarz or to discuss goblin politics, just to open a new account. He assumed that they had something they wanted him to do, however, so he inclined his head politely when the hanarz appeared. She had not changed since he had seen her last, still with dark gray skin, direct eyes, and the silver chain around her neck. Harry kept an eye on the metal. He had seen her work magic with the shackles set into her skin last time. If she had something to accuse him of, something to hurt him for, the chains were the means by which she would do it.

“Harry.”

Startled, Harry met her gaze. He had never heard her call him that—but, of course, he hadn’t seen her since he renounced his last name. He nodded. “Yes?”

The hanarz leaned forward across the carved stone table that separated them. The guards behind her carried quivers of arrows and bows and wore heavy ornaments at their throats, but didn’t react as their leader neared him. Harry supposed they must consider him safe, perhaps because he had freed the southern goblins with the help of several other wizards in a cooperative ritual. “We know what it will mean, that you are fighting the Ministry and freeing the werewolves,” she said.

Harry stared before he could help himself. He wondered if they had figured that out from reading about the hunting season in the newspaper and the fact that he had come to them when he was supposed to be in Hogwarts, or through a more magical means. “It means full-out rebellion,” he said, nodding. “I didn’t come here today to involve you in it, hanarz. I mean only to insure that they cannot freeze the Black accounts, so I’m transferring money into another one.”

“We have gifts for you,” said the hanarz, as if she had not heard him. She removed one corner of the robe that covered her, and the dark iron chain that curled out of the side of her throat and into her right shoulder rose. Harry watched it twitch and throb and hum. Then it lashed towards him, and a wave of sound shot over his head, causing him to duck. Harry turned, but could see nothing visible as the wave of sound hit the stone, and, apparently, traveled through it and on.

“What was that?” he asked, turning back.

“A call,” said the hanarz, “to let those who hear it know that the vates is fighting for the rights of magical creatures and needs
help. Those who wish to answer it will. It is not audible to human ears,” she added, “no matter what they use to listen.” Harry, his mouth open, closed it again, nodding. He had been afraid the Unspeakables might use some artifact to intercept the call and ambush any allies on their way to him.

“The second gift is one we were asked to keep in trust for you,” the hanarz said, “by someone who approached us with awe and humility. We honored her request.” She snapped her fingers, a sound like breaking twigs, and one of the guards stepped forward with a tiny chest. Harry knew the chests of Gringotts, thought, and suspected this one was linked to a vault, transporting the money from it into the chest until the owner said to stop. The guard opened it, and Harry blinked. Inside lay jewels instead of the coins he had expected—small diamonds, tiny rubies, silver and golden ornamented bracelets that he could tell at once weren’t magical but would fetch hefty prices. Harry blinked again, this time to clear some of the dazzle from his eyes.

“Henrietta Bulstrode left this for us,” said the hanarz. “In accordance with the Unbreakable Vow that you asked of her, she donated half her money to begin an Augurey sanctuary. But she converted other money for you, since her daughter wanted nothing that came from her.”

“Why jewels?” Harry whispered.

“We will sell them for you,” said the hanarz. “The money will return to a new account, linked to neither her nor you—a goblin vault. Thus we will make sure the Ministry cannot get to you even if they do manage to freeze most of the human monies here.” Her lip curled. “We will take particular pleasure in offering the jewels for sale to Ministry officials.”

Harry let out his breath. “I thank you, hanarz. This is too much—“

“And not done yet.”

The hanarz nodded to the goblin who had escorted Harry here, and whom he was vaguely aware had remained standing just behind his shoulder. He hurried out of the room, and returned in a few moments, his feet flapping gently on the stone floor. Harry examined what he held. The dark, curving object was not one he saw every day, and he finally realized it was a horn, carved of a black tusk of some kind, and banded with silver.

“What is it?” he whispered, lifting the horn. The grasp the goblin had used to hold it was only reverent, he saw. The horn was marvelously light, and moved like a dancer’s hand in his.

“A horn to call our aid,” said the hanarz. “It will send a summons through rock and stone. We would prefer not to move yet, as we prepare to reveal our freedom to the world of wizards, but you are vates, and you have freed us, and that makes you ours as much as it makes you anyone’s.” She nodded to the horn. “This is carved of karkadann alicorn, from the beasts we hunted in the days when we ranged further afield than Gringotts. No wizard has had it since Salazar Slytherin bound us.” Her intense yellow eyes fixed on his.

Harry ducked his head, embarrassed. For over a thousand years, then. He, Draco, Snape, and others had been the ones who freed the southern goblins from Slytherin’s binding. “You’re certain you wish to give me this?” he asked.

“We are more than certain,” said the hanarz. “By gold and iron, by steel and stone, by silver and bronze, you have kept your promises.”

Harry nodded, and slipped the horn into his pocket. “I’d like to set up the new vault, please.”

“Of course, Harry.” The hanarz bowed to him with a sound of clinking chains. “Vates.”

******

Draco sat in Defense Against the Dark Arts and tried to pay attention; he really did. But the decision he had to make seemed to sit beside him, in the place where Harry should have been, and poke him with a long bony finger, and whisper words that Draco did not want to listen to.

*What happens if you decide against your family? Harry would still accept you without the Malfoy name and money, of course, but you would not be what you have always been. You would be a penniless wizard, with only your possession gift and your pure blood to be proud of—and since Harry supports the Grand Unified Theory, you would not be allowed to be proud of your pure blood.*

*What happens if you decide against Harry? He will accept the decision, of course, but someone else might get close to him. Look*
at that Syrinx. Draco stared at the Gloryflower girl, sitting calmly on the other side of the classroom. You know that she’s going to go to him the moment he summons her. It’s not impossible that they could share things that you won’t get to experience, that Harry would become more and more like her the more time he spent around her. It’s happened before. Snape and I managed to influence him against his family.

“Mr. Malfoy?”

Draco almost flinched. Someone calling him by that name just then was unfortunate timing. He looked up and met Pettigrew’s eyes. “Yes, sir?” he said quietly.

Pettigrew nodded. “Can you demonstrate Ventus for us?”

It was a wind spell, one they had practiced half a hundred times in the dueling club. Draco did it without thought, from his seat, and a wind blew across the room and snatched a pile of scrolls off Pettigrew’s desk, sending them tumbling all over.

The professor simply raised an eyebrow, though several students giggled. One of the things that made him such a good teacher, Draco thought, was how calm he was, and how little quarter he gave to emotions like frustration that managed to distract and destroy “teachers” like Trelawney and Hagrid.

“What will they think of you, if they make the wrong decision? Did you really think that you could avoid making this choice forever? Did you think that your father and Harry would be content to work side by side forever? Did you think that neither of them would make a demand that the other would be unable to fulfill? Yes, I bloody well did, Draco thought, savagely, to make the voices shut up. The only time they’ve ever been this close to open conflict, I managed to avert it by out-dancing my father. And he’s tied his own fate more and more to Harry’s since then. He began the truce-dance not long after he nearly killed him with Tom Riddle’s diary. I had a right to think it would continue.
The voice had no answer for that, and Draco’s head cleared. By the time Defense class ended and he had listened to Professor Pettigrew’s assignment to write an essay on the theory of combining charms for homework, he had decided that perhaps what was most wrong was the way he was thinking about this.

*Instead of thinking about what I’m going to lose, I should think about what I’m going to achieve by choosing either way. What’s in it for me?*

*And, most importantly, what do I want?*

*******

Snape felt as though someone had taken a mallet to his mind.

He paced in circles around his quarters, from which Joseph had been banished, from which he had removed his students’ essays, from which everything that could take damage was gone. It had to be that way. The spells he felt the urge to cast, and which he did not deny himself, because they rid him of the rage that threatened to cloud his head, would too easily kill someone else or destroy parchment.

The mallet blow had come in the form of a combination of news: what Harry had done the night before last, defending a hunter from a werewolf and losing the hunter, and Harry’s flight from Hogwarts.

Harry had contacted Joseph to say that he was well after his adventure with the hunter, so that Joseph would pass along the news to Snape. He had not talked to him directly.

He had not asked Snape for help in defending the hunter.

He had not talked to him before he ran away to confront the Ministry and perhaps come close to losing his life. In all of those actions, he had assumed that his guardian was too weak to help, or even to tolerate hearing Harry’s voice come from his left wrist.

And he had been right.

Snape could see what he had become now in relation to Harry. It maddened him. Harry had not blinked an eye once the dreams, and the decay of Snape’s emotional walls, started. He had put himself in Snape’s way for as long he could, insisted on his getting help, displaced Snape from his immediate presence once he attacked Camellia, talked to Snape through Joseph, written him letters, showed him the love in his eyes when Snape used Legilimency on him.

They were all steps that he might have taken for another of his wounded allies—steps that he might have taken with his own parents if they had not been hopelessly weak, and arrested by the time Harry had the strength to do so.

Harry did not consider him a guardian any more. He would not ask Snape for help, because he believed that Snape had no help to give him. So he took care of Snape instead, and turned him into a petitioner, a dependent on his good will and generosity. Harry had no parental figure any longer, and he had adapted to it with surprising speed and grace, because he had to, and because he had walked without parents for so long that it was second nature to him.

It drove Snape mad.

All those years of earning Harry’s trust, of showing him that Snape could help him where no others could, of getting Harry to relax enough to let someone else protect him and be the strong one—wasted. Snape knew Harry might relax in someone else’s protection while he recovered from a wound, but that did not imply trust. It implied practicality. Harry would still be thinking as a defender, and when he healed, he would take the defender’s position once more.

He’d thought he could not be a good son last year, Snape remembered. But he had been wrong, hadn’t he? It had been Snape who was not a good parent.

He turned and cast a crumbling curse at a table he’d Transfigured from a feather. It showered down in shards of wood, and helped keep Snape from the whispering pain that tried to enter the back of his head.

*I have no son. And through my own actions, because I transformed, and Harry changed to meet me—took the position of healer. Why shouldn’t he? He is used to being that for everyone else.*
Snape did not know if he would have the strength to push beyond the circle of his self-justifications and hazy rationalizations and double binds if it was only for his own sake that he was doing it. After all, it was so much easier to lie in the middle of the mud and bewail his fate. And Harry would not mind him doing it, would simply keep up being the parent for however long he had to.

But for Harry’s sake, he could plunge through the disgust and the hatred and the pain.

He could not join Harry yet. He was wise enough to know that. But when he had healed enough of his bleeding wounds that he could be an asset, then he would go, and tell Minerva to hire Slughorn in his place for however long it took.

He summoned again the will that had kept him alive and spying for that year among the Death Eaters, when it would have been so much easier to surrender to the darkness, or lie down and die. He wanted his son back.

Then he shouted for Joseph.

*****

“I did try to tell you.” Camellia’s voice was strung-out, worn out, defeated. “No one can stop a werewolf on the vengeance-path for his mate, Harry. Not even you.”

“I could have Apparated away,” Harry whispered. He sat in a room in the main building of Woodhouse, the wooden one in the center of the stone quadrangle, watching the sun rise. He had slept well enough last night, casting Consopio on himself so that he wouldn’t lie awake and worry about things, but he’d asked Tonks to shake him near dawn, since he didn’t know how to modify the sleeping charm so it would end at a specific time yet. Getting the right amount of sleep was very important. “I could have taken Kieran somewhere else.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered,” said Camellia quietly. “How do you think Loki found Wayhouse in the first place? No one told him, Harry. The presence of the prey a werewolf takes vengeance on pulls him along. You could have Apparated anywhere you liked. He could have followed.”

“If we kept Apparating—“

“Eventually, you would have lost strength,” said Camellia. “Eventually, you would have had to sleep. And then he would have caught up. I did try to warn you. I told you that he couldn’t be stopped or turned aside.”

Harry rubbed his scar. He would get angry if he spent too long thinking about this, and that would mean another headache. “I wanted to tell you that the pack should be ready to come to Woodhouse by the end of today. The Black estates won’t be safe for long, and they’re no place to hide forty-one more werewolves.”

“And you think Woodhouse will be?” The sarcasm, and skepticism, was clear in Camellia’s voice. “What makes it any safer? As soon as you free those werewolves, you’ll be an outlaw in truth, Wild.”

