Chapter Twenty-Six: Against the Lord of Sea Eagles

Harry could feel his anger rising. The moment he saw Hawthorn crouched in the corner of her cell like some whipped dog, it had begun, and now it traced a glowing, warm path up from his belly to his throat, waiting to explode. The magic that danced around him and within him only urged it higher, because once his temper exploded, the magic knew he would use it more.

He concentrated on the warmth of Hawthorn’s arm around his shoulders, on the way she leaned on him, and reminded himself again and again that he couldn’t explode, that he needed to get her and the others out of here and insure they survived. He murmured reassurances, and took down the wards on the doors that Trumpetflower identified as having werewolves behind them, and tamed his anger again and again, shoving it back into determination. I’ll let them survive. I’ll get them out. I have to remember that our purpose here is to keep them all alive and insure they reach Woodhouse, not taking revenge.

He was sorry now that he hadn’t managed to think of a tactic for handling the Unspeakables’ time globes other than swallowing the magic. No one needed this much power, and it was already shoving at him with ideas of its own, since he held it so tightly in confinement. Harry didn’t know what its personality would be like if he allowed it to finish growing, but he knew already it was mischievous.

Have to keep going, he thought, and reminded himself that anger hadn’t saved Kieran, and anger at the Minister hadn’t been the best way to handle that situation. Draco had been smug and chuckling when he possessed Scrimgeour. With that example of rage-handling in front of him, how could Harry justify losing his temper?

“Harry?”

Harry turned his head. Trumpetflower was standing in front of a door, her neck bent to one side and a puzzled expression on her face. “What is it?” he asked, wondering if she had smelled a werewolf imprisoned here whom they hadn’t been told about.

“I—” Trumpetflower gave him a sharp look. “She isn’t a lycanthrope, but there is someone in here who smells like you, Wild.”

Harry knew at once who it must be, and he refused to allow himself to react. Lily wasn’t part of his life any longer. Neither was James. Both were in Tullianum, behind locked doors, but there were plenty of locked doors they passed without releasing the prisoners. These would just be two more. He shrugged. “I know who it is, and she stays here,” he said.

Trumpetflower’s eyes widened. “Very well,” she said, and stepped away from the door as if it were warded with blades.

Damn it. I frightened her. Harry turned to count the werewolves behind them, automatically adjusting his posture so that he could support Hawthorn. There were thirty-three, and a thirty-fourth was freed as he watched and had her wand pushed into her hand. Harry nodded. We’re close to getting out of here. And I have to remember that our primary purpose is to keep them alive. Remember that.

“Wild?”

Harry turned. Rose was near the front of the line, her nostrils flaring as she stood near a door that wasn’t as heavily warded as the others. She glanced at him and let her tongue loll out of her mouth in a grin. “Do we have room for one more werewolf to accompany us to the valley?” she asked.

Harry blinked. “Of course. Who is it?” He reached out and drained the magic from the wards, and Rose easily smashed the lock and opened the door.

The boy inside looked no older than Harry himself, though both taller and stronger. He was already sniffing, and his eyes were a brilliant enough amber that Harry knew he must have been bitten young. He stepped forward and touched his cheek to Rose’s before he glanced at Harry.

“My name is Evergreen,” he said. “I was part of Loki’s pack. You must be our new alpha. You have the transferred smell about you.”

Harry fought to keep from grimacing at the mention of Loki, and thought he was successful. “Yes,” he said. “And I do remember you. You were the one who bit Elder Gillyflower and—“ And started this mess, he wanted to say, but now was not the time or the place to sound accusing. “And went to Tullianum for it,” he finished. “Even though you were born a Muggle.”

Evergreen grinned. “That’s me.” He touched Rose’s shoulder and moved around her into the corridor. “It’s good to see you again, Rose.” He glanced up and down the hallway. “This is a general jailbreak?”
“No,” said Harry, as Trumpetflower yelped near another door and he reached out to remove the wards on that one. “Only for people unfairly accused of no other crime than being werewolves and tossed in here.”

Evergreen’s grin widened. “It’s good to see that you’re doing what Loki wanted you to do,” he said. “Even if it is later than he wanted, and took more provocation than he thought it would.”

Harry didn’t respond to that. He watched as the newly released werewolf reclaimed his wand, and listened.

There was some strange sound under the reverberations of power all through the tunnel. Harry could feel it drawing nearer like a storm; it definitely came from outside the Ministry. If he concentrated, he thought it sounded like jangling bells. A delicate sound, not threatening, but he shouldn’t have been able to hear it through this magic.

A Lord-level wizard was coming. And while the power was barely familiar, since they had met only once, Harry knew it must be Falco. He would have known Voldemort anywhere, he thought.

Harry suppressed the urge to scream. He probably wants to scold me for rebelling against the Ministry, or for not keeping his balance. And he will certainly fight me. He wouldn’t approach like this, forsaking all caution, if he just wanted to watch.

He pushed the urge to scream into more determination, and flung out his hand. If the magic wanted to be used, then he had a use for it. He thought of the need to keep the werewolves alive, to spare as many people casualties in getting out of the Ministry as possible, and to reach Woodhouse safely, and pushed.

The magic poured out of him as if he were a hive and it were the honey, thick and viscous, but assuming the shape he wanted it to make. A shining corridor formed, bursting through the walls of Tullianum and running up through the Ministry, finding the lift chute and running up from there until it met the Atrium, then rising again until it hit the surface of the alley. Harry concentrated, building the walls up, making them as strong as wards backed by linked Shield Charms, so that neither Unspeakables attacking from the sides with flung artifacts nor Falco striking from above would get through.

He wanted them out of here alive, and he wanted them out of here safe. When they reached the end of the corridor, then people would have to Apparate; Harry couldn’t extend the corridor from London to Woodhouse without breaking about fifty thousand laws centered around the International Statute of Secrecy. But they had always known that. It was fighting their way out of the Ministry, with the added complication of an angry Lord-level wizard arriving, that was the problem.

He pressed his hand against his throat, and cast Sonorus, so that when he spoke everyone could hear him. “You’ll have to take the corridor,” he said. “Follow it until it ends. As long as you stay in the path, then nothing can hurt you. When you reach the end, you’ll be Apparating to a place called Woodhouse. If you don’t know where it is, Side-Along Apparate with someone who came with me. They know. You should be safe there.”

“What about not wanting to go?” demanded one of the werewolves who must have been a member of the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts. Harry didn’t recognize her, at least. “If we escape with you, like this, then the Ministry is going to see us as rebels.”

“Your only alternative is to stay here,” said Harry. “And you should have seen how the Ministry treats werewolves in Tullianum by now.”

The woman hesitated, as if for half a heartbeat she were thinking about Stunning him to gain credit with the Ministry, but then she glanced around at the people who had come with him and subsided. Most of her comrades were already hurrying up the glittering path that stretched ahead of them. Harry was glad to see Adalric Bulstrode near the front of the line, visible by his limp, urging people along with both dignity and grace. Millicent wasn’t far from his side. As long as those two were there, Harry thought, he could count on the line to keep in order.

He turned his head upward. Falco was very nearly level with the Ministry by now. Harry thought, and a whip of light coiled around his body and rose up through the stone, to gain form and substance when it entered the air. It ought to be as good a signal as any other to Falco of Here I am.

“Why aren’t you coming?” Draco asked him.

Harry started. It seemed that people had obeyed orders for once in their lives, because when he glanced around, he was standing near the back of the line. Only Draco, Owen, Michael, and Syrinx stayed clustered close to him, staring at him anxiously; most people were at least twenty feet away down the corridor.
“Because Falco Parkinson is approaching,” he said, and saw Draco’s eyes widen. “Yes. Exactly. I need everyone else out of here. Now. With luck, he won’t want our duel to destroy the Ministry, but if anyone associated with me remains here, he could attack them. Move.”

To his credit, Draco started moving, but he reached back and caught Harry’s left wrist as he did so, and Harry’s three sworn companions stayed at his back. Harry growled under his breath—his being in the corridor would probably encourage Falco to attack it—but the thought of the arguments that would pop up later if he tried to badger Draco into leaving him alone kept him moving. His eyes remained on the ceiling, anxiously scanning. Falco’s magic still spoke from the air, not as if he were diving under the ground and trying to strike from beneath.

Then the side of the corridor split open, and Falco arrived from thin air, a wizard with long, flying silver hair, clad in dark green robes that shone with some symbol Harry thought might be a scale, his hand held out. Where that hand moved, reality rippled, and Harry saw the corridor drying up and flaking away.

He had no idea what might happen if that hand touched him, and no time to find out. He rolled, pushing Draco into Michael, Owen, and Syrinx, forcing them backwards and away from the immediate scope of the duel. Then he raised a shield that, he hoped, would keep them safe.

Falco had nearly reached him by the time the shield was done. He launched the reality-bubble at Harry’s head.

Harry ate it. It cost him to do so. He could feel the same dragging pain in his gut and throat and magic that he had experienced when he was gathering in Voldemort’s tainted power during the Midsummer battle. Sooner or later, the absorbere gift closed in on itself and tried to digest what it had swallowed. Harry was reaching the point of oversaturation. Not even creating the corridor so that his people could escape unmolested had used as much magic as he hoped.

“I wish it did not have to come to this,” Falco said sadly, as he landed in front of Harry. He still looked more than half sea eagle, his hair gleaming like feathers, his feet having the shape edge of talons, as though he had not bothered to complete his Animagus transformation. “If you had Declared for Light, then I would have helped you as well as Tom. Britain needs a Dark and a Light Lord, to keep the balance between them both.”

Harry didn’t bother answering. He had no idea what Falco could do; the best he could do was gather in his own magic and release it in a form that he hoped Falco wouldn’t fight that well, because he knew that Falco didn’t share the same gifts that he and Voldemort did.

A dark green snake solidified in front of him, one that had Sylarana’s eyes, and fangs, and Locusta venom. Harry hissed out a command in Parseltongue, and it slid forward, gaze fixed on Falco.

Falco waved a lazy hand. His power spluttered out and destroyed the snake. Harry rebuilt it, the scales piling on even faster this time around. The magic, happy to be of use and recognizing a familiar pattern, spun and dived and darted and wove the serpent back into being in moments.

Falco dodged the snake’s first strike, but his gaze remained on Harry. Harry met it fearlessly. He fairly sure Falco was a Legilimens, but he didn’t think Falco had the power to compel him, any more than Voldemort or Dumbledore had. Perhaps it would do the irascible old man good, to realize that Harry had no intention of backing out of this rebellion.

In a moment, Harry realized something was wrong, something else that Falco knew and he had never studied. He couldn’t remove his eyes from Falco’s. His mind was tingling and going numb, and his will to command his magic was going to sleep. It wasn’t compulsion, because Harry was sure he would have struggled instinctively against that by now. It just gave him—different thoughts.

Harry found his breath slowing, his head lolling back on his neck, the sharp, urgent ideas about getting the werewolves out alive deserting him. Falco carefully stripped back those emotions and dived deeper into his mind.

And he found the anger Harry had been suppressing.

Harry found himself awake again, alive, the rage bursting out of him like a golden fist out of his chest. It hit and crushed the snake, which was trying to bite Falco once more, but it also hit and dealt Falco a stunning blow. Harry saw him lose his feet and fly backwards, an expression of true surprise on his face before he slammed into the stone of a Tullianum corridor and lost all expression for a moment.
Harry snarled. His ears rang with the karkadann’s cry, and he felt as if her breath were here, raking over him. He wanted to rend, to tear, to kill. He thought of the way he had killed Dumbledore, and wanted to do the same to Falco. He could strip him of all his magic, draining it into another vessel so that he wouldn’t lose the ability to swallow, and then take even the magic that had kept him alive so long. Wouldn’t the Dark and the Light be pleased that someone who had fooled them was dying? They must see that Falco wasn’t going to grant his allegiance to either one of them any time soon.

And then he heard a voice cry out his name behind him, sharp and urgent, and Draco blazed like a phoenix in his mind.

What was he doing? He didn’t have the time to drain Falco, assuming it was even possible; Falco didn’t have Dumbledore’s fear of the prophecy paralyzing him. His first goal was to get everyone out alive.

Harry tamed his rage, though now it felt like pulling on the reins of a cart to which the karkadann was attached. He turned it, and sent it plunging in another direction. He took a deep breath, and concentrated on a vision of the corridor intact, whole, with the shimmering colors that made up its walls spreading like oil slicks. Impenetrable oil slicks. He just didn’t have time for this. None of his people had time for this.

He turned and checked on Draco, Owen, Michael, and Syrinx. The shield that had sheltered them was half-crumbled. Harry nodded sharply to them. “We’re going to run,” he said. “Up the corridor. Go in front of me. Don’t look back. I need you at the end to help Apparate werewolves to Woodhouse. I don’t think they can have moved all of them out yet.”

Draco opened his mouth. It looked like it was forming a protest. For that matter, Owen looked as if he were going to join in the act.

Syrinx caught Harry’s eye, bowed, and said, “Of course. They need us.” Then she began to run. Owen hesitated, and then, as if he remembered that he bore the lightning bolt scar, too, and didn’t want a Light witch to outdo him, he followed. Draco lingered, still staring hard at Harry. Michael was probably not going until Draco did, Harry knew.

Harry saw Falco stirring from the corner of his eye. They didn’t have much time. “Please,” he said. “Draco. Run.”

Falco vanished.

Harry felt his magic as a pendulum swinging out, gathering momentum and weight on the way. When it hit, it would be massive. Harry poured all his magic into the strength of the corridor, all he had gathered and then some. He would have cut a hole in his own magical core and drained out his power like Voldemort’s if he thought it would help.

“Not without you,” said Draco.

When Falco’s strike landed, it would either splinter the corridor, or it would bounce from Harry’s shields. Harry didn’t know what it would do to anyone who stood with him, unprotected.

“Go!” Harry screamed, and that seemed to convince Michael, if not Draco. He grabbed Draco’s arm and practically yanked him off his feet as he started to run, feet drumming on blue light. Harry turned to face the cut of the pendulum. It came back at him as if it had a scythe on the end, like a pendulum he had seen once in the Room of Requirement, when he used it to heal from what his parents had done to him.

Harry had been willing to let that pendulum cut his palm and shed blood, so that he could renounce his family name. He would endure far more than that, to keep the corridor intact and the boy he loved, with everyone else, safe.

Falco’s magic met his.

Harry felt the walls of Tullianum shake, and wards brace and buckle. He heard terrified screaming from those prisoners still in their cells, and probably from the upper floors, where the Ministry’s people would be wondering what the hell had just happened. He heard a howl that might have come from the throat of a wounded werewolf, far ahead of him.

He felt it throughout his body.

The magic seemed to liquefy his bones and turn his viscera to jelly. Lightning bolts crept up his arms. Harry could hear a stronger pounding than his heart in his ears, and wondered madly if it was possible to hear one’s brain sloshing against one’s skull. He heard a single dull snap under the pounding, too, and grunted. Broken bone, don’t know which one.

A gnawing, familiar pain low in his side told him. Broken rib. He had first felt one when Quirrell, acting for Voldemort, cast a
Crucio on him in their first year. He breathed through the pain, as he had done then. He was fighting for higher stakes now than he had done even then—more lives, and as much peace as possible.

He lifted his head when he thought it was done.

The corridor had held.

Harry saw Falco hovering beyond it, staring at him, his face oddly rippled by the glass-like light. He had wings, and a sea eagle’s face, but a human body, still flaring with the dark green robes.

Harry stared back at him, and wondered if he would try another strike. He knew he would resist it. It might break another rib, or his leg, but he would survive it.

Falco only shook his head, and then vanished. Harry concentrated. He could feel his magic, hear the jangling bell-music, but it was retreating. Falco had given up on harassing them, for now.

Harry let out a long breath, let the pain throb, and forced himself to his feet. He looked up the corridor ahead of him, and saw only tiny, distant figures, hurrying away. He permitted himself a grim smile, and then began to time his walking, around more and more throbs of pain from his wounded side.

His magic pulled feebly at the pain, but Harry had given all the swallowed power to the corridor, and he had never studied the kind of healing spells that would let him set broken bones; the ones to heal wounds inflicted by curses had seemed more valuable. He was afraid of setting the bone wrong if he tried to heal it on his own.

At least he could travel by Apparition, he thought. Traveling by Floo or Portkey with a broken rib hurt to contemplate.

Step and hurt, step and hurt. Yes, it ached, but Harry had had worse. His hand, which rested on the rib to cradle it, twitched, and Harry smiled grimly. He couldn’t reach the stump of his left wrist from here.

And he could turn the pain into the same determination that had carried him forward so far, and made him resist the urge to turn tail and flee when Falco struck. Getting everyone out alive was what was important. He was climbing up the staircase the corridor had formed through the lift shafts right now, and hadn’t seen a single dead body. That cheered him up immensely.

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Falco was more frightened than he liked to admit.

He had believed that by bending time and curving away from the boy, he could keep his attack hidden. He should have been able to. It was one tactic which, dependent as it was on sheer strength, he had never been able to teach Albus; his innate preference for subtlety had sat in the way. And the boy was less powerful than Albus, especially with so much of his magic drained into protecting others. He should have crumbled before the blow.

Instead, the boy had sensed him coming and had time to prepare.

Falco’s mind was not on what Harry might do to unseat the balance in the future, now, or what the international wizarding community would think of Britain. His mind was on a room in a house at Godric’s Hollow that he had had to spend days analyzing before he came up with an answer.

Harry should not have been able to sense my attack.

But Tom could have.

Falco was wondering, again, what exactly had happened in that house. He had thought he understood. A series of coincidences that, timed and dancing to prophecy, were not coincidences. An equality of power that had allowed Harry to survive the Killing Curse; a touch too weak and the curse would have slain him, a touch too strong and the returning magic would have blown his body apart. A transfer of Darkness that was not yet complete, and had made Harry Voldemort’s magical heir.

But that transfer had included only Parseltongue and the absorbere gift, Falco had thought. What he discovered in the room had certainly led him to think so.

He now had to consider that perhaps the transfer had sped more than just those two abilities along the path to Harry. And if so,
what else had come down the link? What else could Harry do that his magical father could also do? What if he were wrong, and Harry should have Declared Dark, not Light, after all?

But what if he must Declare Light, to balance out the Darkness within his soul?

This had splintered his plans. Falco soared back into contemplation, sadder and wiser than he had been a few minutes ago. Harry continued to confound his expectations, but it was much better that this happen and come out into the open. If Falco had not known this and then prepared to destroy Harry, he could have perished because of his overconfidence.

Better to wait and study and see what comes.

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Draco finally managed to resist the pull of Michael’s arm when they were somewhere on the stairs to the ninth level. Jerking away, he drew his wand, pointed it at the wide-eyed boy, and said, “If you ever do that to me again, I’ll make sure that people think you’re a girl for the rest of your life.”

“But you—” said Michael, and then clenched his jaw shut and turned away. Draco let out a shaky breath and faced back the way they had come, scanning the red-green-blue tunnel frantically for a sign of Harry.

He saw him, stumbling on the steps but always making his way higher. His right arm curled around his side, supporting what looked like a broken bone, and when he came closer, Draco could see the dark stain of blood on his robes. He bit back the impulse to hurt someone and reached out, touching the crook of Harry’s elbow. Harry looked up and blinked, then frowned.

“Draco? You should have made your way to the end of the tunnel,” he said. “It’ll take longer to Apparate everyone out if we don’t have people who know Woodhouse there.”

“What were you thinking, telling me to hurry away like that?” Draco breathed. He had intended the words to come out in a shout. He found that he couldn’t make them. Harry’s face was pale, and he looked as though someone had hit him multiple times with a Bludger, never mind the broken bone.

“Trying to keep you safe,” said Harry. “You couldn’t have withstood that blow from Falco. I barely withstood that blow from Falco.” He nodded up the staircase, beyond Michael. “And now I’m here, so can we hurry to the end of the tunnel? I think there are some people who will refuse to leave until they see I’m safe—“ his voice said he didn’t know why “—and the longer we linger here, the more danger we’re in.”

Michael was already climbing. Harry followed him, and Draco stayed at his side where the width of the stairs allowed him to do so. He wondered why Harry wasn’t groaning, and then realized the groaning was probably masked by the huffing breaths he took every time his foot came down.

“I didn’t want to leave you,” Draco murmured. “And I could have stood beside you, you know. No need to toss me behind a shield.”

Harry looked at him gently, though for a moment his jaw clashed as he ground his teeth together. “I know that, Draco,” he said. “I know that you want to fight beside me. You did wonderfully with the Minister. But Falco was attacking with sheer strength, and he almost defeated me. I’m still not sure what sent him away. At that point, you couldn’t stand against him, and if I had seen you die or get wounded, I would have gone mad. So I chose the best compromise I could.”

Draco chewed his tongue for a moment as he thought about that. Didn’t he still have the right to demand to stand beside Harry? Or would asking make him as childish as when he’d asked Harry to choose his side over Potter’s and Patil’s?

He didn’t know. It bothered him that he didn’t know.

They reached the end of that staircase, and then the corridor ran smooth and straight for a while through the Atrium. Draco could see Ministry employees gaping at them; a few were tapping with their wands on the side of the tunnel, but they drew back from that hastily when they saw Harry. Draco smirked at them, and put an arm around Harry’s unwounded side to support him for a moment as his steps grew heavier and his breath huffier.

Figures moved near the gates, making Draco start, but it was Moody, along with several other people who kept their faces cloaked in glamours that shifted and changed, revealing too many features to keep track of. Moody grinned at Harry. “Mission done,” he said. “Information obtained.”
Harry nodded, and a doorway slid open in the side of the tunnel. Moody was the only one who entered. The others turned and faded back into the shadows.

“Contacts,” Moody told Draco when he saw him staring. “They don’t trust anyone except me.” He tossed a wooden scrollcase in the air and caught it as it came down again, laughing. “We got what we came for.”

Draco wanted to ask what that was, since the only role Moody’s contacts had played in the original plan was to fetch the password for the room where the wands were stored and to act as a distraction, but he kept his tongue. Harry’s huffing breaths were growing worse, and from the number of staring figures on the staircase ahead, where the tunnel rose up to the alley they’d come in by, most of their group had indeed waited for Harry. Draco heard them cheering at the sight of him.

He also felt a surge of magic from Harry. When he glanced at him, his face looked normal again, and the stain of dark blood on his robes was gone. Harry also lifted his head and walked as steadily as possible, nodding back to the cheerers in a reassuring fashion.

_I suppose he has to_, Draco thought. _Otherwise, they’ll worry too much about him to fix on Apparating. When we get to Woodhouse, then he has time to collapse and drink a healing potion._

They climbed the stairs, Draco reversing his position so that he could stand close to Harry’s broken rib and keep anyone too enthusiastic from jostling the wound. Luckily, only a few people actually tried to hug Harry. Others kept their distance, talking in soft and excited voices. Harry made a point of nodding and replying to most of them, though Draco could see how eagerly his gaze sought the end of the tunnel and the point where they could leap into nothingness and continue on to Woodhouse.

They reached it without anyone from the Ministry stopping or slowing them down. Draco took a werewolf by the arm at Harry’s insistence, glancing at him all the while. Harry was talking to the werewolf called Evergreen, though, and didn’t look back at him. A moment later, they vanished.

_Really_, Draco thought, and did his best to think of the wide expanse of grass inside Woodhouse, near the pine forest, where the centaurs liked to stand. He hoped that no one else would be Apparating there just then. Actually, he wasn’t sure if he could Apparate, and if not, then he would wait until someone else came back for him, but he wanted to try.

Then a phoenix’s warble broke his concentration. Draco sighed. “Sorry,” he said to the werewolf, a staring, shocked woman of about thirty, who just nodded. Draco bent over his left wrist. “Yes?”

“Draco?”

It was his mother’s voice. Draco blinked, and swallowed, and suspected that sorrow would distract him too much to Apparate after all. “Mother?” he asked. “Didn’t Father tell you about the disownment?” He wasn’t going to let her contact him under false pretenses, and thus hide the choice he had made. He had expected Narcissa to be horribly disappointed with him and stay with Lucius, which had to meant that she didn’t yet know.

“He did, Draco,” his mother’s voice said softly. “I’ve left your father for now. He didn’t want me to leave. I’m at Grimmauld Place. I’ll join you as soon as you tell me where you’re going.”

_So it wasn’t tears that were going to distract me, but joy._ Draco choked back a whoop. He still considered himself a Malfoy, and it would be undignified to do that in front of a complete stranger. He didn’t ask his mother if she was sure, either. That would be insulting to her as someone who was born a Black and had married into the Malfoy name.

“We’re at Woodhouse,” he said. “You know, the place that we fought Voldemort’s forces last October?” The werewolf next to him gave him a sudden look. Draco ignored her. If she didn’t know what she was getting into, then she should never have left Tullianum.

“I remember it well,” said Narcissa. “I will see you in a few moments, my son.”

“See you,” said Draco, and let the communication spell end. He knew he was grinning like a fool, and _that_ he didn’t think he could hide. It didn’t matter. His mother had chosen him over his father. He wasn’t going to be the only person with the name of Malfoy in Harry’s rebellion after all.

He didn’t even care that Michael had to Apparate him, and Owen had to Apparate the werewolf. He still couldn’t stop smiling, and it only grew worse when they landed in a puddle not far from the quadrangle of stone buildings and he saw his mother
waiting, her blonde hair shifting behind her in the brisk breeze.

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Harry concealed his gasp as they landed, but that apparently wasn’t enough to fool Evergreen. The young werewolf sniffed once, then looked at him, and for the first time since he’d come out of his cell, some of his grin faded.

“I can smell blood,” he said.

Harry nodded, and cursed himself for not remembering a glamour that would cover scent. Well, since he was about to take a healing potion and deal with the broken rib, it wouldn’t be a problem for much longer. “I’m going to take care of that,” he said. “You can wait here for me, or ask someone else what’s going on.” He glanced up and saw Camellia hurrying over from her sentry post under the pines. “Some of your packmates are here.”

Evergreen glanced up and gave a joyous howl, hurtling several steps forward. Camellia met him in the middle of it, and they rolled on the ground together, mock-growling and tussling with each other. Camellia laid her head on the grass just long enough to give Harry a look of eloquent thanks.

Harry smiled, then turned away and walked as rapidly as he could towards the wooden house and the room where they’d placed the healing potions his allies had brought along. Tonks met him on the way there, studying him worriedly. Harry nodded to her. “Broken rib.”

“It’ll be tender even if you use Bone-Set,” Tonks warned him.

“I know,” said Harry. “But the point is to deal with the pain. I have too much to do to let it incapacitate me.”

Tonks opened her mouth as if she would say something, then shut it, shaking her head. Her hair turned black, but she just shrugged when Harry questioned her. Harry decided it couldn’t be of importance. Tonks was one to speak her mind when she had something to say.

He went to work on the pain instead. It was too sharp to ignore, the way that Lily had trained him to ignore most of the curses he cast on himself, but he could take the screaming urge to curl up around it and transform it into something else. So he did. By the time he did locate the narrow green bottle of Bone-Set that Elfrida had brought and swallow it, the pain and desperation had become more whips to urge him along the path towards what would come. They had freed the werewolves from Tullianum. Now he had to settle them into Woodhouse, and prepare for the Ministry’s response.

Tonks went on watching him all the while. Harry asked her twice more what was wrong, once before he drank the Bone-Set and again while he waited for the sweep of honeyed fire through him to mend the bone and ease some of the pain, but she shrugged again the first time and said the second, “When I know how to phrase it, then I’ll tell you.”

Harry had to admit that was fair. He used the moments when he had to stand still and let the potion work to list tasks in his head. Contact the shops and increase the food deliveries, tighten the wards around the Black houses so that anyone trying to break in would bounce back—an impossible task when there were as many people living there as had been the case with the werewolves, since they had to be able to pass in and out, and breathe—let the people waiting for word back in Hogwarts know that he was all right, find places for everyone to sleep, check on the wounded, explain how the defenses in Woodhouse worked, arrange for regular patrols of the valley…

“Sir?”

Harry looked up. Syrinx Gloryflower was standing in the doorway, her face solemn. “There’s an argument breaking out, sir,” she said. “One of the werewolves attacking your good name, and another defending it. It hasn’t come to teeth yet, but it might.”

Harry nodded and moved a few steps away from the cupboard that had contained the potions, deliberately raising his arms. The skin was still tight and tender enough over his ribs to make him hiss, but he could move.

“There directly,” he said, offered one more reassuring smile to Tonks, and then hurried after Syrinx.

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Remus was fighting to control his rage, but it was hard to remember that he should do so, even with ordinary witches and wizards watching, when his opponent was as strong, with as much of a temper, as he was. Camellia had been bitten very young, just like
Remus, and he didn’t have to hold back if he attacked her. And right now, he was as close to attacking her as he had been since he first met her.

“He left me behind.” He tried to speak softly, but to put a proper snarl behind the words, he needed to raise his voice. “He’s my alpha, and he left me here. I’m a wizard, and I could have helped, but he left me here.”

Camellia stood in front of him, lips wrinkled, amber eyes flashing, and seemed as oblivious to their audience as Remus was conscious of it. “Because he can’t trust you,” she said. “We all know why. You’re still too much a wizard, Remus. You haven’t let the packmind wash over you. You haven’t adapted to considering him a leader in place of Loki; you still think of him as a temporary replacement. Or you think you should be leader.” Camellia’s jaws snapped shut, and she flicked her head to the side as if she were tearing out someone’s throat. “And we all know why that began, and where that would end. We don’t need someone as changeable as you are leading us.”

Remus growled. He didn’t move his eyes from Camellia’s, keeping them locked straight in a challenging stare, and Camellia began to growl back. They moved closer to each other, or at least Remus did. He could feel his blood singing in his body, his shoulders tensing and hunching. Camellia would, too, the spiral of inevitability catching them up and turning them closer and closer to each other. One of them must spring first, but Remus didn’t know which one it would be. He had little control right now; if the tension built up in him first, he would do it, but nothing said it had to be him.

“Enough.”

Camellia’s eyes snapped away from Remus’s as if torn, and she dropped into a crouch, arching her neck to bare her throat. Remus felt the impulse to do the same thing, but he shook his head. This wasn’t the alpha Wild speaking. This was the boy he had known from a child, his friend’s son, Harry.

The person who had left him behind, when he could have come along, defended the captives, and been one more person to soothe them with his scent and Apparate them back to safety. He turned sharply on Harry.

He surprised himself by locking his eyes in the wrong place, on Harry’s shoulder; somehow, he had forgotten this latest growth spurt. He shook his head and met Harry gaze to gaze. That wasn’t much better, actually, and not only because of the pack instincts urging him to look away. He felt a creeping irritation at the deep calmness there. How could Harry be so calm? Granted, he had managed to survive and get everyone away from Tullianum without casualties, but he had to have heard the argument. The Harry Remus had known would have shown more empathy for his side.

“Why did you leave me?” Remus snarled at him.

“Simple,” said Harry, as if they were discussing the weather. “I didn’t trust you.”

Remus braced himself to keep from trembling. Both the wizard and the werewolf in him hated that statement. “Why?” he whispered. And he had meant that statement to be proud, and it didn’t come out that way.

Harry tilted his head. “Because of this,” he said. “You alter like water with wind on it, Remus. You could have helped me, but perhaps you would have cast a curse at the Tullianum guards for treating werewolves the way they did. Perhaps you would have argued with me at a crucial moment. Perhaps you would have disobeyed an order I gave and got hurt as a result.”

“I am firm in my devotion to the pack,” said Remus.

“Which is why you’re arguing with me.” Harry took a step forward, staring at him deliberately.

Remus couldn’t help it; he had to avert his gaze. “This is an unusual situation,” he said. “Having a human alpha is—not done.”

He could see Harry shrug from the corner of his eye. “Loki chose me. I wouldn’t have asked for the responsibility if he didn’t think me fit for it.” Harry smiled. “Be happy, Remus. I’m fighting for the rights of werewolves the way you wanted me to, at last. And I’ll welcome reconciliation any time you choose to reach out and start acting like a man—or wolf—who wants to discuss his problems, instead of an innocent wronged. For right now, that doesn’t seem likely.”

He turned and walked away. Remus stood where he was, shivering and wondering what in the world he should do next. The rebuke had hurt, like a cuff with tooth behind it.

He had been hurt when Harry left him behind, and the reason still seemed too simple. Why can’t he trust me? Was changing my mind and joining the pack the only thing that convinced him I might be untrustworthy?
One thing was clear to Remus now, though. He would find little sympathy from his packmates for the problems of living with a human alpha, or having a boy he had helped to raise in a position of authority over him. Most of them had adapted to Harry’s presence without a pause.

Perhaps the problem really wasn’t with Harry or the pack, but with him.

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“But he didn’t have to say it in front of everyone,” Michael said, for the fortieth time.

Owen restrained the very adult and mature urge to slap his twin upside the head. Then he wondered why he was restraining himself. His hand shot out, and caught Michael’s temple a solid hit as he whipped around from pacing their room. Michael, utterly unprepared, staggered and sat down on his bed, then put a hand to the bruise, which was turning dark purple, and frowned at Owen.

“What was that for?” he asked. His fingers twitched, wanting his wand, Owen knew. He probably only kept himself from reaching for it under the sure and certain knowledge that Owen could out-duel him.

“I told you this was going to happen, that’s what it was for,” said Owen, sitting down on his own bed and leaning forward. “The moment you started pining for his boyfriend, I told you.”

“Draco flirted with me,” said Michael. “Or, at least, he was happy to take in my admiration and pretend it mattered to him.” He paused, blinking. “Do you think he did that just to get me to admire him more?” he whispered.

Owen rolled his eyes. “And now the secret of why you’re attracted to him comes out,” he said. “You’re both brats, and you’re both blind as fuck.”

Michael turned a sulky shoulder towards him.

“I don’t care who you’re attracted to,” Owen told him plainly. “Even a little flirting isn’t a problem; I know you never tried to put your hand in his pants.” Michael stiffened at that, and Owen paused and stared at him. “Please tell me you’re not that much of an idiot.”

“Of course I’m—” Michael broke off, fuming at the lack of a good way to answer that statement. “I object to you referring to it in such a crude manner,” he said at last.

“So, staring and flirting aren’t problems,” said Owen, deciding he wouldn’t even touch this latest bit of ridiculousness. “But did you think that Malfoy would really fall in love with you, Michael? To get upset when he talks about fucking Harry is stupid.”

“He just didn’t have to do it in public,” whined Michael.

Owen stood, shaking his head. He was glad that he wasn’t vates, and didn’t have to do the intricate little dance Harry did to spare his twin’s feelings. That meant he could say exactly what Michael needed to hear.