“And you would rather have me not free them?” Harry raised his eyebrows, and wished again that Charles had managed to modify the spell to make someone’s face visible. He wanted to see what Camellia looked like right now. “I have to, Camellia. I have a formal family oath pulling at me as well as the wider one I swore to help werewolves. But I thought you would be glad. They are your own kind.”

“I want you safe, Wild,” Camellia whispered. “And if that is selfish, so be it.”

Harry smiled tolerantly. “Ah. That I can understand. But yes, I do plan to make Woodhouse safe.” He stood up. “I have to go now, Camellia. Get the pack ready. I’ll contact you near evening with detailed Apparition instructions for those that can Apparate.”

He waited only for her assent before he cut off the communication spell. Then he strode from the study through the halls to the kitchen.

Woodhouse had narrower rooms than any place he’d ever been. The walls seemed to arrange themselves in cramped corridors and hidden nooks behind staircases on purpose. And, of course, everything was made of wood. Harry thought it might actually be perfect for werewolves; there were many small “territories” they could doze in if they wanted to be alone, the study and kitchen and a few other large rooms for piles, and the intense, comforting smell of trees everywhere.

Tonks was waiting in the kitchen, looking through the Daily Prophet and idly munching on a piece of burned toast that she’d
made out of bread delivered that morning. Harry had contacted a few Squib-run shops in wizarding London, which were grateful for the custom and didn’t mind sending the owls up early to fly with bread and orange juice and other things to Woodhouse. Harry made a mental note to himself to switch other deliveries from Grimmauld Place and Cobley-by-the-Sea to Woodhouse. With eighty people here, or more than eighty, food would otherwise be a problem.

“What are they saying?” he asked, when Tonks peeked around the paper to wish him good morning for the second time.

“The usual nonsense,” said Tonks. “I don’t think anyone really knows what you’re doing yet, but they can speculate on it. They know you’ve left Hogwarts. They think that you’ve decided to go into seclusion and, I quote Honeywhistle quoting someone else, ‘brood on what he thinks is injustice.’”

Harry snorted and spread marmalade across another piece of the bread. “Well, then, I ought to take them by surprise.”

Tonks nodded. “Moody said that he would come around noon?”

“Yes. I hope that’s enough time to accomplish what I need to do.” Harry bit into his bread and stared out the window. Beyond lay Woodhouse’s valley, more than half brown now that autumn had begun, but with some grass still growing green and luxuriant from the constant rain. “If not, then you and he start planning the best route for our attack on Tullianum.”

“Remind me again what you’re doing.”

Harry looked at Tonks. Her face was serious, and he was startled to see a resemblance to Narcissa there, which he didn’t think he’d ever noted before. Her hair was flat black, and hung in close curls around her face. She had retained the same lightning-blue eyes from yesterday, though.

“A technique called entering the dream,” Harry said, swallowing a bite of his bread. “We can’t use a lot of magic here in Woodhouse, and defensive wards will only hold for so long. What will make this a true sanctuary is to convince the place that we’re part of it, and to use its magic to defend us.”

“And you think you can do this.” Tonks’s voice was flat, and a match for Camellia’s in its skepticism.

Harry nodded. “Hermione found me some notes on the subject. Mostly, wizards and witches don’t do it because they don’t want to make the effort required, or pay the price.”

“Price?” Tonks’s voice had sharpened, as had her gaze. Harry wondered if she thought him suicidal.

He wasn’t. He couldn’t afford to be. He had read Hermione’s notes until he nearly went blind yesterday, in between arranging for the establishment of a separate vault and food deliveries. “Yes. You have to stay bound to a place for a certain period of time after you enter its dream and get it to notice you. Witches and wizards prefer not to do that. I can, now.” He finished his breakfast. “I’ll leave for small journeys like freeing the werewolves from Tullianum, but otherwise I’ll stay in Woodhouse for at least a month. It’ll make a fine base.”

“What else is involved?”

“Humility,” said Harry quietly, standing. “Being able to set aside thoughts of oneself and focus on something larger. Getting used to an alien mind.” He smiled. “I think that being vates has prepared me for that if anything can.”

Tonks reached out and clasped the stump of his left wrist. “Be careful.”

“Of course.” Harry stifled the odd thought for a moment that no one else should touch him there, because that was Draco’s place to touch. Then he shook his head and stepped out of the wooden house into the sunlight of Woodhouse.

It would be a clear, calm day, he thought. There were clouds passing across the sky, but they were underlit, and only served to make the blue appear brighter. The woods blocking one end of the valley shone, since they were mostly evergreens. Puddles lay here and there among the browned grass, making Harry blink in surprise as they caught the sun with unexpected dazzle, like the jewels that Henrietta had arranged for him.

He sat down in a patch of grass not far from the stone quadrangle, beneath a lone oak. He could feel the steady current of the place magic circling the valley, attending to its stones and hills and trees, the long-lived, non-moving things, loving them, paying no attention to small moving wizards and witches who rushed about.
Harry took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “Consopio,” he whispered.

And he fell into his own dreams, seizing control of them with Legilimency even as he fell, remembering what Hermione’s notes had said.

*Entering the dream means blending one’s own dreams with the place. Most wizards and witches, not having conscious control of their dreams, cannot do this. A Legilimens, or someone using the Lucid Dream charm, may manage it.*

Harry dreamed of himself sitting in a place much like the one he had actually chosen to sit in, his mind reaching outward. The current of place magic was visible here, because he wanted it to be, a rushing white tide that crested against the stones on one side of the valley, then washed over the trees, then turned and danced over the buildings that had been here so long the magic no longer objected to them. Patrolling, ignoring, dreaming, it continued along its busy way.

Harry reached out and slid his dream flawlessly into the dream of the current, matching it, trying to see what it did.

And Woodhouse noticed him.

The first touch of its awareness nearly paralyzed Harry, so alien was it. Woodhouse had no conception of distance or direction. It was *itself*, forest and trees and houses and stone and the sky above, and every point on its body was equally distant from every other point. The only thing Harry could compare it to was a tapestry, or the way a tapestry might think of itself if it were sentient. Every thread connected to every other thread, and there was no center, so it might be said to be all of a piece.

No notion of separateness was tolerated. The moving creatures that rushed about in Woodhouse were separate, but of them it was not obliged to take any notice. They tried to move it around and make parts of it be alone, and it took away those parts and put them back. It was *itself*, and it dreamed.

Harry felt the urge to struggle madly back to the surface, into his own head and his own dreams. But Hermione’s notes had words to say on that, too.

*The wizard who cannot give up his own individuality, even for a few moments, cannot enter the dream. He must trust to the place magic. He must submit himself to a greater purpose. The place magic is no more malicious than the ocean. As a swimmer is at the mercy of the waves and not in command of them, so the wizard must become—but even more like a piece of driftwood than a swimmer, knowing himself borne to a place he does not choose, and not contesting it.*

Harry took a deep breath and submerged himself. Old notions helped. The idea that he was important and separate from his duty was the new one, the idea he had come to late in life, not the other way around. He imagined Woodhouse as the world, the place he had to save, the thing infinitely more precious and beautiful and important than one small wizard. He slid away.

He drowned.

Woodhouse was aware that a new thing had entered it. It examined the new thing. It was a seed that might someday become a tree, blown in from elsewhere. The seed had buried itself in strange soil for a tree, but the soil was just as important as the ordinary ground. Sunlight warmed it, and water fed its lips, and it grew upward just as the other seeds would. But it was a tree that grew like a flower, dying in a short time.

Woodhouse turned it over and over. The small thing turned with the turning. It had branches, branches with bare twigs; it must have dropped its leaves early. It walked on stone, but did not stay rooted there. Trees did not stay rooted when a storm came and blew them over, either. It did not want to be separate. Nothing wanted to be separate that was part of itself. The dream blended with its dream, and the thing was not a small rushing thing anymore; it was part of Woodhouse. It could still move, of course, because every point in Woodhouse was part of itself.

It might go away, but it would arrive again. It might move stones from the valley’s walls, but they were its own stones, as much a part of Woodhouse as its own limbs were. It might bring other small rushing things. For its sake, Woodhouse would tolerate them. It tolerated the migrating birds that came in and rested for a day and departed again. They would be part of it for as long as they stayed.

Woodhouse noticed it, and liked it, and made the small rushing thing part of itself, and put its dream back into its head, because the small rushing thing could not stay asleep all the time, any more than the sky could stay light all the time. But it would always be part of the dream.

Harry blinked and sat up, slowly. He still felt as if his head had cracked open and let in the sea; that was the only experience he
had had, before now, of such vastness. His hand trembled as he stroked his own hair, and he looked at the valley with new eyes. In its own way, it was as vast as the ocean. Take the world of every blade of grass and tie it together with the world in every nook and cranny of each tree and the thoughts of every bird and the gleam of the dissipating puddles…

Harry shook his head, dazed. The sun stood near noon now, and he thought that Moody must have arrived. He stood, shakily, and made his way back towards the quadrangle of buildings.

The current of place magic circled past him, and tugged at him as if he stood in water. Harry smiled in spite of himself. He was part of it now.

And if half of Hermione’s notes, or a quarter of what else Harry had read on place magic, were true, then Woodhouse would protect him, when his enemies tried to attack, as if it were defending itself, because he was part of it. Power slept in stone and tree and soil and earth. He could not ask for a safer haven for the werewolves.

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Draco was so deep in thought, considering what he would gain by choosing Harry or choosing his family—and the advantages were considerable, on either side—that he didn’t hear Potter until the other boy came up behind him and actually shouted his name into his ear.

Draco turned around, one hand on his wand, and arched his eyebrow. “Potter? What do you want?”

“I wanted to know what you’d decided about Harry, of course,” said Potter flatly, as if he had a perfect right to the knowledge. “Are you going to abandon him like so many other people are, or are you going to stand beside him?”

“I’m thinking about it,” said Draco, and made sure that his voice was the one his father used for dealing with idiots. Potter’s face turned red, predictably.

“You know that Harry would choose you in an instant,” he accused, voice gone tight.

If I was so mad as to ask him to choose between you and me, the way you’ve been doing? Draco stared into Potter’s eyes, and reminded himself that Harry wouldn’t want him to curse his brother. Besides, they were in the middle of a corridor between classes, where any professor could see and stop them. “I don’t think you understand my choice,” he said. “There are factors you aren’t aware of.” And which I won’t tell you about, because you’d be stupid enough to bleat, and then my father would become aware of it, and force my hand. This is my choice.

“Well, tell me what they are.” Potter folded his arms and gave him a challenging glance.

“No.”

Potter started to answer, but the voice of his bitch of a girlfriend interrupted him. “Don’t worry, Connor. If he won’t tell, then he won’t tell, and there’s nothing we can say to make him change his mind. Besides, this is just more evidence that Malfoy doesn’t really care about Harry.”

Potter, to his very small credit, looked uneasy as Patil wrapped her arm around his shoulders and led him away, but he didn’t object. Draco snorted at both their backs.

The idea that people would think him unsupportive of Harry because he hadn’t said anything about Harry’s disappearance or the werewolf situation so far entered his mind. He dismissed it. He was not going to let other make people make him afraid, or influence his decision. He would not.

He thought he knew what his choice would be, how the scales were tipping, but he wanted it to be true. Neither Lucius nor Harry would welcome him if he made his decision and then regretted and whined about it later.

The way I whined about Potter and Patil?

Draco could feel his face flushing a dull red, and was glad that almost everyone else was in Arithmancy already, so that no one could see. He did pause to lean against a wall and take a deep breath before he entered the classroom, as much to come to terms with this new and disturbing realization as to hope that his face cooled down.

I was acting like a child. Father would have been disappointed in me. Harry probably was, but said nothing about it. That
decision was as much mine as anyone else's, and I was making the wrong one.

That only increased his determination not to make the wrong one this time.

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Connor blinked. Of all the things he had expected Peter to say when he sought him out and told him that he wanted to help Harry, this wasn’t one of them. “You think I ought to just stay at Hogwarts?”

Peter raised a hand, then cast a locking ward on the door. It was one he had used a few times at Cobley-by-the-Sea to insure that no one would interrupt their Animagus lessons. Connor sat down in a chair beneath a banner that depicted the Pied Piper of Hamelin legend and waited for Peter to take the chair across from him. Peter had arranged his quarters to be smaller and warmer than the ones either Sirius or Remus had had when they taught here. Connor still felt a jolt of homesickness when he looked around. He would have liked it if either Sirius or Remus’s quarters had looked like this. He would have loved it if James had been a good father, and had been able to become Defense Against the Dark Arts professor.

“Connor.”

He looked back at Peter. Peter had that serious, stern, thoughtful look on his face, the one he only got when he was about to say something really important. Connor clasped his hands and leaned forward.

“Your support is essential to Harry,” Peter told him. “You can speak out against the anti-werewolf laws, and against Mrs. Parkinson’s arrest. You can do whatever you think you need to do so that other people will understand that you think these laws are a horrible, horrible thing. But would you be willing to leave Hogwarts and go to where Harry is now?”

Connor blinked. He hadn’t thought that far ahead. He had pictured himself fighting at Harry’s side in battle, comforting him when Malfoy made the choice to do nothing that he seemed closer and closer to making, and standing with him when he won, as he inevitably would. Someone, he hadn’t thought about the day-to-day business of life with Harry in the meantime.

“And would Parvati want to come with you?” Peter asked.

That was something he hadn’t thought of. Connor huffed out a breath. “I suppose not,” he said. “She doesn’t—like Harry all that much. I mean, she knows that he’s important to me because he’s my brother, and she wants him to pay more attention to me because of that, but that doesn’t mean that she would want to run away from Hogwarts and fight battles at his side.”

Peter was nodding. “And Harry wouldn’t want you to make the choice to abandon her,” he said. “Besides, he’s going to need someone here at Hogwarts who can watch what the students are thinking, and report it to him. Professor Belluspersona and I can only do so much, since professors don’t hear all the gossip among the students. McGonagall has to think about what’s best for the school first and foremost. Snape…” Peter grimaced as if he’d bitten into a wormy apple and shook his head. “Harry needs someone who can know what direction the students’ thoughts are turning, and what gossip they’re reporting from their parents.”

“Ah.” Connor nodded his head. “And you know that Malfoy won’t do it, because he’s not loyal to Harry.”

Peter made a choking noise. Connor squinted suspiciously at him. If he didn’t know better, he would say Peter was holding back a laugh. But why should he be? He was clever, quick, observant. He had to know what Malfoy’s current behavior was like, and what it meant. Connor felt far less pleasure than he had thought he would about being right. Malfoy was faithless, it was the last day of the full moon and he was doing nothing, and that would hurt Harry.

“Something like that,” said Peter. “But in any case, he’s not trusted by as many people as you are. He’s too conspicuous, and people will be watching him more than the other way around.”

“Won’t they do the same thing to me, once I declare my support of Harry?” Connor asked.

“They’ll expect it of you, I think,” said Peter, smiling. “Show them Gryffindor honesty, and listen with Slytherin deviousness.”

“I can do that,” Connor muttered. “I think it’s Gryffindor deviousness, though.”

Peter nodded. “The other Houses tend to underestimate us and our skills in sneaking around.” He clasped Connor’s shoulder. “Let’s do what we can to support Harry and not hinder him, the way that going to him when you’re only half-trained in battle and worried about Parvati probably would.”
The words were so gentle that Connor couldn’t flinch from them. He nodded, newly determined on the best probable course. “Right.”

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Harry nodded. “And I highly doubt they’ve managed to change the corridors of Tullianum in two days’ time,” he said. “I would be more worried about the traps the Department of Mysteries might have set up along the way.”

Moody snorted, his real eye shining with excitement. His magical eye was fastened on the rough map that he, Tonks, and Harry had worked out of Tullianum. Since both Moody and Tonks had been Aurors, they had both patrolled the new prison and stood guard on the cells, and knew it fairly well. “If you’re really worried about them, boy…”

He trailed off. Harry looked up. He didn’t think he’d ever seen Moody looking shifty before—except for when he’d truly been Mulciber, and probably couldn’t help it. “What?” he asked.

“I have some—contacts who would help.” Both Moody’s eyes looked at the map now, as if he wanted to avoid showing his real emotions. “People I came to know during my years as an Auror. People not entirely on the wrong side of the law, but not in good graces with the Ministry either.”

Harry nodded. He had once heard Moody described as the wildest of the Aurors. It made sense that he would have friends who existed on both sides of the fence, so long as those friends weren’t Death Eaters or other criminals who had done things that Moody considered wrong. The old man’s sense of justice was infinitely more personal than Harry had thought when he first met him. He had made his peace with Harry using Dark magic, after all, as long as he did the right thing with it. “If you think they can be helpful, then invite them along. Or ask for information from them. Which were you planning on?”

“Both,” said Moody blandly, and then gestured at the map with his hip, a gesture Harry thought he might have developed over the years since he’d earned his wooden leg. “When are you planning to attack?”

“In a few days,” said Harry. “I wanted to wait for the full moon to pass, of course, and then I wanted to give some time for my allies to catch their breaths and think rationally about what they want to do.”

Moody narrowed his eyes as if sniffing out a rat. “If they’re loyal to you, they should have been here already, boy.”

Harry stared at him calmly. “I’m not forcing anyone,” he said, “except those who declare themselves in support of the anti-werewolf laws. Then I’ll force them aside. But Mr. Malfoy, for example, has decided not to aid me unless I renounce the Grand Unified Theory.”

“And the others?” Moody’s voice was a growl.

“Some have responsibilities they can’t abandon,” said Harry, thinking of McGonagall and Henrietta and Peter. “Some are already doing other tasks, and it’s essential that they remain in place.” He’d asked Rose and a few other werewolves from his pack whom he trusted to go to London and ask the alphas if they wanted to bring their people to shelter under him. Depending on how many of them came, there might be a need for fewer guards on the London packs when October’s full moon rose. Honoria was going to come with them when they attacked Tullianum to lend the expertise of her illusions, but then she would return to the Maenad Press, where Harry thought she could do the most good. “And some are dealing with problems of their own.” Snape, and Narcissa Malfoy, who would surely choose to side with her husband.

“And some of them you simply haven’t called,” Moody finished, sounding disgusted.

Harry met his eyes and nodded. “I’m asking for full commitment. I didn’t want anyone to grant that and feel bad later.”

He expected another sarcastic comment; instead, Moody watched him and murmured, “So different from Albus.”

Harry gave an uneasy shrug. Then he turned sharply as his left wrist rang with phoenix song. Touching it, he asked, “What is it?”

“Strangers,” said Camellia’s tense voice. Harry had asked her to be one of the watchers on the valley’s outer edge, since she’d refused to go to London without him. “They’re—” She paused, and then her voice said, soft with wonder, “They’re not human.”

Harry blinked, said, “I’ll be there,” and slipped out of the wooden house, Moody right behind him. He couldn’t see anything until they managed to make their way around the stone buildings, though.
Camellia and the other sentries stood in a ring around a group of perhaps thirty goblins. When he drew near, however, Harry could see that they weren’t a delegation of southern goblins come to visit. They were northern, tall, with much longer claws and teeth, and six fingers on either hand. Bronze and gold sparked from heavy bracelets and anklets. Harry knew their leader, and tilted his head down in deference as he approached them.

“Helcas Seadampin,” he said. “Welcome.”

Helcas, the goblin Harry had first contacted when they began to talk about removing the web that contained the linchpins, swept a full and fluid bow. He seemed to move more easily than the last time Harry had seen him. Harry wondered if that was the effect of the web being gone, or simple happiness. Certainly there was wild joy in his face as he held out his hand, carefully closing his jagged claws around Harry’s wrist.

“Harry vates.” Helcas nodded over his shoulder. “There are goblins with us from all four clans, Seadampin and Stonecantor and Waterrune and Ternretten.” Harry wasn’t surprised to notice that there weren’t thirty goblins there after all, but thirty-two. Some carried spears, some bows and quivers, some lengths of what Harry thought was chain, but which shone so brilliantly he couldn’t be sure. “We are ready to go to war beside you,” Helcas continued, and that got Harry’s attention.

“You’re sure?” The northern goblins had waited to reveal their freedom. Harry had assumed, without a real reason to now that he’d thought about, that they would wait as long as their southern cousins. But, of course, it was stupid to assume so. The Gringotts goblins had much more to do with humans now. They would cause more chaos when they moved. The northern ones would mostly show off just how powerful they were.

“Of course we are,” said Helcas, and there was a softness in his tone that Harry hadn’t known he was capable of, since his voice was like a gull’s shriek. “Vates. You are ours, as much as you are anyone’s. You will not stand alone.” He grinned then, a girding wall of so many fangs there was barely room for his tongue. “And it is time that wizards learned what goblins are capable of. We have not been to war in centuries.”

Harry nodded, overwhelmed. “The hanarz’s call summoned you?”

“We heard of your need that way,” said Helcas. “That does not mean she is the only reason we are here.”

Harry nodded again and started to say something else, but the ground shook with a familiar thunder then, and he turned instinctively towards the forest entrance of the valley, since that was where they had entered during the spring alliance meeting. And, sure enough, the centaurs appeared, their hides glinting palomino and bay and chestnut and black in the high sun. Harry recognized the one who led them, the powerful male called Bone.

He started to call out a greeting, but they didn’t return it. Harry tensed. Bone had a set expression on his face that might mean trouble. Harry didn’t know why the centaurs would have cause to be angry at him, but he prepared to defend himself, his pack, and the northern goblins anyway.

Bone halted with a crash about twenty feet away from him. Then he shouted, “Ave!” and reared. When he came down, it was in a kneel, his front legs tucked underneath him. The other centaurs followed suit, kneeling in a wave, and Harry wondered if it was possible to die from embarrassment.

He cleared his throat. “Bone, thank you, but—you can rise.”

Bone looked up at him. “We come to you as soldiers,” he said. “That is how centaurs greet their commander.”

“Oh.” Harry blinked. “I—of course.” He realized they would have to amend the attack on the Ministry to include the centaurs. “And you don’t mind the wizarding world finding out about your freedom, either?” he asked faintly.

“Of course not,” said Bone. “The stars spoke. It is time.”

Harry nodded. Then Camellia cried out again, almost a howl, and Harry turned sharply. Something was coming through the wards, something for which they parted like water, and something so big that even Woodhouse took notice, because of the way the feet made its earth shake.

He saw the horn first, black and corkscrew. It nudged aside two trees, and then the creature emerged fully into view, shaking out its coat, which was the creamy-white color of a polar bear’s. Its feet ended in multiple hooves each, and it stood the size of a rhino. Harry found it hard to meet the eyes, which were as deep as oil wells. When it stepped into the open and he could see every inch of it, he realized the tail was a lion’s, whippy and crowned with a puff of white hair, not a horse’s.
A unicorn, but what a unicorn. Harry knew the creature, though he had only seen it once, in a vision Fawkes had shown him. Fawkes had flown around the world, singing to the magical creatures of their vates, and this unicorn had heard him in Africa. A karkadann; its name meant “lord of the desert.” It was as vicious and violent as the unicorns Harry had freed from the Forbidden Forest were gentle. Harry knew ancient Muggles had seen karkadanns battling with elephants, before wizards had decided to lock them away for their own protection.

“How did one get free?” he whispered.

Bone started to answer, but the karkadann bugled at the sound of his voice, and the sound was a shrill trumpet that set Harry’s heart on fire, a true battle-call. He held out his hand, and the unicorn trotted towards him, each foot coming down with a thump that jolted everyone except the centaurs. It halted next to him and tilted its head down to stare.

Harry met its gaze as best he could. The karkadann stared at him for long moments, then blew out its breath. Harry gasped. The breath was sweet and hot and sandy, and smelled of corpses rotting in the sun. And it affected Harry more profoundly than even the trumpet had, filling him with visions of fighting and defending and killing those who would try to kill him.

His magic soared up in answer. The karkadann shook its—no, Harry realized, her—horn in satisfaction, and snorted. Then she turned away to begin a patrol of the valley, following the general direction of the current of magic.