“Frankly, I don’t understand why they’re in love with each other,” he said. “It must be shared experiences. Harry could do better. Malfoy’s so self-involved you’d think he’d rather marry his own mirror. But I don’t need to know why it works for them. I just know that it does. And if you sulk and whine about it, and that impairs the oath you swore to Harry, I will take it out of your hide.”

“As my two-minutes-older brother?” Michael objected.

“As head of the Rosier-Henlin family.”

That at least got through to him. Michael lowered his eyes. “All right,” he whispered. “I understand. It was a stupid mistake, and I would be even stupider if I let it hurt Harry. That doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt, you know.” He flopped down on the bed and pulled a pillow over his face.

Owen shook his head and strode for the door. He would contact their mother, to reassure Medusa that they were both all right, and then he would join Syrinx in settling as many werewolves as they could. He, at least, remembered what it meant to be a Lord’s sworn companion, and that didn’t include hiding one’s face and sighing over love matches that were never meant to be.
“You’ll never have to go without Wolfsbane again.”

Hawthorn started and dropped her hands, which had been covering her face. She’d been shown to a narrow wooden room in the central building of the quadrangle, given a bed, and told to rest. She couldn’t rest, though. Even with a window in the wall, this reminded her too much of her cell in Tullianum.

The sense of lightness and magic, and the fresh wild scent, that came with Harry were most welcome. Hawthorn looked at him in silence, not sure what to say. She was caught between intense gratitude for her rescue, intense humiliation at the way she’d been treated, and a growing rage and hatred hot enough to melt iron.

“I promise you,” Harry said, moving forward and sitting down on a stool at the end of the bed. That put his head lower than hers. Hawthorn didn’t doubt that had been on purpose. “Never again.” He clasped her hand. Hawthorn wondered if he was pouring magic into her, or if the surge of strength she experienced when he did that came from being close to the one she’d chosen to follow.

“How much of this rebellion did you start because of me?” She asked it quietly, but Harry heard.

“A good deal,” said Harry. “The hunting season the Ministry announced would have pushed me into it, but when I read that you were arrested…” He shook his head. “It was the end.” He looked directly into her eyes. “Do you know who betrayed you?”

The rage and hatred boiled over. Hawthorn bared her teeth. Harry didn’t move. Hawthorn supposed that spending a good deal of his time in the last two months with a pack of accepted werewolves had taught him to ignore that. “No,” she whispered. “They are dead when I find out.”

“The number of people does seem to be limited,” said Harry, and sighed. “But I don’t think it can have been anyone in the Alliance, or they would know I’m set to drain them of their magic once I find them. Who would risk becoming a Squib?”

Hawthorn snarled again.

“Greyback bit you as revenge for not helping him raise Voldemort, though,” Harry went on quietly. “Do you think that Walden Macnair was his only co-conspirator in that plan? Or could there have been others, people who would remember the bite, and have the ability to pass the knowledge that you were a werewolf along?”

That had been Hawthorn’s first thought. She shook her head. “They never let me know all their names,” she said. “I can tell you what former Death Eaters I suspect of likeliness to do something like that, but I don’t think it’s enough.”

“We’ll find them,” said Harry, and his hand ground down on hers hard enough to crush bone. Hawthorn was a werewolf, though, which meant stronger than the normal run of witches. She squeezed back.

“And they are dead when we do,” she said. “And the Ministry guards who treated me as they did are dead.”

Harry’s hesitation was infinitesimal, but she caught it; she smelled the surge of uncertainty in his scent. “What?” She held the growl back with an effort. To be a son of high principles was a fine thing, but surely Harry should understand how she felt, that she would want revenge for her mistreatment.

“They will be dealt with,” said Harry quietly. “But if a murder returns you to Tullianum, is it the best course?”

Hawthorn couldn’t face his eyes right now. She put her arm over her face and rolled away. It was her left arm, and there came the faintest tingling from her Dark Mark as she felt Harry’s gaze linger on it. Yes, she thought at him. I am a vicious witch who took revenge for the killing of my daughter, and I was the Red Death, and I want revenge for this, not justice.

She suspected Harry would probably persuade her otherwise, in the end, but she wanted to enjoy these uninterrupted moments of rage.

“I wanted to kill something, when I saw you,” Harry said softly.

That was new. Hawthorn peered out from beneath her arm. “Why didn’t you?”
Harry smiled slightly. “Because we weren’t there to kill.” He deliberately let his hand glance across her Dark Mark. “Sleep well, and let me know if you need anything.”

Hawthorn stared at his back as he left, and wondered if she should be comforted or confused. Then she decided to put it aside for now, and enjoy being in a room that had a tub off to one side spelled to fill with hot water.

For the first time in three days, she would be clean.

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Harry paused outside Hawthorn’s room to shake away the memories of her crouched, shaking and bewildered, in a corner, and the moment when he had nearly destroyed half the prison with his newly acquired magic. Reliving the memories brought the emotion back.

And his rage did no good, could do no good, unless he could use it to fuel other purposes.

He shoved it down again, transformed it into energy to complete the next few tasks on his list, rubbed his forehead as his scar ached, and then strode away to look for Draco and his mother. It was wonderful that Narcissa had come to their side, had personally chosen them over Lucius—Harry would never have thought she would do so—and he wanted to make sure she knew she was welcome.

And then there would be more things to do. There truly was no ending, no resting.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. He had told Draco once that life was those unending responsibilities one had. He couldn’t complain about a lack of excitement or variety, at least.

Smothering a wry smile, he veered towards the sight of white-blond hair.

~*~*~*~*

Interlude: The Liberator’s Fourth Letter

September 30th, 1996

Dear Minister Scrimgeour:

I ask that you forgive me for sending this letter at a time when the whole of the British wizarding world is abroil with the rebellion of Harry vates. I know you are busy. However, my parents are distracted along with all those other false fools who pretend to have Declared for Light when they have really only Declared for peace and safety. This means they have let more information than usual slip to me, and I have been able to send this owl off much sooner than I might have been able to otherwise.

The more my parents talk about Falco Parkinson, the more concerned I am. He does not seem to have the constraints that Albus Dumbledore had. As mad as he was at the end, the Light Lord had at least lived in our world and knew much about the political and emotional currents running through it. Falco Parkinson has not lived in our world. He retreated. I have researched such retreats before this, when I first became curious about Lords and Ladies of great power. Going into the “paths,” as the books call them, is always bad. It detach a wizard from what it means to be human. He thinks in terms of ideals. He regards other people as pieces on a chessboard.

This was not seen as such a bad thing in older centuries, because many wizards thought of magical creatures, or Muggles, in the same way. But when these Lords and Ladies began to treat other wizards as chess pieces, then wars started, because our proud people do not like to be so disregarded. Lords and Ladies were gradually urged to stay part of the world and not retreat into the paths, and many did.

Falco Parkinson is never recorded as Declaring for either Dark or Light. Why my parents are clinging so fervently to him, I do not know. I think only his connection with Albus Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix reassures them.

We are dealing with an opponent who considers none of us real in any important sense, Minister. We are dealing with an opponent who considers us small beads to slide along a scale, so that he might bring it into balance.

And who will determine that balance? Why, he will, of course.
We must have freedom—both from Falco Parkinson, and from the people who would ride on his talons as the only route to regaining what they have rightfully lost.

Yours,

The Liberator.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven: Like a Hell-Broth Boil and Bubble

Rufus heard the *Ennervate* distantly, as if it were happening in another world. He felt it when someone grasped his arm and pulled him to his feet, though, all the while shouting into his face. “Minister! Minister! Are you all right? Are you awake?”

He opened his eyes then, blinking, and the first thing he saw was the glittering corridor that stretched through the tunnel beside him and, doubtless, up and on through the Ministry. He grimaced. Then he touched a hand to his face, turned to face the Auror shouting at him, and snapped, “Yes, yes, I’m awake.”

The man backed down, abashed. Rufus turned an eye on the corridor again, and cast a *Reducto* at it. It bounced, and he barely had time to get out of the way as it did. Rufus shook his head. Harry, I don’t doubt that you used this to rescue your people, but why did you have to leave it here? I’m going to have to turn to the Unspeakables to rid us of it. That will put me further in their debt.

“The damage?” he demanded of the Auror next to him.

The man had pulled himself together enough by then to make a useful report, at least. “Forty-two prisoners missing from Tullianum, sir,” he said, “including the last capture, Hawthorn Parkinson. You and your guards stunned. Several Aurors with minor wounds from tripping on a staircase.” His face flushed as Rufus stared at him. It sounds ridiculous said aloud, Rufus thought, no matter how legitimate the cause may have been. “Madam Bones was tied and left in a Body-Bind, while her face was painted to look like a clown’s. We don’t know what the purpose of that was, other than to humiliate her. And of course there were—some of us blinded in the Atrium when the attack began, but we’re recovered, now.” He smoothed a hand down the front of his robes and refused to meet Rufus’s eyes, again. “There’s a lot of damage on the fourth level, in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Centaurs were there.”

“Centaurs.” Rufus’s voice was flat.

The Auror nodded miserably. Rufus wondered if they’d drawn lots for which one had to approach him and tell him this. “Yes. They seem to have appeared in the Ce—Centaur Office, sir. They galloped up and down the halls and kicked in doors and windows and broke furniture, but they didn’t kill anyone.”

Rufus closed his eyes and shook his head. “Go to the entrance of the Department of Mysteries,” he ordered. “Fetch me the first Unspeakable you see. We’ll need to talk to someone about removing this corridor.”

The Auror sketched a little half-bow and darted away. Rufus rubbed a hand across his face and stared at the tunnel again. Harry had achieved exactly what he came here for, he didn’t doubt, getting his prisoners out and doing it with a minimum of casualties. That certain other humiliating things had happened, like his own Stunning and Amelia’s embarrassment, were incidental, distractions or the fortunes of rebellion. They could be hushed up, Rufus hoped.

What could not and would not be hushed up was the extent to which Harry’s invasion was a thumbing of his nose to the Ministry. That had to be stamped on quickly, or it would encourage others to think they could get away with flouting the law.

And it meant Harry would have to be declared an outlaw and a fugitive, along with all the werewolves he harbored.

Rufus felt a great weariness rising up in him. Things would have been so much easier if Harry had come to him and they had talked this out like rational wizards. He understood that Harry didn’t like the hunting season, but in another month or two, Rufus would have gained some control in the Wizengamot and persuaded them to scrap that edict. Harry had just destabilized things so utterly that Rufus wondered if he would be able to gain control any time in the next half a year.

But he would not get things done by standing around in the tunnel to Tullianum and wondering. He turned and began crisply ordering the former guards on his office door to inspect the damage to the prison, and make sure that Harry hadn’t broken the wards on those cells that hadn’t opened.

He would control what he could. He might be skating on open water instead of ice now, but he could not allow the wizarding
world to fall into chaos. He had seen the fringes of such chaos during the First War with Voldemort. It must never be allowed to happen again.

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*That* had been enlightening.

Rita Skeeter wondered if anyone would notice the difference in her buzzing as she zipped down the corridor and up towards the lift shafts that would take her to the surface. Did beetles sound different when they were smug? She’d never had anyone to tell her that, since there were so few people she’d ever shown her Animagus form to.

She had wondered if it was a good idea, staying close to the Minister instead of trying to follow Harry and his companions when they freed the werewolves. She could have crept onto someone’s neck and followed them in their Apparition. On the other hand, the chance was too great that Harry would have anti-Animagus wards up around his secret stronghold, and Rita really didn’t want to have to explain herself to an angry vates who could swallowing her magic.

But she had stayed close to the Minister, and so heard of Amelia Bones’s denigration. It would make the perfect touch to the article that she intended to write for the *Prophet* and bring out—perhaps tomorrow, perhaps more quickly than that if the *Evening Prophet* would accept it.

*How should I phrase it? Sweet concern? Shocked fear? A touch of malicious amusement?* The malicious amusement would fit most readers’ image of me, but then they might believe I was pulling it out of thin air. And shocked fear might turn more people against Harry than he, or I, wish.

*Sweet concern it is, then.*

Rita let her wings do her humming as she flew out of the Ministry and towards the small flat where she kept most of her writing materials. The wizarding world was boiling, and Rita intended to add to the boil, while striving to keep the cauldron from overflowing. No one thrived when civil war exploded in the streets, but reporters thrived when there were so many interesting stories to keep alive, and so many different sides to them.

She felt more alive than she had in years. She thanked whatever luck or chance or fate had said she was going to live in interesting times.

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Harry swallowed the last bite of bread and honey, and then began the communication spell. He’d waited until late enough in the evening that he hoped Connor would be alone. If he was in the midst of a dueling practice session or Animagus training with Peter, well, Harry was sorry, but he needed to talk to his brother now.

The warble of phoenix song lasted only a moment before Connor’s impatient voice said, “Harry?”

Harry smiled, then remembered that his brother couldn’t see him and put the smile into his words. “Connor. Hello.”

“We heard about the attack on the Ministry,” said Connor. “It’s in the *Prophet* already. Are you all right? Did you get everyone out? Are they all right? Did you know that Malfoy ran away somewhere?”

“We got everyone out we went there for,” said Harry. “And some we didn’t. There were a few wounded, none fatally.” His broken rib had been the worst of those casualties, though, which humbled him. There were times that he felt he didn’t deserve such good fortune. “And I don’t know what you mean about Draco, Connor. He’s right here with me.” He glanced across the room, to where Draco was sitting on a bench and earnestly talking with his mother. He hadn’t left her side for long since Narcissa had arrived. Harry suspected that he was just stunned and dazed that his mother had actually chosen him, and had to make sure of her with every press of her hand and every stare into her eyes.

He finally noticed Connor’s silence. “Connor?” he asked, wondering if he shouldn’t speak himself. Perhaps someone else had come into the room, and Connor had to hide that he was receiving a message from his brother.

“Harry, I—“ Connor cleared his throat awkwardly. “I was so sure that he wasn’t going to support you. He didn’t say *anything* about Mrs. Parkinson’s arrest or the hunting season for three days. Do you know why?”

“His father threatened to disown him if he supported me,” said Harry. “So he kept his mouth shut. Then he made his choice, and
then he came to me. That’s the whole of it, Connor.” His own, private emotions, those that had made him wonder how he would endure this without Draco at his side, were his to keep.

“Oh.” Connor’s voice was subdued. “I never thought of that. Parvati said he was probably disloyal to you, that he must be, if he couldn’t even tell me why he was keeping silent.”

Harry quelled a surge of irritation. It was unworthy of a vates, but one reason he was thankful this rebellion had happened was to remove him from an environment where Connor and Draco would do nothing but argue. “Well, now you know what’s true,” he said, and made his voice cheerful. “How is Peter? The others?”

“Still in shock, I think,” said Connor. “Everyone at dinner was discussing the article, but no one knew what to make of it. I heard a few people say that you were a villain, and a few people say you were a hero, but someone always shouted them down. Then the shouting person didn’t know what to say when someone asked them for their opinion. I think you just managed to shock a big portion of the wizarding population, Harry.” His voice had a dryness on the end of the statement that Harry thought he’d picked up from Peter.

“Well, they can take a few more blows, then,” Harry muttered. “I’m going to be sending letters out tomorrow.”

“To who?” Connor asked.

“The Minister, for starters.” Harry stretched his right arm out and shook it as it cramped. Even the kitchen in Woodhouse wasn’t that large, and sitting as close as he was to Camellia, he didn’t have much room. “Telling him what terms I’m offering to come back into the fold and act like a good little boy.”

Connor made a choking noise. Then he said, “But, Harry, you were the one who started this rebellion.”

Harry blinked. “And? Your point?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be the one listening to terms?” Connor asked. “Not offering them?”

Harry laughed aloud. Camellia gave him an anxious glance and a sniff. She seemed to be under the impression that he needed someone keeping track of his scent and his emotional state at all times. Harry didn’t know why. He let his hand rest on her shoulder while he spoke to Connor. “I’m sure the Minister will think the same thing, Connor. Quite frankly, though, everything about this rebellion is unusual. I don’t think the Ministry has ever faced something like this. On the other hand, it didn’t do anything this stupid, either. So I’ll tell the Minister what I want, which includes the scrapping of the hunting season. If he can do that, I don’t really have a reason not to surrender and come back and stop this. I don’t want to tear the wizarding world apart. I’m not committed to civil war for its own sake, or rebellion because I think myself personally wronged. I’m committed to revolution, and mental revolution above all. The Minister managing to do what I ask of him would be sufficient to show that he’s moving in that direction.”

“I’m worried about you,” said Connor, sounding subdued again.

“Why?” Harry could feel contentment rushing through his body. He didn’t know why anyone should be worried about him. Other than the tenderness over his broken rib, everything since he arrived back in Woodhouse had gone according to plan. He’d talked to people, defused fights, showed the werewolves where they should go, and been happy as he only was when he was busy. The images of everyone squabbling were fading away. Most of the people in Woodhouse seemed to realize that endless arguments would only drain their energy, and were, at worst, talking to each other in cold voices.

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“Because I don’t know what’s going to happen next,” said Connor. “Will you get out of this alive? Will you have the chance to tell the Minister your terms? Everything’s so uncertain, Harry. At least with the Midsummer battle, we had a plan. Here, I don’t think you do.”

“I’m doing what I can, such as protecting the werewolves,” said Harry. “From what you described at Hogwarts, no one else is any more sure than I am. The trick is not to get panicked over it. We’re in freefall right now, Connor, but I have wings.”

Connor was quiet again. Then he said, “All right. I love you, Harry. I hope things work out.”

“They will,” said Harry. “And if anyone gives you grief because you’re my brother, Connor, go to Peter or McGonagall. Both of them will protect you from curses or attacks.”