“That is one piece of news we carry,” Bone said, after each of them had spent several breathless moments watching her. “The webs are beginning to melt, vates, just a little.”

Harry turned to stare at him. “What?”

Bone nodded, eyes large and serious. “Yes. The stars sang of it as a sign of a true vates existing in the world. Unicorns run where they will; there are reports of a ki-lin abroad in China again, for the first time in centuries. The nundus are straining at their webs in Africa. Dragons are hatching in greater clutches, and more of them are surviving. And now and then, if they intend to join in a battle for more than just food or territory, a single member of a species may slip free of its web altogether.” Bone led his gaze to the karkadann. She was grazing now, though every few moments she ripped her head up and stared around self-importantly, to foil any enemies that might be sneaking up on her.

“I’ve never heard of that,” Harry said. “I—all the books I read on vates said nothing about this.”

“It is true,” said Bone. “It has not happened in centuries, and when it did, it was probably at a time when the wizarding communities were not interconnected and could not know that the various, scattered rebellions added up to one great pattern. And, of course, the knowledge of what a vates is has retreated and been kept alive mostly by the magical creatures.”

Harry shivered. “So it doesn’t matter that I’m only in one country in the world?”

“It would not if you were only a Lord-level wizard,” said Bone. “But you are a vates. So the freedom you spread encourages freedom. Many of the ancient webs were tied to each other for reinforcement, and almost surely, as some of them begin to fall, that unravels the edges of others. And the unicorns.” For a moment, he smiled. “The stars say the unicorns are running, and where a truly free being of Light is, compulsions cannot hold. For every unicorn who chooses to run through Australia, a bunyip stirs, and for every one who chooses southern America, the old sleeping jaguars hear. Surely you did not think they would have no effect?”

“I suppose I thought they would keep to themselves,” said Harry, overwhelmed. “They seemed to want to when I set them free.”

“They go where they will,” said Bone. “The world is awakening again, vates. Not all as a result of you, not all as a result of your choice, but as a result of choices on choices, the unending building of them.”

Harry struggled to regulate his breathing. “It’s going to cross over into the Muggle world eventually, isn’t it?”

Bone simply inclined his head.

Harry closed his eyes. For a moment, he caught a glimpse of what he’d started, of what it might mean for Muggles to live in a world where unicorns were a reality, of how dangerous it might be, of what wars it would start—

And of the fact that he couldn’t stop this now without putting the unicorns back under a web, which he was not going to do.
He opened his eyes and nodded, the vision fading. “Whatever comes, I am ready to face it,” he said.

The karkadann reared abruptly, towering against the morning, and bugled again. Harry wondered who heard it, and what it made them think of.

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Draco closed his eyes. He was leaning against a pillow in the bed he and Harry had shared as little as three days ago. It felt too empty, too big.

He was in the bed with the curtains drawn around him, hiding him, the only Slytherin sixth-year boy left. No one was here to see him. The door was locked. He did not have to feel alone if he did not want to.

But he did.

And at the same time, he was once again standing on the mountaintop, exposed unforgivably to all eyes. The moment he made his decision and moved, then people would know. He could not remain in this comfortable limbo forever.

Draco snorted. *Comfortable? It’s been anything but comfortable. I didn’t ever wish to know that much about myself.*

But he’d investigated, and made the lists in his head, and thought about what he would lose and what he would gain with either side, and confronted the fact that he wasn’t ready—yet—to give up the belief that purebloods were superior, and thought about how it would affect his mother, and still there was only one decision he could make.

*This isn’t about what my parents think, or what my peers will. They’ll think whatever they wish. I can affect it, but I can’t control it.*

*This is about what I want.*

*And what I want, more than anything else, is to be myself. Strong, dignified, proud, powerful. I won’t be that if I continue to let my father think he controls me. I’ll only be waiting for some day of proving that never comes, like Harry’s brother, or his father.*

*I want respect. I want love. I want people to gaze at me and envy, not what I have, but what I am.*

*I want Harry, not least because he’s the one who can help me achieve all that.*

Draco opened his eyes and nodded, then tapped his left wrist. Phoenix song warbled for long moments before Harry’s distracted, sleepy voice said, “Hmm? What is it? Connor?”

Perhaps he thought only his brother would have been rude enough to speak to him near midnight. Draco didn’t care about the rudeness, though. “Harry,” he said.

He could *hear* Harry waking up, the pause between his reply and Harry’s answer enough time to consider implications. Then Harry said, poised and strained and tense, “Draco.”

“I’m coming to you,” Draco said. “Tell me where you are.”

“You’ve made the decision on your own?” Harry asked carefully. So carefully, trying not to step on anyone else’s will. Draco was glad that he was not a *vates.*

“Yes.”

“You know that it might mean—Draco, your father and I quarreled,” said Harry bluntly. “I don’t know for sure if he’d want you to stay away from me, but I think he probably will.”

“He told me to stay away,” said Draco. “I told him I understood. He took that to mean I’d agreed. Sometimes, he forgets I’m a Slytherin, too.”

“Draco—“ Harry’s voice was on the edge of upset, now.

“I chose,” said Draco. “This is about what I want, Harry. Tell me where you are. Now.”
“I’m dropping the wards,” Harry whispered. “We’re in Woodhouse. If you touch the Portkey bracelet, it should take you to me.”

Nodding, Draco climbed out of bed and scooped up his packed trunk. Argutus, lying on top of it, stirred sleepily. Draco was sure that Harry hadn’t meant to leave him behind, but that was what had happened. Draco intended to correct that mistake. Really, he reflected as he gazed at the packed trunk, his decision had been made even before he got into bed. “Now?”

“Now,” Harry confirmed, and there was a crack in his voice through which Draco heard joy.

Draco touched the bracelet of magic on his wrist that would transport him to Harry’s side, unless there were powerful wards in the way. Since so many of the locations where Harry stayed were powerfully warded, it was often less than useful, but this time it worked, tugging him and the trunk and Argutus through a whirl of colors and landing them all in a bedroom. Argutus crawled out of the way, probably uttering complaints Draco couldn’t understand.

Harry waited on the other side of the room, near the bed, his eyes wide. He was still dressed in robes, crumpled though they were from sleeping in them. He stared straight into Draco’s face, and Draco waited.

Then Harry let out a loud sound neither sob nor cheer, and crossed the distance between them faster than Draco thought physically possible. His hand latched in Draco’s hair, his handless arm wrapping fiercely around his waist, and then he tilted Draco’s head back and kissed him as if he’d been starving for it.

Yes, Draco thought, smugness settling in his belly as he kissed back. This is what I want. This is what I deserve.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Twenty-Five: Jailbreak

Harry woke in a flood of early morning sunlight. He blinked for a moment, wondering why on earth Tonks or someone else hadn’t shaken him awake with the dawn, and then realized the warm weight in his arms might have something to do with that.

Shifting, he raised himself on one elbow and looked down at Draco.

Draco slept on his left side, the soft snores that he always denied making emerging from his mouth and nose in little puffs of air. That, in turn, stirred his hair, which stuck up around his face in tiny independent clumps. Harry stared at him for a long moment, then closed his eyes and swallowed.

He had hoped that Draco would choose to come to his side. He had even hoped it would happen without his having to ask, because he did not know what to say in the face of Lucius’s opposition. To force Draco to choose between his family and Harry was intolerably cruel.

And now Draco was here, and had chosen, and had explained, last night before they both fell asleep, all his reasons for doing so. The reasons quieted every objection that Harry might have raised against his presence, except for the sorrow that would result for Lucius when he found out.

Harry would have made himself survive if Draco had chosen otherwise, he knew. Transforming every pain, every irritant, every impatience into determination to win this battle had worked for him in the last few days, and was working now. And he would not have shown Draco what he felt; he would have wanted him to be happy, and his boyfriend’s brooding would have made him unhappy.

Now, though, Harry could lean his head down until his cheek rested on Draco’s, a gesture he wouldn’t have dared with Draco awake, and breathe, “Thank Merlin you chose this. I needed you so much.”

He closed his eyes and lay there in the sunlight, feeling warmth close around them from above and below.

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Lucius was concentrating so intently on a spell that might be just the thing to curb Rhagnara’s ambition that he started when the phoenix song warbled. He clenched one hand on the book to keep from dropping it and glared at his left wrist. It went on singing, however, so Lucius forced his voice smooth and asked, “What is it?”

“Father.”
Draco’s voice, smug in the way that it was when he won a game. Lucius only felt a renewed surge of irritation. Draco knew his morning routine. He should have known better than to interrupt Lucius during the hour that he used for studying spells and writing correspondence.

“Draco,” he said. “What is it? Has something happened?” Harry might do any number of mad things in his distraction. Lucius would write a letter for Julius to take to the Department of Mysteries when they occurred, of course, so that the madness would be controlled and contained. The boy needed more guidance than Lucius had ever suspected he did, when he still thought of Harry as someone he could follow without complaint. He was like a wild horse who resisted breaking to the rein.

“You could say that,” Draco said, and his voice dripped with self-satisfaction now. Lucius felt his curiosity peak. Whatever it was must have been very good news, and perhaps that was why Draco had interrupted him, because he could not wait to share it.

“Out with it,” said Lucius, marking his place in the book of mind-control spells with a peacock feather quill and leaning back.

“I looked carefully at all my options, Father, and made a choice I’ve been putting off for far too long,” Draco began, his voice subtly mocking. Lucius frowned lightly. It must have been self-mockery; Draco saw now that the choice really was simple. That probably means the news is not as momentous as I hoped. “I wanted to let you know at once that I’d made it, of course. As of this moment forward, by your own words, you no longer have an heir.”

Lucius felt the breath in his throat turn to frost. His left hand clenched over the arm of his chair until there came a warning creak of wood. “What did you say?” he whispered.

“You heard me.” Draco’s voice took on a lazy drawl. He has never sounded more like me, Lucius thought, even while he fought to keep his feet in a suddenly reeling world. “You threatened to disown me if I chose Harry’s rebellion. And now I am sitting in the same house as Harry, eating the same breakfast, after having slept in the same bed last night. When one chooses a side, it’s always best to do it thoroughly, don’t you agree?”

And those last words alone were a slap at Lucius, who had always sought to keep his options open, and danced on both Harry’s and the Dark Lord’s sides for as long as possible. He would not show it, however. Now he was grateful that the communication spells had no visual component, so Draco could not see him clamping his teeth together.

“You will have no money from me, Draco, until you renounce this madness and come back home,” he told his son. “You will have no sanctuary in our Manor. You will have no help from those who call themselves friends of the Malfoys.”

“Oh, I knew all that,” said Draco.

The careless manner in which he said it further infuriated Lucius. “And what do you think this will do to your mother?” he asked. “Your standing among the pureblood circles? Your reputation as a wizard?”

“Mother is the only one of those I regret staining with my defiance,” said Draco. “You may tell her yourself, if you like, as I can’t imagine that you’ll keep this quiet. And she did not raise a son who would cower tamely in front of his father.” His voice changed cadences, to taunting. “Really, Father, I only said that I understood your request to keep away from Harry, not that I would obey it.”

Lucius, lost in an icestorm of anger and frustration, did not allow himself to lament that mistake. It had been understandable. “You will regret this decision yet, Draco,” he whispered.

“I don’t think so, Father,” said Draco. “A wise woman told me over the summer that I wasn’t as much like you as I was like Mother, and I see now that she was right. You would never have defied your father if he made you choose between him and Mother, would you have? But that doesn’t matter. I’m with Harry now. I weighed my choice, figured out all the consequences of it, and still chose. I have what I want to make me happy. I imagine you can’t say the same.”

The communication spell ended. Lucius sat where he was for a long moment, staring at the wall and pointedly not shaking. Then he stood and went to the hearth to firecall his solicitor. He would not speak to Narcissa about Draco’s disownment until he could present it to her as a fait accompli. She would be on his side, of course, because they had raised their son to act a certain way and he was not acting it, but she might still protest such a step. Lucius would ease her pain as best he could.
“Our first goal is to keep the people we rescue from Tullianum alive.” Harry said, leaning forward over the table, his hand splayed flat on the surface and his eyes traveling from face to face. “Not to kill Unspeakables. Not to weaken the Ministry. Not to gather information that will be useful for a later attack on the Ministry, as I hope that we won’t have to do this again. Is that understood?”

Draco looked from person to person, and saw them all nodding. He concealed a smirk behind his hand. There were many more wizards than had been there this morning. A short argument with Harry, just before Draco had called his father to talk to Lucius about the terms of his disownment, had revealed that Harry was waiting to call on his allies because he wanted to give them time to make up their minds—and, Draco thought, because he was afraid that more of them would act like Lucius if he “took them for granted.” Draco had trounced this supposition quite quickly, by pointing out that at least some of them were probably waiting anxiously for Harry’s call, not wanting to interrupt in case he was doing something important, and unable to simply Apparate to his side because they had no idea where he was.

Harry had blinked and muttered, and then started using the communication spell to talk to his allies, most of whom responded just as eagerly as Draco had thought they would. He’d shaken his head and rolled his eyes, though he’d been careful not to let Harry see him do it. Sometimes, Harry forgot which way the balance of power tilted. And his assumption that people who would help him in war against Voldemort wouldn’t want to help him in a rebellion against the Ministry, or a rebellion undertaken because of werewolves, was, frankly, laughable.

The Bulstrodes were here now, all four, though of course Millicent’s little sister, Marian, was bedded down for a nap. Syrinx, Owen, and Michael had finished Apparating an hour after Harry had spoken to them. Thomas Rhangnara and his eldest two children had appeared with pops that sounded gleeful to Draco’s ears. Ignifer Apollonis stood stern and tall next to Honoria Pemberley, who would not stop whispering with Tybalt Starrise and his Muggleborn partner. (Draco was proud of himself for thinking the term Muggleborn instead of Mudblood). Delilah Gloryflower was there too, the bells in her hair shaking as she bent over the map. Moody, Draco’s changeable halfblood cousin, and the goblins and those few centaurs who could fit into the room, as well as those werewolves who would be helping with the attack, were scattered here and there amongst them.

Draco told himself he was not ashamed that he was the only person bearing the name of Malfoy in the room, and put the thought away as Harry took a step back from the table. Harry’s eyes were brilliant with determination, his face so set that Draco thought swords would have broken on him. He didn’t seem aware of the fact that people were so fixated on him, or he would have been blushing and stammering. Of course, Draco thought, Harry did his best as a leader when he thought about what he had to accomplish, and not what he meant to the people who followed him. He would never have believed it, anyway.

“We’ll be waiting to Apparate until we’re outside the Ministry,” he was saying now. “The anti-Apparition wards are simply too strong for most of us to tear, a few people excepted.” His gaze lingered on Apollonis and Adalrico Bulstrode, Draco noticed. “And then I’ll need as many people as possible to take as many werewolves as possible in Side-Along Apparitions. We don’t have time to get a detailed explanation of Woodhouse to their ears.”

“Is the karkadann coming?” asked one of the goblins, one Draco thought was female, with ornaments of bronze and gold gleaming from her wrists.

Harry shook his head. “She’ll remain here to guard Woodhouse, along with some of the pack and a few centaurs, of course.” His gaze turned to the tall centaur Draco thought was named Bone, or something else ridiculously simple. “I know that your people cannot Apparate. What—“

Bone laughed, his eyes shining. “We have our own ways of getting from place to place,” he said. “Do not fear that. Now that our web has changed and our magic is free, the wizarding world shall learn it again.” He folded his arms over his chest and gave a stern nod. Draco concealed a shiver, as best he could. He had grown up on stories of centaur rampages and what they could mean for wizards.

“What about those who get in our way?” Honoria asked, loudly.

All eyes focused on Harry. His expression never wavered, though, and Draco had to wonder if he’d underestimated him.

“Our primary purpose is still rescuing the werewolves,” he said. “And by the oaths of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, causing excess fear is immoral. That means I don’t want you going out of the way to seek Ministry people to murder.”

They waited. Everyone had known that, Draco thought. The difficult part, the other part, was what they were waiting for Harry to talk about.

Harry let out a harsh breath. “Our primary purpose is rescuing the werewolves,” he repeated. “And those who deliberately put
themselves in the way of that have lost their right to simply depart, lives intact. Use defensive magic as long as you can, but defend your own lives and the lives of the pack first. If it has to be done, kill them.”

A profound silence followed in the wake of Harry’s words, and Draco noticed that the faces of all in attendance were solemn. He knew why a moment later.

Acting against the Ministry was one thing; even breaking werewolves out of jail could win them the silent applause of some in the Ministry who stood against the anti-werewolf laws in secret. But killing the Ministry’s people would bring them to the brink of open war.

Harry could have evaded that by commanding his people to avoid killing at all costs. He clearly wasn’t going to.

Draco took a deep breath and shook his head, feeling a shock travel through him rivaled only by the shock he’d had that morning when he saw the karkadann. Things were changing.

******

Lucius looked over the last of the documents his solicitor had handed through the Floo connection, and nodded. He reached out and picked up the quill, holding it for a moment over that last line.

He need only sign, and Draco would be disowned.

It was not permanent, of course, because Lucius did not believe Draco’s little fit of teenage rebellion was permanent. When Draco realized what it really meant to be alone in the world, separated from his parents, from his name, from everything that made him who he really was, then he would give in. He could not want to be at Harry’s side only, Lucius knew. No Malfoy was content to remain in the shadow of another for long. If the Dark Lord’s reign had lasted, Lucius Malfoy would have carved himself out a separate name. Draco, however, had no reason to think that Harry would give him position and power and prestige over others. In the end, he would withdraw from his lover because he could not be his own person while Harry overshadowed him. He would have to return to his father and build on the family name to become a power, as every Malfoy for the last ten generations had.

Lucius brought the quill down, and signed. It was only a temporary cut. His son would come to his senses and return. Being in the bed of a Lord-level wizard was not enough to make up for lost money and lost connection, in a world such as theirs where connection was so important.

That done, Lucius bundled the documents back through the Floo connection and went to tell Narcissa.

******

Harry appeared at the Ministry entrance with most of his human and goblin allies clustered around him, but invisible under Honoria’s illusions. Harry spent a moment studying the glamours, wishing he knew how to make them. They shimmered like Invisibility Cloaks, adjusting themselves to their surroundings. In moments, Harry could no longer see his allies, but only the dirty and graffiti-covered alley.

He took a deep breath, and knew he was studying the glamours and how to make them just in order to put this off. He turned to the broken telephone box and pushed the sequence of numbers corresponding to M-A-G-I-C that would let him in.

Nothing happened. No voice, welcoming or otherwise, spoke. Harry narrowed his eyes slightly, then shrugged and stepped away, focusing on the telephone box.

“Modero,” he said.

The magic surged through him and, following the path of his will, grabbed at the magic around the telephone box. Harry felt a moment when the Ministry’s wards grappled with him, trying to retain control of it. But he repeated the spell, and the box was ripped away. Harry nodded and stepped into it, feeling Draco, Owen, Michael, and Syrinx crowd in behind him; they had agreed those four should go with him first, no matter what happened. The lift slid downward, moving more smoothly than he remembered it doing, and deposited them in the Atrium.

They stepped out to the shrill jangle of alarms. Harry smiled sourly, even as he made the lift rise again to start bringing down the rest of his allies. Well, he had hardly expected to enter quietly. Even tearing apart the Ministry’s anti-Apparition wards and appearing much closer to Tullianum—which he’d decided against doing because most of his allies weren’t strong enough to do it, so Harry would have had to make multiple trips Side-Along Apparating them—would have caused panic, and probably louder
alarms.

The only person in the Atrium at the moment was the checkpoint wizard, who was gaping at them, or, presumably, at him, since Harry was the only one visible. Harry had insisted on that. He hoped at least a few people who might otherwise oppose their mission would stand aside when they saw him, knowing they couldn’t face his magic.

Not so the checkpoint wizard. He leveled his wand at Harry and tried to squeak out some sort of challenge.

Harry took a deep breath and dropped all the barriers on his magic that he could, retaining only the one path of focus necessary to get the lift up to the surface of the alley. His power filled the Atrium like a rising tide, sloshing all over the walls and the fountain and the checkpoint wizard. From behind him, Harry heard a half-drunken giggle, and knew it was Draco. He tended to get like that when Harry released his magic fully. Harry still didn’t know why.

The checkpoint wizard’s eyes rolled back in his head, and he collapsed in a dead faint. Harry shrugged and moved forward, eyes fastened on the gates beyond him. *One less person to fight.*

And then the gates opened, and out poured a flood of wizards in dark robes, moving with a battle-trained precision that Harry recognized. *Aurors.*

He felt a glimmer of magic from behind him, and a tiny mote of light darted towards the Aurors. Syrinx, Harry knew; he doubted Draco or either of the Rosier-Henlin twins would have used Light magic. The Aurors, busy arraying themselves into a battle line, didn’t notice as the tiny mote divided into many parts, one for each of them, and drifted up to hover in the corners of their eyes.

They sure as hell noticed when each mote grew into a sunrise, though, blinding them and sending them sprawling backwards, clawing at their faces. Harry glanced over his shoulder and nodded, to let Syrinx know he was proud. Behind them, the lift landed with another load of their allies.

Harry faced the gates and began walking over and between the sprawled Aurors. Everyone who was actually entering the Ministry had memorized the map of Tullianum, and knew how to get there. Besides, with Harry going in front of them, the wards should be broken by the time they reached it, and the hidden prison revealed.

******

Narcissa knew what Lucius would say to her, when he arrived. She had known from his low, furious voice through the door this morning what had happened. She hadn’t heard the conversation, but she didn’t need to. Draco had made the choice she always suspected he would, and now the only thing that remained was to go and join him.

Her trunk was packed. She had on a gown that Lucius should recognize, since she had worn it the day when they heard of Sirius’s final strike against his abusive parents. Subtle gray, accented with silver on the sleeves and the skirt, it spoke of a great wrong done by one’s own family, and the wearer of the gown having the strength to endure and mourn the wrong.

Lucius would recognize it the moment he came through the door into her room, and Narcissa knew one of two things would happen then. She was hoping that she need only stand, hold Lucius’s eyes, turn, and Apparate. She could pass out through the wards of Malfoy Manor as Lucius’s wife, and she had checked; the wards on Grimmauld Place were still open to welcome her. Regulus had arranged that exception before he left, and Harry had never sought to end it.

She waited.

******

Rufus stood straight as every alarm in his office, it seemed, began to shrill. These were alarms he hadn’t installed, and Fudge hadn’t ether; they were old, meant to warn the Minister that the Ministry’s entrances were under attack. Rufus reached for his wand, wondering if it was Death Eaters, or werewolves determined to free their pack members, or perhaps Dionysus Hornblower, who had tried this more than once—

And then he felt the wash and sweep of magic from below. A Lord-level wizard was in the Ministry, and his power rose, flooding the rooms, destroying the wards, hitting those who would try to fight him and making a good portion of them cower and whimper in fear. The power did not have the tainted edge that Rufus knew from viewing the left-over remnants of Voldemort’s spells, and he didn’t think Falco Parkinson, whom the Liberator had warned him about, would try a strike like this, not when he was committed to cautious movement and watchful observance.
That left only one person.

And now he heard the unspoken Not yet on the heels of Harry’s promise that he wouldn’t invade Tullianum, and damned himself for a fool.

“What is it, sir?” Percy’s voice was nearly as shrill as one of the ringing wards, and Rufus reminded himself that the boy was still very young, a trainee Auror.

“Harry,” said Rufus, which explained it all, really. He reached into his desk drawer, pulling out a ring of gray metal that contained an old signet in the shape of a flowering rose, and tossed it to Percy. Percy fumbled, but caught it, and stared at him, looking confused. “Go to Burke,” Rufus commanded. “Now. Show her that ring. The Aurors are bound to obey me and not Bones in a situation like this. She’ll know what this means. Now,” he stressed, when Percy went on blinking.