“I know that!”
Harry laughed again at the indignant tone in his brother’s voice. “Making sure you did. Good night, Connor. Sleep well.” He ended the communication spell, and then leaned forward around the edge of the bench, slowly scanning the room until he spotted the person he wanted. He was speaking with Rose and Trumpetflower, snarling at something they’d said.

“Evergreen?” Harry called. “Could I talk to you for a moment?”

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Connor rolled over on his bed, tucked his arm around his face, and lay there breathing.

He had never imagined, not once in a thousand years, that Malfoy had gone to Harry when he disappeared. He thought his father had pulled him out of school. It would fit the silence that Malfoy had maintained for the days before his vanishing. He was trying to distance himself from Harry, appear as neutral as possible, and then he would retreat to safety. Political power games were one thing, Connor had thought, but rebellion was another, and Lucius Malfoy must have commanded his son not to support Harry. And of course Draco had obeyed.

Except that he hadn’t. Except that disownment, if Lucius Malfoy had done everything he could—and Connor was sure he could—meant that Draco had lost his father’s support, his family’s support, his money, and the sanctuary of Malfoy Manor and any other properties.

His reasons for keeping silent even made sense.

And it sounded as though Harry didn’t have a single doubt of Draco’s loyalty, so this wasn’t some ploy to get close to him just to increase the power of his family in the Alliance of Sun and Shadow. Draco might be clever, but Connor thought Harry was cleverer. If there had been some hole in Draco’s story, some lie, then he would have seen it.

Connor pushed his face into his pillow, and let out a sigh that, even to him, sounded huffy. He hated having to apologize. It made his mouth taste nasty.

Now, though, he thought he would feel worse if he didn’t apologize. He had sworn the oaths of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, just like Draco had. One of them was to think as rationally as possible, not to let one’s thoughts be overtaken by fear. And what had he done? Reacted against Draco out of fear, influenced by Parvati’s fear of him as a Dark wizard. Parvati wasn’t afraid of Harry, except if he lost his temper, because she knew that he used Light magic too, but Draco was a different matter. Parvati had been raised on stories of how Malfoys, and Dark wizards in general, tortured their enemies. And Lucius Malfoy had been a Death Eater.

I suppose Draco might have it in him to torture someone, too, Connor thought. But if he did it, it would be for Harry’s sake. And I don’t think he would. Harry would throw him out of the Alliance if he found out about it.

So he had to eat crow.

Connor grimaced. He’d speak to Draco tomorrow, then. That would give him some time to swallow his pride. And tonight, he would go to Parvati and tell her that they’d been wrong.

He wasn’t looking forward to that conversation, but hiding from it wasn’t something a Gryffindor would do, so he swung himself off his bed and went to do his duty.

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Harry closed the door behind them. He and Evergreen stood in a narrow room, one of the closets of Woodhouse, and wards already sparkled on the walls, shutting off anyone from hearing what they’d talk about. Harry turned to face the young werewolf squarely, and met his eyes.

Evergreen glanced away at once. Harry knew that was a good sign. A direct stare would be a challenge, and that would mean that Evergreen hadn’t accepted him as alpha.

“I freed you because Rose asked,” he said. “And because I assumed that you bit Elder Gillyflower because Loki asked you to, not because you want to run around biting people. If you do, then I’ll have no problem confining you and assigning guards to watch you. I wouldn’t leave a werewolf there for the Unspeakables to experiment on. That doesn’t mean I’m willing to let a monster run free.”
“Have no fear,” said Evergreen. His voice was humble for the first time. Harry was reminded of the way that Camellia would put on a false face of snarling, snapping bravado in front of other people, and then show her worry when they were alone. “I did that because it was the best way, the only way, to get people to pay attention to us, and because Loki asked me to. You have a different way, and you’re my alpha now, human or not. I’ll follow you.” He turned back to Harry. “Can I—approach and sniff you? The others saw Loki transfer his power. I only heard about it. It would help if I could smell it for myself.”

Harry nodded, and Evergreen strode forward and bent his head to sniff carefully about Harry’s neck. Harry watched him without fear. Evergreen was his own age, and besides, he’d been born Muggle. If he did try to bite, Harry could pin him to the wall with magic. There was no way he could fight back.

Evergreen stepped away from Harry at last, and dropped to one knee. Harry felt his face heat up. “There’s no need to do that,” he began, reaching his hand out.

“There is, for me,” said Evergreen. “My devotion to Loki was always extreme, because he helped me. He helped all of us. He was the only alpha who moved on helping werewolves, rather than just hiding a pack and hoping the hunters or the curious would pass them by and they could live their lives in peace. But now you’ve come and freed us from prison, and you’ve insisted that your human allies treat us well.” He clasped Harry’s hand and pressed his cheek to it, his eyes staring up at him with no trace of mockery. “I owe you devotion as deep as that I gave to Loki.”

Harry’s happiness had vanished, and he felt a tingling ache begin in his scar. “Please,” he said quietly. “I—I am glad that you won’t do something like bite Elder Gillyflower again, and that the transfer of alphas has gone well for you, but please, please don’t kneel to me.”

“Why not?”

Harry had no notion how to explain the mixture of panic and disgust churning in his belly without making it sound as though he hated Evergreen, so he simply shrugged. “It makes me feel uncomfortable,” he said, and Evergreen accepted that.

“Then I will not.” He stood back up and stared into Harry’s eyes for a moment more. “You should know, vates, that, whether I kneel to you or not, I do plan to fight to the death for you.”

He left the room. Harry put his hand over his eyes and breathed shallowly for a few moments.

He thought about casting *Extabesco plene* on himself while he went to write his letter to Scrimgeour, but he knew that would make his allies panic when they couldn’t find him. He couldn’t just order them out of bowing and kneeling and making declarations of devotion and loyalty, either, since that would be contrary to their free will, and he didn’t even have a solid reason for it.

But he did wish, violently, for a moment, that all of what they wanted to do could be accomplished with simple actions and words, and without gestures.

Harry shook his head, smoothed his discomfort back into determination, and went to work on his letter to the Minister. He planned to show it to several people before he sent it. He would want Narcissa’s perspective, to see how well it used diplomatic language, and he would want Hawthorn’s, to make sure he was not leaving out an injustice. He might have been tempted to consult with Hawthorn alone, but he feared she was too vengeance-obsessed to see straight.

Once he had the letter written, he would send copies to the Maenad Press and the *Daily Prophet* and Mr. Lovegood at the *Quibbler*. He had no idea if Scrimgeour would actually announce the contents of the letter, and he wanted to make sure the rest of the wizarding world knew what it would take to end his rebellion.

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“It’s insolent,” said Percy firmly. “After everything you did to support him, and he sends you a letter like this?”

Rufus shook his head. He didn’t have the words to describe the letter Harry had sent him, and, apparently, all three major newspapers. He read it again, in the hope that doing so might give him the words to answer.

*Dear Minister Scrimgeour:*

*I do not claim to speak for all werewolves, or all magical creatures. The only ones I can speak for specifically are those who have*
joined me in this rebellion and given me leave to reveal their presence. For those, and for the wizards and witches who have tired of seeing injustice and chosen to join the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, I raise my voice now.

We do not demand changes so sweeping and immediate that they would provoke only opposition. The Ministry has changed its position towards magical creatures several times over the last century, and some of those changes have even been positive. We are willing to work with you, and with the other witches and wizards who have more traditional stances on the matter, to solve the problems.

But the hunting season must end. We cannot tell what rights the Ministry will take away next. If they hate magical creatures who are human for ninety percent of the year, what is to stop them from making similar, and worse, mistakes with centaurs, or goblins, or house elves? Why is the Ministry’s first course to panic and imprison them, and the second to declare legalized murder, instead of attempting to supply them with Wolfsbane and search for a cure? Prejudice and hatred can be the only conclusions.

Likewise, there must be serious attempts at negotiation with magical creatures who are free of the webs. The northern goblins are free. They have little interest in the wizarding world, but if wizards do want to trade with them for work in metal or stone, they will demand equal terms to those given human craftsmen. There is no reason this should not be granted. A good faith effort by the Ministry would involve establishing a new committee to begin the negotiations, rather than assigning the goblins to deal with the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, the very name of which is insulting.

The centaurs who dwelt in the Forbidden Forest are free. They changed their nature so as not to rape when their web ended. However, they would still find themselves unwelcome in many cases. A good faith effort by the Ministry would involve sending representatives to the Forbidden Forest to speak with the centaurs, listen to their story, and decide how they should be integrated into the British wizarding world, or how they should live separately if they decide to do so.

We do not intend to simply campaign for the freedom of those Dark creatures who need to be negotiated with more carefully—for example, giants, sirens, and dragons. Voldemort loosing sirens and giants on Britain without a care only shows that he is no vates, and that our goals are far from his of causing chaos, misery, and despair. As for dragons, the case of each species, and even some individuals of each species, must be handled carefully, and the statutes that keep Muggles ignorant of their existence worked around.

For any bound reptilian species, including wyverns, Harry vates offers to serve as a translator from Parseltongue. For others, centaurs and goblins, who speak both the human tongues and have education in other ways of communicating, stand ready.

Barriers of language cannot be allowed to lie in the way, either as obstruction or excuse.

If and when the Ministry can promise equal protection for werewolves under the law, and a fair trial for any accused of crimes beyond bearing the lycanthropy web, the wrongly-imprisoned from Tullianum will be pleased to return to the wizarding world.

The Ministry’s rights over our lives ended when they declared murder legal. We require not only a reversal of that declaration, but a commitment to keeping it forbidden. We offer rational arguments. We do not desire to be met with irrationality.

Signed,
Harry vates and the Alliance of Sun and Shadow.

Rufus shook his head, a grim smile on his lips. This time, though, he didn’t feel the weariness he had felt yesterday; he felt impatience instead, and skepticism mixed with sarcasm.

Does Harry really think this is going to force anyone to move? They’ll react badly, and they’ll insist that he come in for trial, where before they were afraid of his magic. Fear turned to stubbornness and mixed with anger is a volatile liquid that must be handled carefully, and Harry isn’t here to stir the pot.

On that note, Rufus had visitors to deal with, people he wouldn’t have had to give the time of day to yesterday. But twenty-four hours could change a great deal, and not always for the better. Rufus wished Harry had remembered that lesson, or that someone had taught it to him.

“Mr. Weasley.” Percy looked up, practically hovering on his toes. He hadn’t stopped reading his copy of the Prophet and muttering darkly under his breath; Rufus was glad to give him something different to do. “Please show Mrs. Whitestag and Mr. Willoughby into the office.”

Percy nodded and strode across the room, flinging his door open. Rufus smoothed his face into the expression of polite interest that he wore for most visitors like this—the occasional pureblood with a mad idea who managed to win access to him because of
money or influence.

This time, though, only one of them was a pureblood. The other was a Muggle backed by purebloods who found him a useful tool. And thanks to Harry’s little stunt yesterday, Rufus would have to take their words far more seriously than he would have otherwise.

Aurora Whitestag entered first. Rufus regarded her warily. She concerned him more, and not just because she knew more about the wizarding world than Willoughby, and there was no sign that she was a tool like he was. She believed in what she was saying, enough to stand by it, and there was no sign that she was a fanatic. At worst, she would become another level-headed revolutionary like Harry. Rufus didn’t want any more of them. One was enough for his people to deal with. The only thing he could be thankful for was that Whitestag was not a Lady.

Philip Willoughby followed her. He looked less steady than the first time Rufus had met him, but months of being a grieving father and not accomplishing what he set out to do would take their toll on anyone. His hazel eyes had deep marks of exhaustion under them, and he sat in his chair like a sack of potatoes. It didn’t surprise Rufus when Whitestag spoke for both of them.

“Minister, you know that we’ve joined forces to propose a monitoring board for young Harry.” She waited until he nodded, then leaned forward. “We have enough support to begin it now, we think. Several members of the Wizengamot have agreed to be part of the board, including Griselda Marchbanks.”

Rufus blinked several times. That was a surprise. Marchbanks was a staunch ally of Harry’s, as far as he knew. Perhaps she did think Harry needed restraint and supervision, or perhaps she was agreeing so that Harry could have one friend on the monitoring board.

“It’s a little hard to see how it would be set up now, ma’am,” he told her. “Given that Harry is in hiding and in rebellion against the Ministry.”

Whitestag smiled. She had dark eyes and dark hair, and pale skin, and an air of certainty. She was the kind of woman Rufus might have been drawn to himself, twenty or so years ago. “Oh, we’re talking about when he comes back,” she said. “And he will come back, Minister. He knows he’s too important to our world to stay in hiding forever. He’s the Boy-Who-Lived. We need him. And say what you will about Harry, I think he has a very strong sense of duty.”

Rufus reevaluated her again. Whitestag had clearly picked up more about Harry than had come through in her rare Prophet interviews. That only made her more dangerous, of course. Rufus did not want Harry caged. Part of that was personal fondness, but more of it was certainty that that would involve more mucking around in his Ministry when Harry saw the cages and chains and broke free of them.

“He does,” Rufus said slowly. “But what makes you think he would agree to this monitoring board? He also has a very strong sense of independence, and it’s only got stronger. I don’t think a boy who would plan a battle at Hogwarts all by himself with the help of a few allies will take kindly to someone looking over his shoulder.”

“He will if we make it part of the bargain for his coming back into the wizarding world in good standing,” said Whitestag. Willoughby muttered something about the battle and how his daughter might have lived if someone had been there to rein Harry in. Whitestag ignored him. “That sense of duty, Minister. His followers won’t stand for something as dramatic as a trial, or Harry being arrested and sent to Tullianum, and I don’t think he will, either. But a monitoring board? A small sacrifice that will also insure he has adult counselors, ones who have good reason to fear his running wild?” She tilted her head and smiled. “I think he will.”

“He does have a guardian,” Rufus told her. “Professor Severus Snape. And I believe that Headmistress McGonagall take something of an affectionate interest in the boy as well.”

“We saw that when we came to talk to her,” said Willoughby darkly.

Whitestag put a calming hand on his arm and glanced at Rufus again. “But we’ve been listening to reports from Hogwarts, sir, in the form of children whose brothers and sisters died in the attack,” she said. “They say that Professor Snape is barely able to teach his own classes now, and may soon retire or go into seclusion altogether. Emotional problems. And Headmistress McGonagall, admirable as she is, has a whole school to look after. If she had been willing to abandon her responsibilities, she would have gone into exile after the boy. We certainly cannot send Harry back to his parents, not when he renounced them, and not with the way they have treated him. Nor do those friends and allies he has surrounded himself with seem adequate to give him guidance. I believe custody of Harry should be taken away from Severus Snape and shared between the monitoring board, Headmistress McGonagall, and those of his friends and allies who are most trustworthy. We would have to interview them, of course.”
Rufus hid his alarm. He had heard nothing of Snape’s degradation. “It’s an interesting idea, Mrs. Whitestag,” he said, “but I’m afraid I’d have to think more about it before giving you a definite answer.”

Her smile brightened her face. “Of course, sir.” She stood, her head half-bowed. “If anyone has been patient in the face of enormous provocation from Harry, you have been. We lost our children, but I have come to see our losses more and more in the pattern of larger losses for the wizarding world if Harry does not receive the training he needs. He killed our children because he is still half a child himself, being asked to bear burdens we should not have piled onto a teenager’s shoulders. I am doing this for his sake as much as for that of my dead daughter and son.”

Rufus looked into her eyes. He believed her.

And it terrified him.

“I—I will speak with others, Mrs. Whitestag,” he said. “In particular, I would like to confirm some of the information you gave me. And then I will talk to you again about what we should do.”

She bowed to him, a full formal gesture of the kind that even most purebloods didn’t bother with anymore, and then took Willoughby’s arm and guided him gently out the door. Rufus wondered if she had brought him to make her case look stronger, or to offer him moral support. It could have been both.

Rufus did not want to see that monitoring board established, even now. It could interfere with Harry’s work as vates, and he valued that as an ideal, though he didn’t think Harry would go about it in a practical way.

He wondered, though, if Whitestag was right and it would be the only acceptable way to settle the rebellion in the eyes of the wizarding world.

He shook his head, and turned to making sure he got some information on Professor Snape. He doubted the Unspeakables would stop him, any more than they had stopped Whitestag and Willoughby from visiting. They would probably be pleased with the thought of restricting Harry, and they knew he was in their debt for their removal of Harry’s tunnel.

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Harry concentrated. His magic surged through him in pulsing waves, still touched by tenderness from his broken rib. He pictured them concentrating on the end of his left arm, and then let out a deep breath and the words of the countercurse at the same time.

“Supervenio ad integritas!” It had the force of a shout, though he kept his voice low.

His left wrist shivered, and when Harry opened his eyes, it was to see another curse dissolving from it, melting off in gray strips the color of rain. A slight numbness he’d never noticed existed was suddenly gone. Harry blinked, and felt phantom pain in his missing fingers. He carefully pulled his magic back from his left hand—the book he’d retrieved the countercurse from said it should be left alone, to recover from the effects of the Dark power—and sat down hard on his bed.

He closed his eyes and allowed himself to bathe in the exaltation for a moment. The third curse broken. Now I need to study before breaking the fourth one. If he could believe the mirrors at the Sanctuary, the next curse was the last preventing him from having a hand, but also the hardest to break. It would take time for him to recognize the pattern in Argutus’s scales from any book; the ones he’d looked through so far all had nothing.