Percy stood straight then, nodded, and ran madly out of the room. Rufus slid his wand into its holster, gathered one more object from his drawer, and stepped out of his office, nodding to the two Aurors who waited on guard.

“You’re with me,” he said. “Sworn to secrecy, of course. I’ll know who talked about this if anyone did, and gut ‘em. You understand me?”

Both of them nodded, eyes wide with something between fear and battle-joy. Rufus reached out and slapped the flat piece of stone he held against the wall. Not all the Ministers had used this set of defenses, because not all Ministers had been battle-trained. But Rufus was, and he intended to defend his ground and his people.

Magic embedded in the walls shimmered and hissed in response to the touch of the stone plaque—place magic, based on spells woven in when the building was constructed. Rufus didn’t think any modern wizard would know how to weave them, and that was a true pity. The stones ground aside, and opened up a steep descent, something between a staircase and a chute. Numbers along the walls marked where various floors were. Rufus nodded. He would go to the tenth level and wait there. Better than running madly all over the Ministry trying to catch Harry.

Rufus had no doubt that Harry was making for the prison, to free as many werewolves as possible. He forced himself, however, to strip the emotions from that idea, and only consider it as part of battle tactics. It didn’t matter that he was facing a man he would have been proud to consider a leader and a friend. What mattered was that he was facing a man making for Tullianum.

His bad leg did not bother him as he went rapidly downstairs. On his way to battle, it almost never did.

******

The door opened.

Narcissa stood. Lucius was entering with an expression on his face that was the closest thing he could come to gentle, and which he wouldn’t have used if there were anyone to see, including house elves. He must have banished them from this part of the Manor. He had bad news to tell her, said the look in his eyes, but he hoped that they would be the stronger for it.

He saw her. He saw the gown. He stopped. Narcissa had never seen him judder to a stop before. She did not think she was ever likely to see it again, so she appreciated it while she could.

She stood there a moment more, letting him absorb the message of the colors and the packed trunk, and the fact that she considered it was he who had done the wrong and not Draco, and then turned, stooping to reach for the trunk.

Lucius’s snarl behind her, harsh and low, told her that he was not going to take the dignified way out after all.

******

Harry had seized control of the lifts as he had the telephone box, commandeering them all to transport his allies to the level below the Department of Mysteries, where Tullianum’s entrance was located. The people who had been riding the lifts had given them skittish looks and piled off at once, meaning that the bulk of his allies had reached the bottom with no casualties, except the blinded Aurors in the Atrium. Harry was cautiously pleased.

Granted, they had only gone down two floors, since the Atrium was on the eighth, but Harry was still hopeful.

He stepped out of the lift onto the tenth level, and found a stiff wind of resistance meeting his magic. This close, the presence of
the Stone was overwhelming. Harry could feel it like the throb of a living heart—or, no, since many small shocks ran through it, perhaps the throb of a living brain was closest. He shook his head and glanced over his shoulder. Honoria had lifted the illusions, so that they could see who was there and not there, and wouldn’t bump into each other. She did circle overhead as a gull, though, ready to cast more illusions as they were needed.

Moody was missing, of course. Moody had explained that while his contacts trusted him, they were reluctant to show their entrances to the Ministry to anyone else, so they would cause havoc elsewhere while Harry and his allies went for the prison. They had provided the current signal that would unlock the room where the prisoners’ wands were located, which neither Moody nor Tonks had known, since it was changed every few days. Harry had considered asking how Moody’s allies had known it, and then decided not to.

The centaurs were not present, any of them. Bone had continued to smile when Harry asked him what was going to happen, except for mentioning the centaur office in the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures. In the end, Harry had given up and accepted that the centaurs would serve as another distraction.

And Thomas, of course, had his own reasons for coming along. Harry was content to leave him to them.

He faced forward. They were in a dimly-lit hallway of dark stone, similar to the dungeons at Hogwarts, but absolutely dry. Harry snorted. When he first came here with Dumbledore, to watch the vote of no confidence for Fudge, Dumbledore had told him there was no way to reach the tenth level except through the ninth. But both Tonks and Moody had insisted otherwise, and when he had asked the lifts to drop further than the ninth level, they’d done so. So much for secrets that only the Hogwarts Headmaster is supposed to know.

He took a step forward.

The ceiling above them opened, and dozens of tiny glass globes laden with the time-reversing dust that Harry recognized from the attack on the Hogwarts Express fell out.

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Narcissa shook her sleeve, and her wand fell into her hand. She turned to face Lucius, holding it, and surprised him again, as the sight of the gown had. He’d taken a single step forward, his own wand already out, lips open in the incantation for the Body-Bind, but he paused when he saw her readiness.

His expression remained surprised after a few moments, even though Narcissa thought it should have changed back by now. After all, he was the one who had started this, had turned this into a duel instead of letting her Apparate away and thinking on his mistakes. She wondered that he thought she was unprepared to face him.

They hadn’t dueled with spells since the early years of their courtship. That didn’t matter. They had dueled countless times since then, with words and silences and gestures and the way they raised their son. This was only a return to what had been, the eternal blaze of a wheel spinning round.

Lucius found his voice then, and not in a curse. “Why, Narcissa?”

“Do you remember,” Narcissa asked him softly, “the question that you put to me on Draco’s first birthday?”

He did. Of course he did. Her husband did not forget things like that. His face went blank again, and Narcissa approved. Lucius had made several stupid mistakes in the past few days, but she would truly have worried if he could not have regained his self-control.

“I joked,” Lucius said.

“I didn’t,” said Narcissa. “I always tell you the truth, Lucius, somehow. You are the one who chose not to see it.”

He stood where he was, motionless as a sleeping portrait, and watched her. Narcissa waited. The tension in the room washed over them like the tension before a building storm, and she could see Lucius’s muscles coiling in response to it.

Narcissa didn’t joke about things like this. Lucius had asked her what would happen if she ever had to choose between her husband and her son, and Narcissa had told him she would choose her son. He had kissed her, laughing, and then they had put Draco into the cot and gone to bed themselves. Narcissa had assumed he had listened to her.
He had not, and underneath everything else Narcissa felt a stir of irritation. Lucius was prone to value his own opinion above those of others, but this was ridiculous, not thinking his wife was an equal partner in their marriage, with a will as strong as his own.

And so it had come to this—not because Narcissa or Draco had done anything, not at root, but because Lucius’s pride had blinded him to truths he should always have acknowledged as true.

 Appropriately, Lucius cast the first spell.

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Harry felt his mind go blank, but the emotion there was neither surprise nor shock. It might have been rage.

“Modero,” he intoned, as he had with the telephone box, and the globes clustered into a delicate mass and flew at him. Harry held up his hand and controlled their flight. They didn’t shatter, but hovered around him, shimmering delicately in the dim light. Harry stared into them, and saw that, unbroken, the dust twirled through shining patterns that had nothing to do with gravity. He shook his head.

Then he lifted his head. The pulses of the Stone were singing again, and Merlin knew what it would command the Unspeakables to do next, now that this first trap hadn’t worked.

Harry took a deep breath and opened his absorbere gift. He hadn’t been planning to do this, since their first purpose was rescuing the werewolves, but now he didn’t care any longer. If the Department of Mysteries was going to attack them from above and behind, he would give them something else to think about.

He drank the magic from the globes, which made the dust stop sparkling and settle into useless rubbish on the bottom of the glass. He drank the power from the chutes that had opened to drop the baubles, and reached behind them, towards a store of rich magic that had nothing to do with the Stone. He swallowed and gulped and absorbed, and he felt himself ring with power, growing swollen with it. He was draining artifacts he had never seen, and he did not care. The whole purpose of this was to put the Unspeakables on the defensive, and make them more concerned with protecting their precious Department than attacking one individual.

He felt the Unspeakables begin to react; the Stone’s pulses changed direction and grew more urgent. Harry grabbed some of the magic he’d swallowed and sent it flowing in a massive slap into the Department of Mysteries. Hopefully, that would be enough to knock the Unspeakables silly.

Then he faced the door that Moody’s contacts said hid the prisoners’ wands. There was a ward keyed to a password covering it, and a strong enough one that Harry would ordinarily have been glad to have the password. Now, though, he was practically bloated with the magic he’d swallowed, and most of that magic had to do with time.

He released it in a narrow beam at the wooden door. The door promptly began to age, the wood turning into puffs of harmless dust that curled around each other and blew away. The room beyond appeared, a neat set of shelves stacked with wand-cases, and showed two Aurors scrambling to their feet, breathless with surprise.

Harry looked them in the eye and said, “I want to know where the wand of every werewolf you’ve put in Tullianum is. That includes Hawthorn Parkinson, and your former comrades from the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts.” When they hesitated, he used his magic to deepen his voice. “Now.”

The walls trembled. The Aurors nodded and began to work, one of them pulling wand-cases off the shelves while another flipped through notes on the table, probably to look up names and descriptions she didn’t know off the top of her head.

Harry caught a glimpse of a door opening in the side of his vision—further down the corridor, towards the hidden entrance to Tullianum. He turned sharply just as the Minister stepped into view.

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Narcissa spun aside from the Cage Curse, and dropped to one knee beyond the table that she usually used to write her correspondence. Sometimes, she had considered telling Lucius about all the traps she’d built into the furniture in this room, and then she had put aside the notion. A woman must be allowed to have her little secrets, her mother had told her once.

Narcissa used one of them now, brushing her fingers along a carved dragon on the table leg.
There was a click, and several holes opened along the table’s legs and rim and underside, firing a series of tiny silver darts at Lucius. He had to move his wand fast to deal with them, and in the meantime Narcissa seated herself on the table, legs crossed and swinging idly, wand braced on a knee.

It was one thing to best Lucius in a duel. It was another to make him realize he had lost. She would not do that unless she managed to trounce him with composure, and not only with magic.

Lucius finished off the last of the darts. Narcissa aimed her wand at him and murmured, “Acclaro iactatia.”

There was nothing Lucius Malfoy did hate more than showing his emotions.

******

Thomas had seen the young red-haired wizard duck into the Head Auror’s office and then out again, but he hadn’t removed the glamour on himself. Nor had he done anything when other Aurors began to rush from behind their desks, milling around like bees with ants invading their hive before they organized and marched out. He waited until the door to her office actually opened from the inside, and then he stepped forward, dropped the glamour, put himself in the way, and smiled at her.

“Hello, Priscilla,” he said.

His wife halted in mid-stride. Thomas studied her, rejoicing, as always, in the way she looked. She was taller than he was, and her blonde hair hung to her shoulders, and her face was stern and neutral. Well, not entirely neutral, not right now. She expressed enough shock at seeing him, Merlin knew.

“Thomas,” she whispered.

Thomas nodded. “I’m here with Harry,” he said. “A lot of us are here with Harry, in fact, including some goblins. Did you know that a vates destroys webs just by being around them? But the goblins’ web he broke under his own power. The northern goblins are free again, Priscilla. We’re living in the middle of a new age.” He cocked his head and smiled. “I always wanted to study history, and now I’m living it. That’s much more exciting.”

Priscilla stared over his shoulder, as if she expected the Minister himself to come marching up between the desks and scold her for taking a moment to talk with her husband. “Thomas, I can’t stay,” she said. “I—someone invaded the Ministry—“ And then she stopped, doubtless realizing who had invaded the Ministry, and put a hand to her mouth. Her eyes, staring at him, became wet.

Thomas reached out and patted her hand. “We hardly expect you to take wing and follow us, my dear,” he said. He was sad to see Priscilla so distressed, so torn. He’d wanted to come and talk to her, make sure she knew that even though they were on opposite sides now, he didn’t blame her. How could he? She had been appointed Head Auror long before the Ministry had passed its ridiculous, nonsensical rules against werewolves, and she couldn’t have known that things would get this bad. “I won’t ask you to call off the Aurors, either. I just wanted to talk to you and tell you about my own decisions. I’ve decided to remember that I’m Harry’s ally first and foremost.”

“Thomas,” she said again, but this time there was a wealth of pain in her words.

Thomas leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek. Priscilla turned her head away, and—was she crying? Thomas hadn’t planned on that. He hadn’t wanted that. He patted her arm in an awkward attempt at comfort. This choosing of free wills thing was obviously harder than it had looked when he’d seen Harry’s Malfoy beaming at his side. He had thought that going to his wife and explaining his choice would be nobler than writing her a letter or leaving her to learn about it on her own. Now, though, she looked as though someone had taken a hot iron to her chest, and Thomas didn’t feel much better himself. He wasn’t sure if the pain was more like a hot iron or like someone hitting him with a heavy cudgel, however. He wondered how he could find out.

“I love you,” he told her. “And I get to see a vates. And I’ll understand anything the Minister has you do to the rebellion. Ministers don’t tend to like being rebelled against, after all, or take it kindly. Don’t be sorry for me, my dear. We are living in such interesting times.”

He kissed her one more time, and then turned to go down to the fourth level, where the centaurs had said to meet them. Along the way, he decided that the pain was more like being slammed in the chest with a cudgel. Shock waves seemed to be passing through his body just under his ribs.

******
Lucius felt his wife’s curse strike him, and snarled. He knew what it did, and he hated how he couldn’t defend himself because the darts had put him off-balance just long enough for the curse to strike him.

A voice began to wail from the side of his head, the voice of the shock and pain he felt. Then another began to mutter in anger. So soft and heated were the words that only the names of Draco, Harry, and Narcissa could occasionally be made out. And a third voice started crooning about its own stupidity.

Lucius knew his cheeks were flushing, that he was losing control of the impulse to shout at his wife. But how could she have done this? He had known she would understand that Draco’s disownment was for the good of the family—and if she had not, why hadn’t she come to him at once, so he could explain?

He always struck back when someone hurt him. Always. He had never considered what would happen if Narcissa hurt him, though.

He knew he should plan, and rationally determine the best course. But the betrayal was too great, and too sudden, and the muttering voices around him, showing off the emotions that he wanted to keep buried and controlled, didn’t help.

Knowing he should hold back, but no more capable of doing so than of flying without a broom, Lucius whipped his wand sideways and cast a curse that would cause Narcissa’s pretty skin to come up all boils. It would not ruin her beauty permanently, but the pain was sharp and stinging. He wanted to hear her scream.

Anything but have her sit there, legs crossed in the dove-gray gown trimmed with silver, quietly laughing, and aware of how very much more in control she was than he was, and having to consider, because of it, that perhaps he had been wrong to disown Draco.

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Rufus saw Harry’s stunned face turned towards him. He saw the people gathered around Harry in the narrow hallway, including Tonks, identifiable at once by the frizz of blue hair around her head, and goblins, goblins of all creatures, with bows and spears and glowing white chains in their hands.

He didn’t allow himself to think about them. He knew Harry, and though he would never have wanted to use that knowledge to battle Harry, now that it had come to this, his wants had very little to do with it. He flicked his wand and intoned the spell that he had to use—nonverbal, of course. Harry would have stopped him at any cost if he heard him utter it.

Draco Malfoy spun out of the line of allies and towards Rufus, summoned by the urgent *Accio*. He stumbled twice, and once nearly regained his feet and resisted the magic, but the distance separating them was short, and Rufus grabbed his shoulder before he could break free. He laid his wand against Malfoy’s throat, and to his credit the boy understood the threat and went limp and quiet. Rufus raised his eyes to Harry’s and held them there.

Harry was ablaze. Magic ran around him in colored ripples, blue fading to green and then to indigo and fiery patterns that mimicked the colors of a phoenix. His face was unearthly, green eyes glowing with the force and fury of a suicidal fanatic’s. Rufus saw enough power dripping from the end of his left arm to nearly form another hand there, perhaps, if he had paid attention to it.

Rufus took a deep breath of relief. He had managed to reach Harry before he freed anyone from Tullianum, or, in fact, did anything irreparable. And he understood Harry’s weakness. So long as Malfoy was in his custody, Harry wasn’t about to move against him. Rufus would never hurt the boy, of course, but he had no qualms about using him as a hostage to prevent this—this madness. Just the thought of what would happen if Harry broke the werewolves out of Tullianum was making his head reel.

“Harry—“ he began.

Then someone pushed him out of his own head. It was so sudden that Rufus had no chance to resist. One moment he was in control of his body and the next he wasn’t, sitting in a tiny prison cell in the very back of his mind. He felt his arm uncurl from around Malfoy’s throat and the wand lift. Then he turned and calmly Stunned the two Aurors with him, adjusting Malfoy’s body so that it didn’t fall to the floor at the same time.

Then he lifted his wand and Stunned himself.

Rufus felt the invading presence leap and pass out of his ears, and then he was the one with the stiffening limbs, the ringing ears,
the shriek of protest in his mind that did no good as he felt Malfoy open his eyes and shake his head and step away from him. He did think he heard the presence, the possessing mind of Draco bloody Malfoy, chuckle.

Well he might chuckle, Rufus thought, before he fell and dimness claimed him. He had forgotten entirely about Malfoy’s possession gift, which he’d heard the truth of from Malfoy’s own lips, and he deserved everything that happened as a result of that.

********

Narcissa recognized the curse Lucius was using, and, more than anything, that made her sad. Lucius truly had lost control of himself. He probably imagined that she would hurt, and cry out, and then apologize in a little girl voice, and that would be the end of it. She wondered if he remembered that she had stopped being a good little girl a long time ago. In fact, she didn’t think she’d been a girl since the first time she saw one of Bella’s rages, long before she knew Lucius.

She dropped off the table, her gown tangling around her and incidentally providing a shield of sorts against any other curses that might come her way. She rolled along the floor, back towards her trunk and away from Lucius, and she heard him casting another curse. This one was a pain curse. Narcissa felt some relief. That one would make her scream like a woman, at least, and he flung it with a strength Bella would have approved of.

She lifted Protego, then flicked her wand towards the sound of the voices muttering about Lucius’s emotions. She did not need her eyes to hurt him, and she used the Blood Whip, the curse that make shields explode, so Lucius would have to duck or have his throat ripped out. It was the reason she had spoken the incantation aloud. At the moment, lost in the depths of rage as he was, she could have killed him if she used the spell nonverbally and he had no idea what was coming, and she wanted him to know that, and know that she knew.

Narcissa sat up again, and found Lucius on his knees, panting, glaring at her. His blond hair was mussed, and the Blood Whip had hit him on the side of the neck after all, inflicting a long gash that would take some time to heal. Narcissa was surprised and disappointed that he had slipped that far. She shook her head.

“Regain your composure, Lucius,” she said softly. “Or I will start to think that you have no Malfoy pride left.”

He lashed his wand.

Narcissa’s eyes went dark, her hand went limp, and an invisible grasp grabbed her throat and began to squeeze.

********

Thomas met the chaos on the third floor. He started to see people running madly away from the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures, all of them shrieking at the top of their lungs. He shook his head and wondered why. He would either be running towards something interesting, or trying to ambush it, and so crouching in one place with his voice silent and still. But then, people had always screamed too much, in his opinion.

A witch grabbed his shoulder and tried to drag him along with her. Thomas shrugged her off and turned to stare at her. She stared back, panting. She had dark hair that stuck up straight from the back of her head. Thomas was charmed. He knew from studying GUTOEKOM that that probably meant she had some trace of lightning magic, but he had only seen those kinds of people in dry words on a page, never met any in reality. He opened his mouth to ask her about her family history, but she interrupted him.

“Run!” she screamed in his face, and left Thomas blinking. There was no need to be rude, he thought, even if one was on the verge of panicking. “There are centaurs running up and down the corridors!”

Thomas brightened. So they had managed to find a way into the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures after all, just the way they had promised Harry they would. “How many?” he asked eagerly. “And do you know how they got there?”

The witch stared at him some more, while Thomas patiently waited for an answer to his question. Then she spat at his feet, said, “Fine, it’s your funeral,” and turned for the stairs, pushing him away. Thomas stepped back to let other people get past, and reached the bottom of the stairs with a little shrug.

When he poked his head into the Department, he grinned. Bone and three other centaurs, all palomino, were indeed galloping up and down the corridor, whooping and stabbing with their spears at the walls. Thomas wondered if anyone else had noticed the small white sparks that were flying from their hooves, indicative of magic. Probably not. A little danger was enough to make sure
people never noticed the important things in life, unless they were research wizards.

He hailed Bone by name, and the centaur looked up at him and nodded, without ever stopping his steady gallop. His hooves shook the walls. Thomas listened, and realized there were many more hoofbeats than there should be, with this small a herd in the Ministry. He laughed.

“It’s partly illusion, isn’t it?” he asked, cupping his hands around his mouth to increase the power of his yell.

Bone nodded at him again. Thomas grinned in excitement. That fit directly into some of the GUTOEKOM theories that he had debated endlessly with Petrovitch. Petrovitch was one of those adherents to the idea that magical creature magic was fundamentally different from wizard magic, so different that no mere wizard could hope to understand it. But Thomas had done what any sensible research wizard would do and looked for clues in the middle of old theories about ancient Grecian magic, since centaurs had come from Greece in the first place.

And sure enough, he’d found ideas about centaur magic there. This was just confirmation of more. White sparks and illusions and magic that fed on fear, probably, since everyone was running around and screaming their heads off. Thomas leaned on the wall and tried to think about the way to word his conclusions to convince Petrovitch, while Bone led his people around in one more grand sweep.

“It was the centaur office, wasn’t it?” he asked, just to make sure.

Bone nodded again. Thomas smiled. That settled it, as far as he was concerned. The centaurs could appear in places named after them and dedicated to them, at least once they were free of their webs. The Ministry had practically been asking for an invasion by having a room named the centaur office. It was similar to the way that holy sites had worked in ancient Greece, with the gods appearing at certain places and stirring certain legends. Once a name and a dedication were in place, they could appear. Not that the GUTOEKOM wizards had come to any sort of consensus on just what the Greek gods had been, yet, or how they fit into the magical systems, but that didn’t matter. What mattered was working out how they did it. Place magic, Thomas knew, that was the key, but of what kind?

He was engaged in these important speculations when the door on the staircase behind him opened, and Aurors tried to invade the Department, firing curses at the centaurs. Thomas was annoyed. He turned and hit the Aurors with a Mandarin spell that would give them six legs instead of two, so that they could see what it felt like to be interrupted while they were trying to do something important.

******

Lucius watched his wife struggling to breathe, and swallowed vicious satisfaction like a shot of Firewhiskey. Narcissa should have known better than to challenge him. Really, she had known better. She had to have done so. But what mattered was that he had her under control now. With the last of her breath, she was gasping, “Lucius, I yield.” Her fingers could barely stay curled around her wand any more.

Breathing heavily, Lucius released the Choking Curse. He left the blinding one in place, however, because he was not stupid. He walked over and stood staring down at Narcissa. She barely looked as though she’d been fighting, if one excused the few wrinkles in her gown. Lucius, meanwhile, was well-aware of the mussed hair that stood away from his head, and how his breath rushed in and out of his lungs with an audible rasping noise, and how blood trickled over the side of his neck.

Not to mention the voices muttering about his emotions. A fourth voice had joined the others, a high-pitched whine that said how unfair things were, for both Draco and Narcissa to betray him. Lucius did his best to ignore it. He couldn’t end the spell; it was one of those pesky ones, like the Fisher King Curse, that only the caster could undo.

He bent over Narcissa and examined her. No, he had been wrong about only the wrinkles in her gown appearing, he saw; there were the bruises of the Choking Curse on her throat. He reached down and laid his own fingers over them, gently pinching the bruised skin and making Narcissa moan.

A fifth voice appeared to talk about his arousal. Lucius bared his teeth in its general direction. He had at least dismissed all the house elves from this wing of the Manor, even if he had originally not wanted them to witness Narcissa’s tears.

The first thing he knew of Narcissa’s continuing defiance was when her wand hit the side of his leg, and she whispered, “Debilitas.”

******
Harry caught Draco’s hand and pulled him close to him, unable to speak, for just a moment, of what it meant to him that Draco had both emerged unharmed from a difficult situation and managed to Stun the Minister and his allies so Harry would not have to fight them.

Draco grinned back at him, a smug curve of his lips, and then kissed him hard enough to hurt. Harry blinked as a cut appeared in his own lower lip, and Draco whispered to him, “When we get back to Woodhouse, I am so fucking you.”