He used those moments of recovery time to search his mind for traces of his Animagus form. The only thing he saw, silhouette or not, Peter’s lessons or not, was a lynx. Perhaps that meant his mind was still too full of Voldemort’s visions, but Harry thought it was more likely to mean that his Animagus form was a lynx, especially because the one he envisioned had four paws instead of three.

He stood in the next moment, and strode outside. He should seek out and soothe the karkadann, who still only allowed him—and a few of the more violent werewolves—to get close to her. She patrolled the valley faithfully, and grazed, and attacked no one, but she had been rushing around Woodhouse yesterday, horn lowered and stabbing at the air. She needed someone to calm her.

He stepped out into sunlight. They had had three days of rain since they rescued the werewolves, but today had decided to be fair, with light sparking from wet needles in the forest and puddles on the ground and flashing spells where Adalrico drilled those werewolves who had wands in dueling. Harry made his way carefully between puddles towards the forest, where the karkadann stood with one foot scraping the ground, staring moodily up at the rock walls that surrounded Woodhouse.
She turned long before he reached her, and uttered a deafening bugle. Harry felt his cheeks flush as people turned to look at him, but at least most of them turned back to their tasks right away. Three days had been enough to dull all but the most fervent gratitude, and get people used to the myriad tasks of being rebels in Wales. Even the karkadann was no longer as much a point of interest as she had been.

She trotted up to him now, though, head lowered and horn sweeping the air in front of her, madly glad to see him. Her first breath nearly knocked him over, and Harry had to duck to avoid the enormous nose. He felt battle-readiness surge up in him, the result of her voice and breath.

He looked at the karkadann thoughtfully. She backed, her left hind foot stamping. Since she had multiple toes instead of a single hoof, Harry thought, it shouldn’t have made that much noise, but it did. The sound reminded him of war-drums.

Harry’s gaze went to the sides of the valley. He hadn’t seen any Muggles in the area, and a quick touch to the sense of Woodhouse that hovered in the back of his mind confirmed there probably weren’t any. Woodhouse’s place magic defended it and kept it hidden from those who weren’t magical themselves. It would have been settled and used long ago, otherwise.

Harry made up his mind. The karkadann badly needed to run. Without people, Woodhouse was just barely big enough for her. With them, she couldn’t gallop without upsetting someone’s pet project.

He gestured to the rocky walls, and the great unicorn understood him without a word spoken. She slid to one knee, though, and Harry hesitated for a long moment before he reached out, gripped that shaggy off-white fur, and hauled himself onto her back.

This close, the smell was utterly overwhelming. Harry could smell blood and death and dust and sand. They didn’t disgust him. He found himself shouting instead, meaningless noise, just to make himself heard, and leaning down along the line of the karkadann’s spine.

She took one step forward, then two, then kicked out and began to really run. Harry saw the valley’s cliffs rushing closer and closer, and then she jumped. The hills became blurs of gray and brown and green. She landed with a jolt that reminded Harry of the blow he’d taken from Falco in their battle—and jostled his still-healing rib—and then turned to the east, surging towards the place where the hills flattened around the forest entrance to Woodhouse.

Harry couldn’t remember the last time he’d been this uncaring of what might happen, except on his Firebolt. The karkadann’s feet dug deep into the grass and soil, flinging up divots of them that sometimes came high enough to splatter against his robes. In the desert, Harry thought, it would be puffs of hot sand. Her muscles rolled and surged, and Harry reminded himself that karkadanns dueled with rhinos and elephants. The stink surrounded him and soaked into his skin, but it was wild, and, as such, no more repugnant than the musk that hung around werewolves. He bounced and shifted in place, but that was what the firm grip with his hand was for.

And he could feel the joy gathering in her, especially when she came down off the hills and saw the flat expanse of autumn grass in front of them.

She hesitated, prancing.

“Go,” Harry whispered.

As if she actually obeyed his words instead of her own free will, she leaped forward, and Harry heard dirt wash around them and suspected her hind feet had carved a sinkhole this time. He crouched down further, because the wind of their passage was strong enough to become annoying, and stared ahead. The world split into two around the gleaming neck, the proud lifted head, the black corkscrew horn. Harry heard himself laughing, and didn’t remember when he’d started doing it.

The karkadann made an odd sound as she galloped, half like a horse’s snort and half like a bellow so wild that it made Harry’s ears sting and smart. She wheeled around at the end of one charge, nearly sitting down on her hindquarters, and then plunged madly at right angles to her stop. Harry thought he’d slip off for a moment, but instincts honed in Quidditch saved him. He gripped with arms and legs and hand, and the next thing he knew, they were shooting north, the karkadann still safely underneath him.

She lowered her head and hunched her shoulders, and suddenly they were bounding, all her feet leaving the ground at once and coming down together again in one place. Harry’s teeth rattled in his head, and he had to fight not to bite his tongue. The karkadann didn’t look back at him, or neigh in concern, but kept on doing it. After all, Harry thought, she probably realized he could get off if he didn’t like it.
He stayed on.

The karkadann slewed around in a half-turn, and then dug her front legs in and bucked, shooting her hind legs behind her, for no reason other than the fun and the wild pleasure of it. Harry slid to her neck and clung there, then slid backward as she reared on her hind legs and screamed her desire for death and conquering and wind and running to the sky.

Harry, with his heart in this throat and his glasses half-sliding off his face, recalled a snatch of something an ancient Muggle author had once written about karkadanns. “He is never caught alive; killed he may be, but taken he cannot be.” The web put on them had proven that author wrong, perhaps, Harry had thought, the first time he read about them.

Now he knew it hadn’t. The web might prevent karkadanns from coming in sight of Muggles or going where they wanted to, but the beast underneath Harry at that moment was tameless. She would only come to someone’s hand because she wanted to. She screamed her freedom to the whole world and didn’t care who knew it.

When she dropped from her rear, with a satisfied snort that shook the earth, she turned her head to the side and waited. Harry leaned out, reaching sideways far enough to touch her ear.

She smelled of ferocity and freedom. Harry met the black eyes and wondered how many times it had been the last sight some other person or creature ever saw.

“You’re magnificent,” he whispered. “You are.”

The karkadann gave another snort, agreeing with him.

Harry carried on stroking her ear for a time, until she turned and trotted back towards Woodhouse. She jumped casually from the side of the hill into the valley, shaking several people from their feet and making some of the water in the puddles leap a dozen feet in the air. Harry shrugged when his people glared at him, but couldn’t find it in his heart to be really sorry. He was alive again, his blood galloping around in his veins as if it had four feet and a horn as well.

He slipped off the karkadann’s back. She went to graze, snapping her lion-like tail in a whipping half-caress around his shoulders on the way. Harry shook his head, grinning, and wondered what in the world he had done to deserve company like this.

An owl dipped down towards him, and he was temporarily distracted. He opened it, and blinked when he read the contents.

October 3rd, 1996

Dear Harry:

This letter is to inform you that Auror Edmund Wilmot is still working in the Ministry. He originally prepared to flee from his post when he believed that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement would use a spell to locate all werewolves, but they have not so far released the spell, perhaps for lack of people to capture the revealed lycanthropes. Therefore, he will remain as an Auror and pass information along. He knows that you could use a spy there. The main plot he has overheard talk of so far is of a monitoring board, controlled by the parents of the Dozen Who Died, to watch over you. Also, the Minister had to resort to calling on the Unspeakables to get rid of your corridor.

He believes he has a foolproof method to slip his owls out of the Ministry. He will give more information as it becomes available.

Peregrine.

Harry shook his head again, dazed. Peregrine was one of the alphas of the London packs, one who had agreed to bring her people to shelter under Harry and was making arrangements to do so, and, presumably, the alpha Wilmot would have gone to.

For Wilmot to remain in place, in the face of intense danger, to do this for the sake of the rebellion…

Harry felt another surge of awe and wonder and gratitude. Why are such people helping me? What have I done to deserve this?

With the feeling that life was, at the moment, wonderful, he went to take a shower to remove the sweat, and then write another letter to the Minister. Four days without a response was too long.

_*_*_*_*_*
Chapter Twenty-Eight: Master of the Rising Tension

Draco shut the door quietly behind him.

Not quietly enough, it seemed. A moment ago, Draco would have said Harry was completely absorbed in the letter on his knee, but he blinked and looked up. “Draco?” he asked, shoving his glasses up with his hand and causing the letter to almost drift to the floor. His Levitation Charm snatched it up and put it back, but Harry grumbled about losing his place before he said, “Is something wrong?”

Draco frowned, then reminded himself what he’d come here for. Harry had only finished riding the karkadann half an hour ago. Draco had given him some time to shower, but, he hoped, not shed the joyful mood entirely. Harry had been open to kissing him in joyful moods before. And Draco had only had to glimpse his face, flushed and laughing from the ride, before a sharp spike of want had made him remember what he’d promised Harry in the Ministry corridor.

“Of course not,” said Draco. “Why should something be wrong when I only wanted to spend time with my boyfriend?”

Harry obviously didn’t assign any innuendo to that statement, because he smiled. “Nothing. But you’ve been talking to your mother almost since she arrived, so I thought she might have dismissed you because her ear’s getting tired.”

It was true that Narcissa had been in his thoughts and at his side since she arrived, Draco thought, but that had only been his wonder at the thought that she had chosen him, after all. He had thought from the time he was a child that his mother and father were, while not identical, joined; seeing one break away from the other had been an impossible concept to grasp. If he chose against one, he would be choosing against the other. And now here his mother was. Small wonder he had wanted to talk to her, to hear all the details of her duel with Lucius, to know exactly what was happening and realize again how much she loved him.

He realized Harry had turned back to his letter while he was distracted, and frowned again. He stepped closer and took the letter out of Harry’s hand. Harry squawked like Granger as that resulted in a long trail of ink down the side of the parchment, and glared at him.

“Draco, that letter is to the Minister—“

Draco bent down and kissed him, pushing Harry onto his back before he knew what was happening. He didn’t exactly want to bed Harry in irritation, but he could use the emotion to begin this. And the moment he had skin under his hands, and the memory of Harry’s flushed face in his head, his thoughts narrowed and oriented towards one point. He wanted this, damn it.

They’d both come alive out of the Ministry jailbreak, they’d done it with no casualties other than a few wounds, and Draco had Stunned the Minister and saved Harry from having to fight him. That deserved some bedding, Draco thought.

Harry hissed, though, and the sound wasn’t a noise of irritation, but of pain. Draco sat back at once. “It’s been a few days since then.” Draco was unable to keep the pettiness out of his voice. Even though it had been his fault as much as Harry’s that they’d shared the same bed for the last few nights, but only for sleeping, and spent their days doing entirely different things, he wanted this now. He shifted uncomfortably, and saw Harry’s gaze dart to his groin.

“Of course I did. But it was a broken rib. The Bone-Set could only heal the break, not ease all the pain. It’s going to be fragile and tender for a few days.”

“‘It’s been a few days since then.’” Draco’s gaze searched Harry’s eyes. Even though it had been his fault as much as Harry’s that they’d shared the same bed for the last few nights, but only for sleeping, and spent their days doing entirely different things, he wanted this now. He shifted uncomfortably, and saw Harry’s gaze dart to his groin.

“‘You get aroused fast,’” Harry said.

“‘We’re hanging a mirror next time,’” said Draco. “‘So that you can see yourself and understand why I get aroused so quickly.’”

Harry’s flush deepened to the color of red clay. He stood and reached out, clasping Draco’s hand. “Listen, Draco,” he said softly. “‘I’m hurt, but it won’t last forever. In a few more days, at most, it should be entirely healed. It already feels better than it did yesterday. Can you wait that long?’”

Draco nodded reluctantly. He supposed that he could always ask Harry to wank him in the meantime, but he wanted more than
that—he wanted to see Harry entirely naked, for one thing, which hadn’t happened since Harry had faced Voldemort in the Chamber of Secrets and won—and anything less would feel like settling. Draco didn’t want to settle. He intended to push.

“Good.” Harry squeezed his hand. “I am sorry about this, you know.”

Draco looked steadily into Harry’s eyes. They shone earnestly back at him. And Draco could see that, yes, he was sorry—

To not be able to give Draco what he wanted.

“Do you want this, Harry?” Draco demanded abruptly. “If your rib was healed, would you go along because you want to bed me, or because this is a gift you can offer me?”

Harry’s flush deepened again. “Both,” he said. “I do like—watching you, Draco.” Draco considered demanding that he say the words, but that would only tie up Harry’s tongue, and he needed it to say the words Draco wanted to hear. “You’re beautiful when you feel that much pleasure in a way that you aren’t at other times. Not that you’re never beautiful at other times,” he hastened to add.

“I know,” said Draco, holding up a hand. “I know what you mean, Harry. But there’s a more pertinent question, I think. How much does your own pleasure factor into this? Not how much you like watching me come, but how much you like getting off.” He was remembering the time Harry had brought him to climax and then arranged Draco on his chest afterwards; it had been warm and pleasant and had already taken its place as one of Draco’s favorite memories, but now what he was especially remembering was the way Harry had said, “I’ll be fine,” when he attempted to return the favor.

Harry was looking away to one side, and wouldn’t meet his eyes.

“It’s less important,” he said.

Draco stifled a growl, then wondered why he was bloody well doing that and released it. He had promised Harry that he was going to push. “Why?”

“It’s not a problem of feeling good,” said Harry, not looking at him. “It’s not. I liked it fine when we were at Silver-Mirror. It’s just—I thought about it afterwards, and I didn’t like the feeling of collapsing like that. I don’t like the feeling of letting all my barriers down at once.”

Draco saw the problem almost at once. The point in the last few months when Harry had seemed most relaxed was at the Sanctuary, in the pool where Draco had massaged his shoulders. On the other hand, both times he’d bedded Draco had been intense, hurried experiences, full of emotion, with Harry not really relaxed, no matter how content he’d been afterwards.

“I wish you had told me about this before,” said Draco, trying and failing to keep the frustration out of his voice. “I could have helped, Harry.”

Harry gave him a sad smile. “In the midst of all this?” His hand-wave took in not only Woodhouse but also the rebellion, Draco knew. “We’ve both been busy, and you’ve been coping with extremes of emotion in the last few days. I didn’t think your mother would join us, either. Besides, I don’t think of it as a problem—“

“I bloody well do.”

Harry gave him a sideways look. “In the midst of all this?” His hand-wave took in not only Woodhouse but also the rebellion, Draco knew. “We’ve both been busy, and you’ve been coping with extremes of emotion in the last few days. I didn’t think your mother would join us, either. Besides, I don’t think of it as a problem—“

“I bloody well do.”

Harry gave him a sideways look. “The answer to this will probably seem obvious the moment I ask it, but I don’t care. Why, Draco?”

Draco shook his head. He didn’t have the words to explain just why he wanted to see Harry entirely naked, taking as much pleasure from their bedding as Draco did. He just knew that he did.

So he said that. “Because I want that to happen, Harry.” He shifted, deliberately drawing Harry’s eyes to his groin again. “I don’t consider it bedding if you just wank or suck me off for the rest of our lives. I want to fuck you, too. You know.”

“It wouldn’t be the rest of our lives,” said Harry. “We’re just a little busy right now—“

“We always will be,” said Draco. “I know that you’re vates, Harry; you were that before I fell in love with you. I’ve put up with the notion that I have to share you with your goals and your allies and all kinds of magical creatures. But you have to share them with me, too. That means that I won’t suffer being put off forever. And if I did let you do that, we’d fall into some comfortable
‘compromise’ I’d wake up from and hate years later. No. We’re going to live at the same time as we’re rebelling.” He raked Harry’s body with a deliberately lingering look that Harry glanced aside from. “Your rib has to heal completely, of course. But until then, I want you to think about the fact that your own pleasure matters to me as much as mine does.”

“Draco—" Harry’s words were a plea, now.

“No arguments on that score, Harry,” Draco said pleasantly, though his heart was pounding hard and he couldn’t tell what emotion was uppermost in him. Anger? Determination? Bloody-minded stubbornness? “I’m not taking a sacrifice to bed. That’s not appealing to me in the slightest.”

He turned and stepped out of the room, shutting the door behind him again and trying to convince himself that that had been worthwhile, after all. He’d nipped something in the bud that he might have ignored in a haze of desire and then regretted afterwards—

Who am I kidding?

Draco sighed and went to find one of Woodhouse’s small rooms to cast wards and Silencing Charms around. He had come to important realizations, yes, but none of that impacted the arousal that Harry had inspired in him and which wasn’t going to be truly satisfied for at least the next few days.

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Harry managed to finish the letter to the Minister, though his thoughts kept bouncing back to what Draco had said to him. At last he laid the parchment aside and ran his hand through his hair. He couldn’t send it right now, anyway. He wanted Narcissa, Hawthorn, and Adalric to look over it first.

How can I make Draco see that this isn’t a sacrifice for me? I just—I just have problems relaxing to that extent, and there’s no reason that should prevent him from experiencing pleasure.

Harry had assumed it was one more thing, like the taste of porridge or chocolate, that mattered to him and him alone, and since he didn’t care that much about it, then no one else should care that much about it, either. But Draco did seem to care about it, and given his newfound pushiness, he would shove and worry at it, Harry knew, until they reached a point where Harry gave Draco what he wanted.

And what I do want, too, what it would be pleasant to have, but not as desperately as he seems to want it.

Harry shook his head. This was getting him nowhere, and the thoughts were distracting him from important things. He transformed the impulse to lie there and let the worries inside his head have free rein to the impulse to take care of those important things, and snatched the letter.