Harry shook his head, soothed down the heat that wanted to appear in his belly at the thought, and turned to face the guards in the wand-room again. They had frozen at the sight of the Minister falling, but one look was enough to make them scramble. They had freed perhaps thirty wands from their cases already, Harry saw, and he wondered if they kept the wands organized by recency of confinement to the prison. Or perhaps all the werewolves’ had been in one place.

He faced the door into Tullianum. It glimmered with wards, of course, such strong ones that most people wouldn’t even notice it was there. Harry had acquired enough power that it was visible to him. And the magic was running through him, anxious to be used. He could destroy the wards with a spectacular blow and protect the people in the tunnel with him at the same time, the magic suggested.

Harry shook his head. He wouldn’t do that, on the off chance it would hurt someone. He opened up his absorbere gift and ate the wards instead. They dimmed steadily, and soon the door into Tullianum was just an ordinary door, with a locking spell on it. He heard some of his allies murmur as it appeared.

He glanced over his shoulder, and grinned. Honoria was busy creating illusions, all of big, grim wizards with dark robes and white masks and aimed wands, facing down the corridor behind them. When the Aurors arrived—Harry was a bit surprised they hadn’t already, but supposed the distractions were keeping them, well, distracted—then they wouldn’t know who was real and who wasn’t for a good many moments. Besides, the sight of pseudo-Death Eaters would panic them.

“Trumpetflower,” he called. He blinked. His magic had crept into his voice, it seemed, seeking expression any way it could, and he sounded like the karkadann. “I need you here.”

The witch was at his side in moments, her nostrils flared. Harry needed her to sniff out the cells that contained werewolves from the ones that didn’t. He had briefly considered a plan to free all the criminals in Tullianum, to preoccupy the Aurors with trying to recapture them, but rejected it. It would be on his head if a freed murderer did manage to escape, or someone else who had done something they deserved to be locked away for. It was for those who had committed no crime but suffering that he had come.

“Ready?” he asked, and Trumpetflower nodded. Harry reached out and snapped his fingers.

The door to Tullianum wrenched open, showing the tunnel beyond. The guards standing there cast a massed arsenal of spells the moment it happened.

Harry opened his mouth and drank them in.

*******

Narcissa felt her wand jab home. Really, the moment Lucius had given in to temptation and laid his fingers along her throat, he had been lost. She had known where he was, and he hadn’t paid attention to her hand tightening around her wand once more. Then she had been able to jab her wand forward, and the curse she chose really didn’t distinguish between which parts of the body it went into. It would weaken him no matter what happened.

Lucius fell, folding over himself with a graceless thump as all strength fled his limbs. Narcissa rolled away from him, and coughed. The grip of fingers on her throat still hurt, and she grimaced to think about what the bruises would look like. But a glamour would cover them, and she had won.

She touched her wand to her eyes and murmured, “Finite Incantatem.” In a moment, the blinding curse cleared, and she could see. She shook her head and stepped across the room to her mirror, fixing her hair back into place with several small whispered spells. The face that looked back at her was pale, but still composed enough. She touched her wand to her throat, and the marks of fingers disappeared.

She turned around and came back to face Lucius again. His eyes widened, and his panting was nearly spasmodic as she bent over him. But Narcissa, wiser than he, watched his wand hand, and she saw the fingers twitch and then fall limp, too tired to get a grip of any kind.
“Too bad, Lucius,” she said softly. “You should have remembered that, even though you are a stronger duelist than I am, I have won all the duels into which I poured my full heart. All our duels over Draco. Not to mention the one we fought because you wanted me to take the Mark, and, because I won that, you never brought it up again.” She pressed her lips to his temple, feeling a surge of pity for him, her proud, handsome husband brought so low. The voices around him were all muttering in various tones of humiliation now.

Pity or no pity, she still kicked his wrist, hard, as he tried to snatch the hem of her gown. Lucius fell back with a moan.

“Think to yourself,” Narcissa told him. “Ask yourself why I would have poured my full heart into this, why I wanted to win so badly.” She kissed him, bit his lip, and turned, picking up her trunk on the way.

Just before she Apparated to Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, she summoned the house elves back to this wing of the Manor. It would not do for Lucius to lie helpless on the floor for the hours it would take the *Debilitas* curse to wear off.

******

Hawthorn put her hands over her face and tried to breathe. All her limbs hurt, and her clothes were shredded. She had torn them herself, in the frenzy of her change. Her jailers had made her put them back on, insisting that they had nothing else for her to wear.

She had stayed here, in this narrow cell scarcely wider than she was and without a bed, for two nights without Wolfsbane. She had held out a feeble hope that, because the moonlight could not reach her through the thick stone, she would not transform, but of course she had. Her mind had vanished for the first time in two years, and she had become a ravening beast who would have slain her husband and daughter, had they appeared living in front of her. Denied that, she had clawed at the stone and bitten at herself. She had urinated in the corners of the cell, and the smell of piss was, to her, the smell of degradation.

Known as a werewolf, she had no life left to look forward to. Delilah Gloryflower had survived her revelation because she had a powerful family surrounding her, one that could raise constant legal challenges in the face of the demands that she be turned over to Tullianum. Hawthorn was alone, and the Aurors who descended on the Garden had known what she was, both lycanthrope and former Death Eater. They might have hated her enough for one or the other; with both, their contempt was horrible. They’d only had to scratch her with silver, and Hawthorn found herself becoming weak and sick. The scratch, high on her left shoulder, still hurt like fire, and radiated angry red lines.

She wondered, in a half-daze, if she would lose her left arm. She did not think she could bear it as calmly as Harry had borne it.

The door to her cell opened.

Hawthorn crouched back into a corner, fighting the instinct to yelp and snarl. If she could not face her torturers, or those come to lead her to trial, like a pureblood witch—the torn robes and the wound and the smell made that impossible—then at least she would not face them like a beast.

She blinked. It was a dream. It had to be. Harry stood in the door of the cell, with a smile that faded rapidly as he watched her. Hawthorn knew the smile did not fade because she had displeased him. It faded because, impossibly, in a dream, he was here to rescue her, and he did not like the way she had been treated.

Harry turned his head and spoke words that Hawthorn did not understand, because the daze of wonder was making her heart beat so hard she couldn’t hear them. Glamour appeared over her then, cloaking the rents in her robes, making them look whole again. Another glamour spread around the cell, masking the stains and the sharp smell of piss. Hawthorn began to believe that this was real, and that she might come forth from her confinement with some dignity after all.

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Harry reached out and grasped her right arm, drawing her to her feet. Hawthorn couldn’t restrain a gasp of pain as her left arm was jolted, and Harry’s eyes went at once to the wound. They narrowed. Hawthorn held still and let him study it as long as he pleased. The pain was nothing next to the fact that she now knew no one could just gape at her bare skin.

Then Harry said quietly, “Let’s go. We still have to get everyone out of here.” The eyes he raised to her face blazed with anger, and for the first time, Hawthorn realized the magic around him, thick with a smell like evergreens at the break of day. “And they can never hurt you like this again,” he said.

Spoken that way, it didn’t sound like a promise, but a certainty, a prophecy. Hawthorn allowed herself to believe, and leaned on Harry’s shoulder as he led her out of the cell.
Falco bowed his head. It had come, then.

He’d felt the burst of magic from the Ministry as he worked on spinning yet another dream for Harry, one he would be forced to pay conscious attention to; so far, most of the others were shattering like thrown eggs against his Occlumency, and he never seemed to acknowledge the odd image that remained in his head. The dream split apart entirely as Falco heard the bell ringing from the Ministry.

*Clang, clang, clang*, it reverberated across the country, and woke things better left sleeping. Falco frowned as he felt Harry’s power enter hidden caves and make the creatures bound there stir, as it made the bones of the dead dragon and the bones of the sleeping live one on the Isle of Man shake, as it traveled out into the ocean and roused answering screeches from the Augureys in Ireland.

Harry was raising his magic in the Ministry itself, and this time, Falco knew it was not to combat another Lord-level wizard. Tom was still in hiding, and no other Lord or Lady had yet entered the country, though they were watching, all of them, to see if the reckless youngster in Britain would yet doom them all. Falco knew what reputation his island must be gaining in the eyes of the international wizarding community, as a household of hooligans, and was ashamed.

Tom, Harry’s proper opponent, was yet too weak to take him on. Falco had not managed to find any way of healing his wound.

That meant it was up to him.

He changed into his sea eagle form and sped out of the paths of Dark and Light, aiming for the real world. When he reached it, he would Apparate. It seemed that it was time he and Harry met in battle, face to face.

26) Against the Lord of Sea Eagles
27) Interlude: The Liberator’s Fourth Letter
28) Like a Hell-Broth Boil and Bubble
29) Master of the Rising Tension
30) The Black Blood Burns Bright
31) Intermission: A Leap Into Burning Light
32) Snape and Joseph
33) The Hills In Their Might
34) Interlude: The Liberator’s Fifth Letter
35) Breakthrough.
36) Ward-Eaters
37) Work, Furiously Work
38) Not Every Problem Is His To Solve.
39) Homo Homini Lupus
40) Intermission: The Day of the Phoenix
41) On The Threshold of a Brand New Dawn
42) Bells, Bells, Bells
43) The Final Compromise
44) Interlude: Discovery Is Your Death
45) Glory Be
46) Interlude: The Liberator’s Sixth Letter
47) Harry’s Epiphany
48) Probo Memoriter Meus
49) Readmitted
50) Interlude: Now Comes the Night
51) Tea and a Cup of Philosophy
50) White Wolf, White Moon
Interlude: The Liberator’s Seventh Letter
51) Taking Control of His Ministry
52) A Wind-Drenched Christmas
53) Horcruxes
Intermission: Repudiation
Intermission: Rebirth
54) Harry, Hermione, and Their Letter-Writing Campaign
55) Scrimgeour’s Line in the Sand.
56) A Different Kind of Birthing Bed
57) Slytherin vs. Ravenclaw
58) Draco Vs. The Monitors
59) Boulder, Boulder, Boulder, Duck
60) All Lines Cut
61) See What Beauty Falls
62) A Round of Time
63) An Island in the Seas of Time
64) The Battle of the Department of Mysteries
65) Harry and Rufus
Intermission: Among the Nightshade and Belladonna
Interlude: The Liberator’s Eighth Letter
66) Wood and Bone and Blood and Iron
67) The House of Apollonis
68) Step Up the Granian
69) Meeting On the Edge of
70) A Visit to the MacFusty Clan
71) Dark and Wild and Wondrous Are They
Intermission: Gloom’s Own Country
72) A Birthday Celebration
73) Harry Loses His Temper
74) And Five On Five
75) A Dream of Spring
Intermission: A Dream of Endlessness
76) A Dagger Through the Vitals
Interlude: The Liberator’s Ninth Letter
77) Malfoy and Vates
78) Love and Never Trust
79) The Last of the Marauders
80) Guardian of His Family Honor
81) The Last of the Potters
Intermission: Come Home to Your Heart
82) A Day For Fools
83) The Duel of Phoenix and Siren
Interlude: The Liberator’s Tenth Letter
84) Full of Song and Crowned With Flowers
85) A Short History of Muggleborn Magic
86) Declared Without Consent
87) Day of Glory
88) Night of Terror
Interlude: The Liberator’s Eleventh Letter
89) Luna’s Gift
90) A Week In Early May
Intermission: Purple, Silver, Green
91) Parvati’s Birthday
92) Hawthorn, Dragonsbane, Pansies
93) From Adalrico’s Hand
94) Others’ Sacrifices
95) Death’s Own
96) Lucius and Narcissa Try To Be in a Room Without Shouting
97) Harry and Lucius Try Not To Stab Each Other to Death
98) Lie In My Arms This Night
Interlude: The Liberator’s Twelfth Letter
Intermission: In Readiness
99) Slytherin and Gryffindor
100) Triple-Edged Blade: First Cut
101) Triple-Edged Blade: Second Cut
102) Triple-Edged Blade: Third Cut
103) Having Seen That Love Hath An End