The request it contained was simple. It wanted to know why the Minister had not yet responded to the Alliance of Sun and Shadow and their demands for werewolf legal rights. Surely, outlawing murder was not that hard a decision? Even a small gesture of good faith would content them, for now. But so far, there had only come this cold silence, and that made the Alliance think the Ministry was dithering.

Harry suspected that Scrimgeour was probably grateful for the silence, and for the fact that so many factions in the Ministry had no idea how to respond. And he wouldn’t thank Harry for pushing.

Harry didn’t care. The silence wouldn’t endure. If he gave his enemies time to rebuild their anthill, then they would inevitably come to conclusions that sounded good but which decided against his people. So he would do what rebels were supposed to do, and kick over the anthill again.

Time to set this to boiling, he thought, and sought out Narcissa.

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Narcissa Malfoy was a very long way from stupid. The only arena of her life in which she would admit to, perhaps, carrying things too far was her grudge against her sister Andromeda, which had lasted through years of silence and years of sniping letters. Their communication had grown coldly courteous again in the last few months, as Narcissa coaxed Andromeda to come out openly for Harry; she nearly had in the summer before Harry’s fourth year, but then retreated when she and Narcissa fell out and she discovered how close Harry was to Narcissa. And now the owls in the last few days had been warmer than ever, because
Andromeda did care that her beloved daughter had decided to join Harry’s rebellion. Very much.

That intelligence meant that she could take one look at Harry when he held out his latest letter to the Minister, and say, “You had an argument with my son, didn’t you?”

Harry flushed. “Not so much an argument as a—clash of words,” he said, and shook the letter. “Please, Mrs. Malfoy, it’s important.”

“What about?” Narcissa asked as she took the parchment. Harry’s deepening blush gave her the clue. She paused, wondering what advice to give. Bellatrix would have laughed and made filthy jokes, Andromeda would have been delicately blunt, but she was neither of their sisters. Besides, neither of them had produced a son, or married a Malfoy.

“I’ll tell you this now, Harry,” she said. “Draco loves you. He may be devious, but he would not force you to do something that made you uncomfortable simply because it pleased him. He wants to please you, as well. And there is nothing wrong—nothing—with indulging your own taste for pleasure.”

“Mrs. Malfoy, please.” Harry had backed away a few steps by now, and had his head down. “Please, will you read the letter?”

“I told you to call me Narcissa,” she chided him gently as she held the parchment open on her lap. She sat on a bench in one of the narrow corridors of Woodhouse, the better to observe what was happening everywhere and note the stirrings of arguments and dissension. So far, no one had expressed serious objections against being here—the freed werewolves, even the ones not originally Harry’s allies, knew the Ministry would not offer them kisses and roses if they betrayed Harry—but Narcissa knew they would come, and she would not let Harry be taken off guard. “And what I say is true. The world will not cease to spin because you think of yourself for once in a while.”

“But I am,” said Harry, lifting his head with a quick, angry jerk. He breathed deeply in the next moment, and all the lines on his forehead smoothed out. Too quickly, Narcissa thought. Unnaturally. “I’m making sure I eat and sleep on time, ma’am. I do use a sleeping charm if I’m prone to lie awake and let my thoughts race around my head. I don’t exhaust myself trying to fulfill impossible requests. I’m learning to refuse people things I don’t think they should have. I’m becoming what you advised me to be in one of the Starborn letters, someone capable of deciding where my magic should go and what it should do, rather than assuming that I have to be a servant for everyone who asks.”

“This is more than that,” said Narcissa. “This is taking time and happiness for yourself, Harry.” She wondered if she could have had this conversation with any other sixteen-year-old boy in the world. Usually they needed to slow down and be told to remember that other people existed, and their actions affected those people. “No one will curse you if you do that.”

Harry shrugged. “I know that, ma’am.”

“Narcissa.”

“Narcissa,” he agreed, but it was too obviously a concession to her. Narcissa eyed him for a moment, and wondered if she should press the issue.

Then she decided not to. Sometimes, as with Andromeda, one needed to let matters rest. Besides, her son would be better-suited to know when Harry was depriving himself, and much more determined than anyone else to deal with it.

She turned to the parchment, and shook her head, ignoring his soft sigh of relief. “If you want to phrase this as a demand, the first line is too conciliatory, I think.”

“I want it to be more of a request,” said Harry. “The letters can increase in ferocity as they grow on.”

“We may not get that far,” said Narcissa. This, at least, she felt competent to address. “We know that you’re taking this rebellion seriously, but so far, the most impressive thing we’ve done is the Ministry jailbreak, and that will already be fading in its impact on the minds of the public. We need other methods of showing them we’re serious. A demand would do it.”

Harry opened his mouth to argue, and then he spun and stared towards the window. Narcissa followed his gaze, expecting to see an owl, but nothing hovered there. Harry’s magic rose anyway.

“What is it?” Narcissa asked.

“INTRUDERS ON THE BORDERS OF WOODHOUSE,” said Harry tightly. “It’s telling me about many small rushing things. It doesn’t like
them. They may be Aurors or Unspeakables.”

A moment later, a ringing neigh and howls both came through the window, signals from their sentries. Narcissa stood, smoothing down her robes, and then shook her wand into her hand.

“They’re entering,” said Harry, and his magic rose and swamped the building. The next moment, he vanished, and Narcissa suspected he had Apparated directly to the attackers’ side.

She turned and went to warn those who hadn’t heard, and then to find Draco. Her mind drowned fear. They had Harry with them, and they had known it would come to this sooner or later, as long as they were rebels against the Ministry. She was not in the least afraid.

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Harry landed on the outer fringes of the pine forest, to find that Woodhouse’s warning had been even more impressive than he thought. The Aurors in question hadn’t fired a spell yet, but they were hostile towards parts of the valley, slapping branches out of the way as they tried to sneak in. Then Woodhouse had picked up on their hostility towards him, and its stance had altered from tolerance of the small rushing things to active annoyance.

Woodhouse would still not attack, given that its place magic would simply defend any stones or trees the Aurors tried to move, but its annoyance could run through Harry, and he could certainly attack.

He reminded himself that intimidating people at the Ministry had stopped anyone from dying. He didn’t know if he would be so lucky here, but he could certainly show off his magic.

He stepped around the tree in front of him and did so.

The air around the dark-robed wizards turned dry. Harry raised his magic as heat, rather than fire, thinking of the deserts the karkadann had run. He murmured a milder version of the dehydration curse Draco had used to save him from the time-globe on the Hogwarts Express, and the witch in front of him started gasping as moisture was sucked from her mouth. He carefully kept the magic away from the trees; since he was part of Woodhouse, the valley presumably wouldn’t hesitate to lash at him if it caught him hurting another part of itself.

Harry let the air around him shimmer, too, and waited, doing nothing more than arch an eyebrow.

The witch in front of him flicked her wand, trying a nonverbal spell. Harry clenched the fingers of his hand, cast a *Protego* in front of his chest, and then aimed the spell, a stronger dehydration curse, over that. The witch made a soundless cry as the tendons in her hand dried to the consistency of old leather, and her fingers spasmed open and dropped her wand. Whatever hex she had chosen sputtered out against the rocks and needles under her feet.

“Now,” said Harry quietly. “What are you doing here? Tell me that, and I might be persuaded to let you live.” He could feel the karkadann shoving through the pine trees to get to his side, but he didn’t worry. She was at a disadvantage in cover as thick as this. And he could easily use his magic to restrain her from killing anyone, should he deem it necessary.

Someone moved forward from the back of the group—a tall woman with blonde hair sweeping her shoulders, whom Harry recognized. She halted and nodded at him. Then she said, “Karen, you were supposed to inform him he was under arrest first, before you cast a spell. Remember it. I certainly will.”

Karen mouthed something sullen. Harry inclined his head to Priscilla Burke. “Hello,” he said. “The Ministry must consider this important if they send the Head Auror after me and mine.”

The karkadann knocked into another tree behind him and let out a bellow of frustration. Harry stood firm, not letting the temptation to charge when he heard the trumpet overwhelm him. He watched the Head Auror’s face instead, caught in a stream of slanting sunlight. He knew she was not here as Thomas’s wife, because she would have already joined them if that was the case.

“The Ministry has declared you, and everyone who shelters with you, an outlaw,” said Priscilla. “The charges are numerous. Sheltering fugitives, intrusion into and damage of Ministry property, endangering public safety. There were others, but I didn’t bother memorizing them.” She let out a long breath. “The point, vates, is that you should surrender and come with us now.”

“Will my people be properly treated?” Harry asked mildly. “For example, will Mrs. Parkinson be treated like a human being, and not cut with silver, and shoved into a corner of her cell, and left to put on robes torn in her transformation?”
Priscilla jolted as if he had slapped her. “That did not happen,” she whispered.

“Oh, but it did.” Harry took a step forward. “That’s the reason I’m asking for guarantees from the Ministry. I don’t trust them to keep my packs from being murdered. Why in the world would I trust them with anything else?”

“Who did this?” Priscilla said.

Harry shrugged. “Hawthorn said that every single Auror who came after her contributed something to it—slapping her, spitting on her, kicking her, casting pain curses. Something.” He held Priscilla’s eyes, even when they watered as if she were trying to blink, and pulled more and more of his magic close to him, in a thick sheen that made the rest of the forest waver like a mirage. “There were twenty of them. That’s a purging of a good part of your Corps, I think.”

Priscilla closed her eyes and visibly fought for mental balance. Then, as if aware that this would make her look weak in front of her people, she chose a glare. “You don’t—I don’t think you understand. I would like to begin such a purge, and make sure that my own people never treat a prisoner like that again, but I need you back in the public eye to do it. I need to hear Mrs. Parkinson’s testimony, or at least see her memories in a Pensieve, to know who was responsible. If you surrender and come along, then we can quiet some of the public suspicions. So long as everyone is still shouting about werewolves running around and trying to murder us in our beds, nothing we do will make any difference. We have to have a calm environment.”

“Correction,” said Harry. “If we surrender, they’ll think they’ve won. And they’ll make sure that none of the really damaging testimony reaches the outside world.” He looked up as the karkadann finally found the passage through the trees and came to a stop beside him, snorting and stamping. Harry reached up and stroked her shaggy foreleg, ignoring Priscilla’s gape. “And that means the end of our freedom, the end of our chance to change things, and the end of our inspiration for the rest of the wizarding world. My answer to that is no, ma’am, unless we have either action from the Ministry, or binding oaths that swear they won’t harm us and try to make us vanish the moment we’re in their custody.”

“Without your coming back now, it will come to civil war, and not just rebellion,” said Priscilla, her voice tight.

“Why?” Harry asked.

“Because people are starting to support you,” said Priscilla darkly. “The pages of the Daily Prophet are swarming with letters. In London, several werewolf packs have secured their lairs and prepared to fight any Aurors who arrest them, or anyone else trying to harm them, to the death. Someone else tried to invade the Ministry yesterday, and got away before we could find out who it was. And now we have letters coming in from—people we can’t afford to ignore in France and Spain, asking why the Minister hasn’t done something about the Alliance’s demands so far, and how they look oh so very reasonable to them.” She scowled. “The Americans are doing the same thing, but the Americans always do that. France and Spain are usually quieter.”

Harry allowed himself a thin smile. He didn’t know much of the British Ministry’s reputation abroad, but he could imagine how it had suffered under Fudge. And then it would have had a year of seeming competency under Scrimgeour, only to tremble and explode now. It was no wonder that even Scrimgeour’s enemies wanted to stop the Alliance, because they would want a smooth transfer of power. Coups didn’t look good on a Ministry’s record.

“It doesn’t look good, does it?” he asked innocently. “That one rebel can defy the whole of a Ministry armed with permission to use dangerous spells, as well as dangerous magical artifacts?”

Priscilla closed her eyes. “You have no idea what you’re dealing with, vates,” she said, and then she waved her wand and lifted a privacy ward between them. “I received permission from the Minister himself to seek you out and try to stop this,” she said. “He was willing to wait before, but the invasion yesterday and the letters from the—the people in France and Spain are unnerving him. Amelia Bones is just about ready to declare war at this point. If you come along now, we’ll avoid that. If you don’t, then we won’t.”

Harry took a deep breath. Then he said, “You and Scrimgeour both seem to think I didn’t know what would happen when I started this rebellion. That’s wrong. I did. I did it to prevent even worse things from happening.”

“You want corpses in the streets?” Priscilla whispered. “You want blood? You want war?”

“I don’t want it,” said Harry. “But that’s what I’m going to get. And without it, we’d have people dying in the street anyway. Their killers would just say they were werewolves later. And we’d have the Department of Mysteries doing whatever the hell it likes, under the guidance of the Stone, and the Ministry shaking apart around Scrimgeour’s ears. He’s got a war of his own to fight, whether he likes it or not. He’s not going to save his Ministry this way, and neither am I. I don’t want to save it. It couldn’t
protect the innocent. It didn’t try.”

“War,” Priscilla said. She was hung up on the word, Harry thought. “A rebellion is one thing. A war is another.”

“Revolution is a more frightening word than either.” Harry smiled so hard his face hurt. “And I’m committed to it. I told the Minister I was. I can’t understand why people don’t take me seriously. Perhaps because I’m sixteen.” He heard branches twitching and snapping behind him, and hoped to Merlin that his people would stay back. The confrontation was balanced on the edge of a knife. Priscilla’s Aurors would fire curses if they thought their leader was in danger. “I’m also a Lord-level wizard, and I’ve finally decided to use that. You’ll have an awfully hard time fighting me, unless you really want to contact Falco Parkinson and ask him to try, or find Voldemort and wake him up.” Priscilla flinched at the mention of the Dark Lord’s name. Harry just barely kept from rolling his eyes. That might set the Aurors off. “Or invite another Lord or Lady into Britain, I suppose, but if one of them was willing to work as an assassin, others would become jumpy.”

“You can’t do this,” Priscilla breathed. “This is why I didn’t join your rebellion. You value life too little.”

Harry started to answer, but just then it happened.

One of the Aurors had edged around to the side. Harry had kept an eye on him, but hadn’t stopped talking to Priscilla. For one thing, that would have brought about open conflict if nothing else did. For another, the man had kept his wand in his robes, though one hand tucked down and close to it.

Now, he flung a vial of some kind of potion. Harry didn’t know who the target was. Perhaps it was meant to break apart on the rocks and splash all of them with the acid or poison inside.

What it did was smash against the karkadann’s leg as she pawed at the ground restlessly. Her fur promptly began to smoke, and an awful sizzling sound spread across the air. The karkadann screamed like a mountain falling, and then she brought down her head.

Harry had underestimated how fast she could maneuver with trees all around her—or perhaps he had only thought of charging, and not wielding her other weapons. The black corkscrew horn, four feet long, impaled the Auror, and Harry heard the smash and wrench and twist of bone as it pierced his spine. The karkadann reared, shaking the body so violently that Harry heard more bones snap, and bits of flesh tore loose and spotted the robes and cheeks of those who watched. Then she screamed again, and, half-turning, the corpse still caught on her horn, lashed out with one hind foot. Another two Aurors went flying. One came up limping; the other lay still, with what looked to Harry like a broken neck.

Then the Aurors began shouting and lifted their wands, and Harry knew the chaos that would explode in a moment. This was the first battle of the war, first blood shed. He had a moment to prevent heavier losses than there might otherwise be, and he took it.

His magic surged out of him and to the sides, spreading the heat shimmer further and faster. The Aurors it hit simply stopped moving, like flies trapped in amber. That included Priscilla, who was caught in an awkward position with her neck half-twisted around. Harry kept pushing, and lifted them all into a hovering position, holding them above the trees.

Beside him, the karkadann shifted as if to move forward. Harry reached out his hand and put it on her leg. She snorted, and bowed her head. Blood had soaked the white fur of her face and dribbled around her gleaming black eyes in a grotesque mask. Harry held her gaze.

“No more,” he told her.

She didn’t have to obey, but she chose to. Indeed, a moment later, her eyes lifted to the Auror on her horn, and she snorted in contentment. Harry remembered legends that said karkadanns would carry the bodies of young elephants on their horns until the weight killed them, and repressed a shudder.

He turned to face the Aurors.

“The terms are the same as they have always been,” he said shortly. “The Ministry has to show that it can treat werewolves with the same rights as humans. It has to do the same with all magical creatures, in fact. It has to show that it cares more about the people it’s meant to serve than advancing its own agenda of pettiness and fear. I’m not going to listen to any arguments that call on me to keep the peace when its own Aurors aren’t even capable of doing that in an ordinary arrest.”

He flicked his hand, and the amber-air shifted, moving the Aurors out of the pine forest and towards the edge of the valley. When it had dropped them on the grass, Harry took a deep breath and reached out to Woodhouse.
Woodhouse was amused. The small tree with no leaves wished to expand the trees. It wished to hold the edge of the valley as safe
as the center of the valley. Because every part of Woodhouse was the same as every other part, that was an easy request to grant.
A touch, a surge, and every blade of grass and every stone and every speck of dirt in that area was set to watch. Then the surge
ran all around the hills, all around the place that recognized itself as Woodhouse, and they all came aware. The sky above it,
which was its sky, would know when intruders tried to fly through it. There were ways that the small rushing things could try to
appear inside it without going through the ground or the air, but Woodhouse watched them, too. It made the tunnels carved
through nothingness solid, and the whirl of false air carried in objects impossible. All of this was very easy. Anything could have
done as much. One part of it asked, and another part granted. And if the small rushing things that tried to hurt it did not come
back, then so much the better. The valley could get on with its dreaming.

Harry rushed, gasping, out of the trance, and found Camellia beside him, along with Draco. Draco clasped his shoulder, and
stared into his face, and never said a word. Camellia was more vocal.

“Did you raise the wards?” she demanded.

“Better than wards,” said Harry. His voice sounded strange, too deep. He shook his head and tried to adjust to having just a body,
not stones and roots and soil. “Woodhouse is watching for us now. It would have allowed most people to enter it before. Now it
will alert me when someone tries. We can let them Apparate in, or Portkey, but we don’t have to.”

“Wards, Wild,” said Camellia. “Just in case.”

Harry agreed. If nothing else, the wards would make the Aurors, or whoever arrived next, think of them as important, and they
would waste time attacking them instead of trying to counter the place magic. He set to work weaving different kinds of shields
around each other. He couldn’t use some kinds, because of Woodhouse’s magic interfering with them, but now that he was part of
the valley, he knew instinctively which kinds would be hurtful and didn’t try to use them.

When the wards were set in place, and tightened and tautened from hill to hill like ropes, Harry bent over the karkadann’s leg. She
snorted, as though to reassure him there was nothing to worry about, and tossed her horn, playing with the Auror’s body some
more. Harry examined the sides of the wound carefully. The potion had created a large pit and cauterized it in the same moment.
He used *Integro* on it, but that only made the karkadann stamp. Harry listened carefully to her sounds, and looked into her eyes,
for any sign of pain, and saw none. Of course, karkadanns were born for killing. It was entirely possible that she had magic which
made the pain lessen, and was already healing the wound.

Only then did he turn to look at the bodies, and use his magic to pull the broken corpse from the karkadann’s horn. She lunged
after it for a moment, then lost interest and bowed her head to push playfully at his shoulder instead.

He had sent the wounded Auror out with the others. That left the impaled one and the one with the broken neck, who was
definitely dead when Harry walked closer to him. He grimaced and shut his staring eyes, wishing his face wasn’t on the wrong
side of his body.

He felt guilt as a hollow behind the determination. He didn’t have time to stop and give in to it. One of the dead Aurors had tossed
a potion at the karkadann and started this. The other had got in the way. Yes, he wished it could have ended with no killing, but he
had known it was not likely to. He could entertain no fantasies of walking out and offering himself up, because these attackers
wanted the other people with him even more than they wanted him.

*You knew what was happening when you began this.*

He weighted both guilt and anger, and threw them into the Occlumency pools. Then he pushed the broken bodies out beyond the
forest, for Priscilla and her people to claim, and turned to face the others. There were many more waiting behind the karkadann
now: Hawthorn, who looked sorry to have missed the battle; Narcissa, with her wand in her hand and a cautious expression on her
face; Evergreen, snarling; Remus, who looked away when Harry caught his eye; Adalrico Bulstrode, his face set and grim;
Millicent, who nodded in response to a question Harry didn’t know he’d asked.

Harry took a deep breath, and made himself into the leader that was needed.

“We’ve got a war coming,” he said. “Best we plan how to meet it.”

*~*~*~*~*
Chapter Twenty-Nine: Sunrise In the West

Falco sat down against the ruined wall and closed his eyes. A wind skittered through his hair, and he shivered. It had been a long time since he’d been so vulnerable to such mortal sensations.

But what he had learned in the ruins of the house at Godric’s Hollow left him feeling more vulnerable than he had for a century.

*It is begun, and will not be ended, until—when? Until one or both of them are dead?* But he did not think he could see even that far ahead. His investigation of the past in that house had given him only pictures of possible futures, and since he could never have predicted the initial occurrence that had begun this, he did not think he could predict the one that was going to end it.

He only knew that it stretched across the wizarding world, a tangled skein of prophecy and hatred and death and magic, and it was confusing all his certainty. He wondered if even a necromancer could have seen the truth of Harry’s death, if she looked at him right now.

One thing it had confirmed for him, though. Harry needed training. Harry needed guidance. He needed to know more about the realities behind Light and Dark magic, the means of fooling them and the means of wielding them. He did *not* need to be distracted by this minor rebellion of ideas that would flourish and die within a few years at most. His very life was hostage to something larger than he was, and until he solved that problem, his attention belonged there, not anywhere else.

Falco’s immediate course was clear, and so it had been worth coming back to Godric’s Hollow after all. He must crush this rebellion. But he could not do so by direct action. He would be unable to teach Harry anything if the boy thought of him as an enemy, and responsible for the failure of his childish ideals. So he would do it from behind the scenes, deft little touches the boy could assign to any of a dozen people.

It would begin with a dream. The ones he had conjured for Harry might be failing against the boy’s mental defenses, but most wizards had nothing like them. And there were many with a paranoid fear and hatred of werewolves at the moment, thanks to the Ministry’s poisoned rhetoric.

A dream could fan that fear and hatred to burning flames.

Falco stepped into the paths of Light and Dark.

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Indigena coughed, then blew air across the page she was studying. Part of the problem with reading a book as old as *Odi et Amo* was the musty smell; it had never quite disappeared even after Indigena performed three separate cleaning charms. The rose that curled about her wrist could shed a sweet scent, but it made her dizzy and dreaming if she sniffed it for too long.

She paused at the heading of a chapter named ‘Brands and Scars’ and tilted her head back. The thorns on her back slid out of their casings and twisted upright like the ears of some great beast. Indigena had already discovered they were sensitive to powerful magic, and, together with her own more normal senses, they helped her clarify what she was feeling.

A powerful wizard on the move. Falco Parkinson. Indigena grimaced. She hated that, for right now, there was so little she could do against him. Her wounded Lord needed her more, and the best plan to help him regain some dignity and pride involved long, slow research and Indigena sitting by his side every day so that she could whisper the words into his ear.

Then it would require months of working—though, if she had understood her Lord aright, he had begun that part already, with the only candidate he could find.

Indigena sighed again and consoled herself that this reading and research and whispering would *eventually* produce action. Not before next year, certainly, and not for months even then, but it would happen.

“May you destroy him, Harry,” she murmured, and went back to reading.

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“And what were the words that she spoke to you?”

Snape gritted his teeth. He did not want to say this. There were times he regretted ever giving in to Joseph. Awash in a sea of pain, and knowing there was more ahead if he swam deeper, his best instinct was to turn around and wade back to shore. Why
should he care about healing? He had carried these wounds all his life long, and he could brew Dreamless Sleep to avoid the vision of his past. He could shut down that part of his mind and survive by going cold. He had done it before.

And during that time, he had made stupid mistakes that got him arrested by the Ministry, and very nearly destroyed Harry’s bond with him forever.

*Remember why you are doing this,* he told himself again, and raised his eyes to Joseph’s face. “That there were three truths in life,” he said. His tone was flat. “One was sorrow. The second was ugliness. The third was death.”

“And you believed her?” There was no contempt in Joseph’s voice, as Snape knew there would have been if he told this story of his mother’s truths to almost anyone else. There was only intense compassion, and he emphasized the word for the sake of making sure that Snape had really believed Eileen Prince.

“Yes.” If he half-closed his eyes, Snape could see the boy he had been, so anxious to grow up and learn these adult truths that his mother had promised not even all the men and women in the world knew. He had already known that he did not fit with other children. Too ugly, too tall, too smart—and, as the years passed and the “accidents” around the house happened with increasing frequency, too magical. By then, his mother had taught him about blood status, too. He was nine, and she had taken him out beyond the edge of town to watch a cat die.

“Why?”

“I saw them happen,” said Snape. The cat had been a young gray tom. Someone, someone Muggle, had staked its left hind leg to the ground and wrapped barbed wire around it, so that the cat tore more and more flesh loose the more he struggled. “I saw sorrow.” Someone had put a leg trap on the right front leg, and the cat had pulled nearly hard enough to sever the limb, but not enough to escape. “I saw ugliness.” The cat’s eyes were crazed and rolling, and the sounds that emerged from his mouth were sick, disgusting squalls of the kind to make Severus hate weakness. “I saw death.” His mother had murmured the spell that would stop the cat’s heart, but after they had watched for long enough that he understood she was not doing it out of compassion. She was doing it because some things did not deserve to live, and because the cat had taught him all it could. The cat’s head had dropped, its body had sagged and puffed out, and then it was dead. Severus remembered watching it and not thinking of death as a release from pain. It was the end of everything, and the body it left behind the reminder of a life full of hurt.

“Snape?”

Snape blinked and shut his eyes, coming back from the half-life he had lived at that age, when everything was a daze, a haze, of grayness, and the only light he had was sharp and cutting, primed to reveal the most unfortunate truths of the world. “Yes?”

“Do you still believe that now?”

Snape sneered. “Of course not. I learned there were at least two realities my mother had forgotten to mention. One of them was hatred; she planned for me to live my life in unflinching truth, and not hate so things so much I would try to change them. And another was revenge. She thought I would never be in a position to take it.”

“And now?” Joseph repeated insistently. “Since you asked for help with the healing? Since Harry became your son?”

Snape wondered how to answer, what to say. If he said that he did not believe those things any longer, he would tell Joseph what he wanted to hear, but he would sound weak. If he said that he believed them, Joseph would press further and further, and try to find out why.

Snape did not want to give him the truth—that he didn’t know. Certainty, of any kind, was better than uncertainty.

“Severus?”

“Do not call me that,” Snape snarled. “I did not give you permission to call me that.”

“So you didn’t.” Joseph refused to look apologetic. “But it was the only name that got your attention. I called you a few times before, and you didn’t answer.” He paused. “Do you still believe that now?”

Snape took a deep breath, and reminded himself that this was Slytherin courage: the courage to look at the world as it really was, instead of believing in a false ideal and dying stupidly for it, as the Gryffindors would.

“I don’t know,” he whispered.
Joseph smiled, a smile that was like all of his expressions, water wearing away at a stone. “Good,” he said. “That’s the first step.”

“Admitting weakness?” Snape fixed him with a flat stare, and imagined that Joseph was one of the fifth-year Gryffindors who lived to torment him this term; they appeared to have forgotten all basic Potions competency over the summer. He did not need, quite, to use the scowl that he would have used on Neville Longbottom, not for this. “This will make me stronger?”

“When you’re standing on quicksand, it’s best to know it, not pretend it isn’t there,” said Joseph.

Snape restrained the impulse to say that it was much better never to step on quicksand in the first place. He inclined his head.

“Now.” Joseph sat up. “I’d like you to tell me what it was you saw which convinced you that these things she told you were truths of the world, instead of truths only in her own shredded imagination.”

Snape began to recall every detail of the gray tom. Telling Joseph about grotesqueries was the one part of his healing he actually enjoyed. If he caused the Seer to turn green, or go a bit gray about the lips, then it was worth any amount of pouring memories into his ear.

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Harry grimaced as he came out of a dream that felt oddly like a nightmare. He opened his eyes, and then stopped when he recognized what sat on his chest, one talon hooked into his pyjama top, staring at him with its beak an inch from his face.

The bird laughed at him. This time, it said nothing, only raked its talons viciously down the center of his chest. Harry ground his teeth together and succeeded in not screaming by sheer force of will; Draco was curled up in his arms, face resting only a few inches from the new, freezing wounds, and Harry didn’t want to wake him.

The bird gave another chuckle, and then rose into the air, three-clawed wings working with a leathery sound that made the hair on the back of Harry’s neck stand up. Then it vanished. A moment later, Draco stirred, and then sat up so violently that Harry’s arm hurt as it fell off his back.

“What is that?” he asked, staring at the wounds.

“The bird again,” said Harry softly, and looked down. The slashes were parallel, as they always were, and covered with frost, as they always were, dark red gobs of frozen blood glinting here and there like rubies. This time, at least, the scratches were not as deep or long as they had been in the Sanctuary. He shook his head and smiled at Draco, who didn’t look reassured. “It didn’t say anything to me this time, only marked me and left.”

“Marked you,” Draco whispered.

Harry studied him, but said nothing. Sometimes, Draco could have the most remarkable ideas, but only if no one interrupted him. Harry had seen him use it to solve Arithmancy equations before, sitting still with his eyes half-shut and then delving into the midst of an answer it would have taken them hours to reach any ordinary way.

But Draco blinked, then sighed and shook his head. “I still don’t know what it means,” he admitted, “any more than we did back at the Sanctuary.” His hand wandered into Harry’s hair, tugging at the strands now and then as if he couldn’t help himself. “I know that I don’t like it, and want it to stop happening.”

“Me, too,” Harry muttered.

Draco tugged at his hair again, not hard enough to hurt but enough to cause small beads of feeling to race down Harry’s scalp, and then pulled his head back to kiss him. Harry opened his mouth. He didn’t know if it was the shock of seeing the bird again, or the need to reassure himself that Draco was there and unwounded, at least, even if he wasn’t, that made him shift, wrapping his arms around Draco. He only knew that suddenly he was more eager for a snog than he’d been in weeks, and his rib was healed enough for him to go through with this.

Draco rumbled, a sound that Harry might have described as a moan if his mouth was free when he made it, and then rolled slightly to his back, bringing Harry up to elbow and arm. Harry deepened the kiss, but refused to hurry it, even when Draco’s rumbles seemed to urge him to do so. He slid his own hand into Draco’s hair, and shifted so that most of his body covered Draco’s own ribs. He didn’t feel much, and wondered if he was supposed to, or if perhaps the feelings in that moment consisted of Draco’s skin under his hand, warmer than he had expected from his pyjamas and the blankets, and the taste of his mouth,
which was fuzzy but not that bad. Is one sign of romance when you don’t think your partner has morning breath? Or perhaps I have no sense of smell right now.

Someone pounded on the bedroom door.

Harry just barely kept himself from jumping so that he bit into Draco’s lip or smacked into his forehead or did something else embarrassing and hurtful. Gently, he pulled away and licked the small cut in his tongue Draco couldn’t help making. Draco looked mortified. Harry smiled and slid out of bed. The bird’s wounds had gone numb, and otherwise he wore pyjama bottoms and top. There was no reason he wasn’t fit to meet whatever message someone had brought now.

Except that, when he opened the door and saw Camellia’s face, he had to lean a bit on the wall. Camellia must have been able to smell what they were doing, but she would make no mention of it.

“What is it?” he asked, and heard his voice flatten.

Camellia answered the same way. “Peregrine was leading her pack from their safe house to a place where they could Apparate out of sight of Muggles. Several young wizards attacked them.” She let out a few quick breaths. “Twelve of them are dead. Peregrine’s here, but wounded, and the two who defended her and arrived with her—they’re afraid they won’t survive.”

“I’m coming,” said Harry softly, and turned to look back at Draco, who was peering over the blankets. “Trouble,” he said, and then he followed Camellia, leaving it up to Draco if he wanted to join in or not.

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Remus wondered if anyone outside the packs would be able to understand all the nuances of what was happening here.

In the center of the room they had chosen—a study, Woodhouse’s largest, to accommodate as many people as possible—sat Peregrine, the small black leader of the pack that had run north of Loki’s, and lived the closest to Muggles. She sat with her head lolling to the left, her back against a chair, her breathing shallow. A cut ran down her side, from collarbone to groin, shallow but long, and shedding drop after drop of blood. It shredded her shirt, and that she could not curl up enough to shield her throat and belly from attack said much about how vulnerable she was. Of course, the cut had been made with silver. Remus could smell the poison settling into her.

On either side of Peregrine curled the pack’s other two survivors, a woman on the left, a man on the right. Both were almost naked. Both were covered with bruises, and stank of internal bleeding and organs shutting down. Both obviously did not care. They had kept up a constant chorus of snarls since appearing. Remus, if he squinted, could see the faint white cords that ran from their necks to Peregrine’s throat; he knew that, if any others of their pack had still been alive, those cords would have been as bright as stars to them. The two survivors were draining themselves of strength to give their alpha a chance to combat the silver’s poison and survive. It was killing them. They did not care. Their snarls and their eyes and their bared teeth said that no one would touch Peregrine as long as they lived.

Hawthorn Parkinson crouched in front of them, about five feet away, coming no closer. She had one hand extended, though, and was talking constantly in a low, soft voice lost under the snarling. She seemed to be of the impression that Peregrine’s packmates had to let her approach sooner or later. She did not know accepted werewolves, Remus thought. More was the pity.

Loki’s pack—no, he must try to think of them as Harry’s pack, he must—sprawled behind Hawthorn, in a loose half-circle. They knew that there was nothing they could do, other than pay these protectors the tribute of a good death-vigil. They had got their alpha out alive, in the middle of an attack that had to have been fierce; none of them had details yet, because the survivors had not spoken, and only knew the number of dead because they knew how many had been in Peregrine’s pack. They would watch, and mourn their passing.

Then the door opened, and Harry stepped in.

Loki’s pack lowered their heads at once, submitting in the presence of their alpha, watching him. Remus felt the impulse to do the same. He resisted it, half-rising to his feet instead. There were too many nuances here that Harry did not understand. Hawthorn at least had the instincts that came from carrying a wolf-web of her own, even though she did not know all the packs’ customs, and could not. Harry had no sense of belonging to their world. What Loki had done in transferring the bond to him was not enough, especially when he refused the packmind that would have let him understand them all at the deepest level.

Harry turned towards the movement. So did Camellia. Remus wasn’t sure if it was the frozen command in her eyes or the perfect lack of interest in Harry’s that made him sit down again, and watch.
Harry stepped forward until he was level with Hawthorn. The guards’ attention switched to him. Of course it would, Remus thought. Wizards had attacked them. They would smell the magic on him, without the counterbalancing smells of wild and wolf, and they would hate him.

Remus clenched his fists. Why did no one tell Harry these things?

Harry merely stood where he was, staring back at the two snarlers. Then he tilted his head back and began to sing.

The voice that emerged from his throat was no wolf’s, but almost as pure—high and sweet and thrilling, a phoenix’s. It was not louder than the snarls. It did not have to be. It swirled around them in complex, starry patterns. Remus could see flames darting around Harry’s skin in faint outlines, as faint as the cords of Peregrine’s pack, and it made him tremble and want to bow his head.

He continued watching, though, because he could not see what the song was meant to do, and if Harry moved forward now, he would get bitten.

The guardians trembled, and raised their voices. Harry went on singing. He didn’t appear to take any notice of them; instead, he lost himself in his own voice. Remus heard a dirge there, the mourning song of sunset, as a great flame passed from the world and ceased to renew itself.

He shook his head sharply. This was a phoenix song. They were not phooenixes, whatever animals some packs might like to name themselves after. He did not think this would work.

Then he saw it was. The male werewolf trembled and laid his head on the floor, and ceased his weak snarl. The female kept on going, but she didn’t lunge and snap when Harry stepped closer. Her eyelids fluttered, and her head dropped to the floor as well. A moment later, she was asleep.

The white cords binding them to Peregrine winked out of existence.

Harry was at Peregrine’s side in the next moment, and Remus finally realized he carried a bottle of the white paste that they had smeared on Hawthorn’s infected cut when they removed her from Tullianum. He set it to hover in the air beside him while he uncorked it and pulled out more and more, smoothing it over Peregrine’s cut. Remus heard the pained undertone in her breathing ease.

Harry kept singing the while, though now it was a hum. It redefined the tension in the room, and made them seem more like comrades uniting against a common enemy. Remus saw other members of the pack relax from the corner of his eyes, felt the currents racing through the packmind soothe into a trouble-free sorrow.

A few moments later, and Peregrine was asleep to match her packmates. Harry stepped away from her and towards the sleeping werewolves.

He did—something. Remus wasn’t sure what to call it. It seemed as if Harry unfolded a layer of himself, tucked it around his hand like cloth, and then held it out to the two survivors. One piece of the cloth wrapped the female werewolf, one the male. They both paused in their breathing, and Remus wondered if Harry had sent them on to the peace of death. They could at least die with a sense of accomplishment.

Then they breathed again more strongly, and the stink of their pain and dying eased, blowing slowly away like the remains of hunger when satisfied.

Remus blinked several times. He had known that Harry could absorb magic from artifacts and other wizards. He had not known, or he had forgotten if he had, that Harry could also give some of his own magic to others, and so restore those like these werewolves, who had given of their power to protect their alpha, to health.

Harry’s face was pale when Remus looked at him, and his voice whispery when he finally ceased the song. “We need to have a council to discuss what happens next,” he said. “Everyone who wishes to be a part of it, please meet me in the kitchen in five minutes.” He glanced at Camellia. “Find a bed for them, first.”

And he swept out of the room, and left Remus to consider that his actions had been efficient, and kind in some ways—and perhaps he couldn’t have done that if he were caught up in the packmind, because he would have understood the sacrifice Peregrine’s wolves were making and would have let it go forward.
The world shifted a little more around, and inside, Remus as he thought about that.

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Harry could almost smell the emotions racing around the room as his people crowded into the kitchen, though he wasn’t a werewolf. His song had eased some of their tension and anxiety, but only just. He could see it in their tightened jaws, feel it in the way their fingers tapped the table, hear it in the mutters that jumped from mouth to ear too quickly to become audible. He tilted his head to the side and called their attention with a simple flare of his magic.

“We don’t know who attacked them yet, do we?” he asked. He wasn’t sure how much information Camellia had got from Peregrine before the silver poisoning took her under. “Wizards” she had said, but perhaps there were names.

“No,” said Camellia. “It almost seems to have been a random attack—but they hit them as they left their safe house, so it couldn’t have been. Someone betrayed them, but I can’t imagine who.” She shook her head, a fast, helpless movement that slowed as she looked at him. Harry did his best to stand straight and project an air of confident pack alpha, because that was what was needed right now. “No member of the pack would have. And why would someone in the other packs? They have to know that the Ministry won’t grant them immunity from the hunting season, not with the way they turn on their heels and break their promises.”

Harry nodded. “And their location?”

“The street in front of their safe house,” said Camellia.

Harry nodded again. “Did they Apparate in?”

“Peregrine couldn’t tell me that, Wild.”

That meant that Harry couldn’t just go to the street and start draining magic, the way he might have tried if the wizards were locals. It would have been a swift and fitting punishment for the attackers. This way, though, Harry had no idea if wizards even lived in the area, or if he would be draining the right ones if they did. It was too easy to Apparate in and then Apparate away again, out of reach. And he wasn’t about to wake Peregrine up right now to ask.

“Very well,” he said. “We’ll watch the newspapers just in case they report the werewolf kills, though I don’t think they will.” His mind felt like a narrow tunnel made of light, and he turned to Moody, who stood almost across from him on the other side of the table, hands braced as if he would bring them down in a massive slap at any moment. “Alastor.” Moody fixed both eyes on him.

“I think now is the proper time to use that information you and your people took from Madam Bones’s office.”

Moody grinned, and his magical eye rolled, making him look half-crazed. “With pleasure, boy.” He and his contacts had been the ones to break into Amelia Bones’s office and paint her face like a clown’s. The sheer humiliation of it—and a Body-Bind to prevent her from looking in the wrong direction at the wrong time—had meant that the Ministry people didn’t suspect the real purpose of their raid. Moody had located certain records that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement wouldn’t want spread about. Some had gone to his contacts, for blackmail material and as payment for their help. Moody had kept the rest. As he limped out of the room, Harry thought he was looking forward to using it.

“We’re going to hit them through the newspapers?” asked Bavaros, Rose’s mate, his voice a disapproving growl. As a werewolf, he was the biggest and blackest Harry had ever seen. “What kind of retaliation is that? Killing must be paid back in justice, Wild.”

“And it will,” said Harry. “As soon as we know who did this. I refuse to attack and kill a dozen wizards because a dozen werewolves were killed. That’s the kind of thing that won’t make them sleep until they’ve eliminated us.” He turned to Narcissa then. “You said that your sister might have some interesting things to offer us, Narcissa.”

Narcissa nodded slowly. “And I think that she will help us without reservation now, as long as you will permit me to tell her the details of what happened today.”

Harry inclined his head, and Narcissa hurried off. Harry faced the rest of them, and saw the narrow, intent expressions on their faces.

“This cannot go much further without shed blood,” he said without preamble. “We saw that the day before yesterday, when the Aurors came. But I will fight a defensive war first, and that means that I will ask you to wait before attacking. Anyone who does will cause more fear, and will have to walk away from the Alliance of Sun and Shadow.” He held the eyes of those few who seemed reluctant, like Bavaros, until they nodded their consent. Harry nodded once more. “Good. Now, I am going to make arrangements to keep the rest of the London packs safe.”
His eyes went to Hawthorn. “Mrs. Parkinson,” he said, “you are a hunted fugitive, but for the task I want you to do, speed is important, more than secrecy. Will you be willing to go to the London alphas in person and deliver a message?” He had not established the communication spell with most of the alphas, and many of them refused to receive owls from wizards—or from the alpha who had taken Loki’s place, since some had had rivalries with him. A lone werewolf, not part of an accepted pack, stood more of a chance of being taken seriously.

“Gladly,” said Hawthorn, her eyes full of life. The silver-infected cut on her shoulder had almost healed, Harry saw. “Give me a list of names and Apparition locations, and I will leave.”

“Good,” said Harry. “For the rest of you, defense is the most important thing we can concentrate on right now. If you are a wizard, I want you to practice dueling until you drop. If you’re a werewolf born Muggle, you are now on permanent patrol of the valley, in alternating shifts. Camellia, you’re in charge of arranging those. The Aurors know where we are. I expect another attack before long, from either them or the Unspeakables.”

“And what will you be doing?” Bavaros asked. There was less venom in his voice than before, but he still sounded frustrated.

“Working on things to make them leave us alone, of course,” Harry replied, and then turned away. He needed to find the list of names and Apparition locations for Hawthorn, and then a relatively isolated part of Woodhouse to make the statement he wanted to make. And, before that, he wanted to drain some of the Black artifacts that he had brought along. Giving his own magic to make sure that the werewolves with Peregrine didn’t die had tired him, as had the phoenix song. He would need to rest.

An arm curled around his shoulder halfway down the hall. Harry turned, blinking, and met Draco’s eyes. Draco looked as if he were made of fire, given how bright his gaze was.

“We’re going to show them,” he breathed. “Going to show them all, aren’t we, Harry?” And he leaned forward and kissed him hard enough to hurt. Harry didn’t care. He kissed back, single-mindedly. His mind was no longer a narrow corridor filled with light, but a galloping horse, speeding towards its destination.

“I hope so,” he said.

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Hawthorn appeared in the first Apparition location, on a Muggle street which shocked her with the brightness of its colors and its stink. Even without her current nose, she thought, the reek would have overwhelmed her; with her werewolf sense of smell, she almost fainted. She plugged up her nostrils and plunged across the street in quick steps, with only a glance to make sure no Muggle cars were approaching. Rubbish and petrol and dirt and other things she couldn’t identify—they blared and yammered at her, and she would have given a great deal to be able to ignore them.

She reached a door in the house she’d been told to look for, and knocked impatiently. The house was a rather typical Muggle one, small and square and looking like its neighbors on either side. But a woman who smelled like snow and pine needles opened the door, and if she didn’t have amber eyes, she was probably wearing green lenses, or green magic, to cover them.

“Welcome, sister,” she said, when she saw Hawthorn. “What’s the matter?”

Hawthorn told her in brief words about the attack, and the woman’s mouth tightened as she listened. Then she nodded, and said, “I’ll warn the others of my pack. But we’ll want to know a few more details. Will you come in?”

Hawthorn was more than willing to step into the house. It did not look so drab inside, where the walls were bright with fairly good amateur paintings and strips of colored paper arranged in collages. She understood the reason for the latter when laughter rang down the entrance hall and two children chased each other into view, both wrestling on the floor. One had amber eyes, and easily pinned the other, who didn’t and began to cry about it not being fair.

The woman she’d met at the door pulled the amber-eyed child off the other one and tossed him into the air. He squealed on the way down. The woman and the boy lying sprawled on the floor both laughed.

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“Welcome, sister,” she said, when she saw Hawthorn. “What’s the matter?”

Hawthorn told her in brief words about the attack, and the woman’s mouth tightened as she listened. Then she nodded, and said, “I’ll warn the others of my pack. But we’ll want to know a few more details. Will you come in?”

Hawthorn was the one who heard the cracks as Apparating wizards arrived, perhaps because she was so used to listening for it, perhaps because she had been half-expecting it since she heard about the attack on Peregrine.

She flicked her wand, and powerful wards surrounded the house. They wouldn’t hold against a steady barrage of spells, but they were strong enough to deflect the first, which would have torn apart the lungs of the woman standing beside her if it had come
through the window. In a moment, the children’s laughter changed to shrieks, tinted with a howl in the case of the amber-eyed boy.

“Get them to safety!” Hawthorn snapped at the woman, whom she knew was a Muggle. She scurried to obey, thankfully, with no muttering about rank. The pack’s wizards were already appearing, stumbling sometimes, caught up in their own pyjamas, frizzes of hair standing out from their heads, but with wands gripped in their hands.

Hawthorn fell to one knee as a *Crucio* came through her wards. It missed her, but caught another of the wizards, who dropped, writhing and screaming. The other closest one bent to tend to him.

She was a fugitive anyway, she told herself. And someone willing to use Cruciatus was an enemy who needed to be stopped.

She stood, and leaned out the window. She could see the witch she thought had fired the *Crucio*, golden-haired and yellow-eyed and disdainful. She was a daughter of some Light pureblood family or another, which didn’t make what she’d done any better, but made Hawthorn all the more eager to fell her. Too many of the Aurors who had hurt her in Tullianum had had yellow eyes.

She spoke the words clearly, and felt the thunder of the magic pass up her wand. “*Avada Kedavra.*”

The beam of green light went through the wards, of course; no barrier could stop the Killing Curse. The witch turned her back just before it hit, and fell sprawled on the lawn of the Muggle house next door. Hawthorn laughed, and heard it come out as a bark and then a howl.

She didn’t know what her chances were of getting vengeance on the Aurors who had hurt her. There were so many of them, and Harry’s obsession was justice.

But these were wizards trying to destroy a pack that had never done them harm, out of intense paranoia and fear. They were perfect targets to soothe some of the hatred in her soul. And she did not even need to worry about concealing her activities from the Muggles all around them. The Ministry was the one who must send in its Obliviators. Hawthorn was a *revolutionary*, and a fugitive, and beyond all their standards.

At peace in a way she hadn’t been since her Death Eater days, she chose her next target.

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“Andromeda.” The voice was gentle, and wistful, and tinged with just a hint of an accent; unlike most of his family, Jean Delacour had learned to speak English at a very young age, when their parents had thought he and Andromeda would make a good match. That had soon ended, when the Delacour family made an alliance with the Veela Council instead, but they had known each other by then, and visited summers, and remained friends.

And, Andromeda knew as she stepped out of the Floo and let Jean brush the soot gently from her robes and kiss the tips of her fingers, a little bit in love with each other, at least on his side.

“Oh.” She dipped her chin and switched to French; her mother had not been remiss in insisting that her daughter learn her betrothed’s language as well. “I come to beg you to do a favor for an old, withered woman past the prime of her beauty.”

“There shall be no ending of the prime, my dear one.” Jean escorted her to a seat in front of the large table he used as a desk in his study, never letting his hand enfold more than her fingernails. It was courtesy that his wife insisted upon. Andromeda was just grateful, at that moment, that she had understood that they were friends, and permitted Andromeda to continue to visit at all. “What brings the fairest of the Blacks to me? Speak, and it shall be set in motion when the words are ended.”

Andromeda sat, ruffling her robes out around her. She had no fair beauty to show off like Narcissa did, but dark hair and eyes set off by pale skin and dark green robes had always done the trick for Jean; they were doing it now, she saw, from the way his glance followed her. “A favor for a mother fond of her daughter,” she said, with a little sigh. “A daughter who has run off to join rebels and werewolves and turn against the Ministry, but whom her mother cannot help loving anyway.”

She saw Jean lift his head as if scenting a wind, and hid her smile in a simpering frown. He would have heard of this already, of course. The French Ministry of Magic might not have *that* much interest in making the British Ministry look bad, at the moment—the French Minister certainly didn’t want Voldemort turning his sights across the Channel—but the French purebloods were a different matter. They were so carefully caught up in their own intricate dance of Light and Dark that a Lord-level wizard who could balance between both was of intense interest to them. Add in the Veela Council with their interest in the *vates*, and the fact that Beauxbatons had received an influx of students from Hogwarts this year talking about the Midsummer battle, and there were
plenty of French wizards and witches who believed that Harry should be given all the help that his government could give him, not hindered. He should be breaking webs and defeating Voldemort, not forced to hide in a valley because the Minister was an incompetent idiot who couldn’t control his own Department Heads.

“That is a rather large favor,” Jean said, sitting back and watching her without blinking now. Andromeda had never known anyone who could go as long without blinking as he could. Perhaps he had taken lessons from cats, or his wife.

“It is a rather large love,” said Andromeda, and drew out a lace handkerchief to hide a sniffle in.

Jean let out a long-suffering sigh. “My dear one,” he said. “What am I to do with you?”

“I have already told you that,” she replied, letting a bit of the sting through. She had never favored men who pretended that they were stupid. Genuinely stupid ones could be entertaining. But Andromeda had chosen her own Ted for intelligence, and if she had ended up marrying Jean after all, she would have insisted that he drop this act at once, especially around her. She suspected its continuation was his wife’s fault.

Jean inclined his head. “You have hinted at it, my dear. But there are so many things I could do to help you. What shall it be? Easing the pressure on the rebellion? Distracting this vates’s enemies? Contacting allies for him?”

“All those and more,” said Andromeda, leaning forward. “As well as the demiguise hair that I know you have on hand.” She savored his astonished look, but met it with a sad one of her own, and a headshake. “I know, Jean,” she said. “I always know. When I realized that someone was buying up all the demiguise hair at the same time as the protests against its use began, I realized who that must be. You should make the names of your operations a bit less transparent to someone who knows your history. As well as your false protest groups.”

Jean inclined his head. “You cannot expect me to give him one of the most important Wolfsbane ingredients for free, I hope?”

“Of course not,” said Andromeda. “Charge him a fair price. And in return, send a few Veela to him to see how they are treated. I promise you, there is no one who will better protect them and insure their future.” She had to admit that, even though she had been reluctant to get close to the boy when she saw how much he depended on Narcissa. She still would not willingly enter his valley and consort with her sister. But her daughter had made her choice, and that took away the option of standing aside and pretending nothing was happening.

“He is still in the midst of a British rebellion,” Jean mused. “And you think he would welcome French ties?”

“He knows the rest of the world exists, but it has not yet reached out to him,” said Andromeda, and again calculated her voice to sting. “Is that his fault, or the fault of wizards and witches who do not want the Dark Lord to notice them?”

Jean simply nodded, not having the grace to look ashamed. He would have been one of those who counseled his friends among the pureblood wizards and allies in the Veela Council to remain neutral, Andromeda knew. Jean was primarily a builder; he extended his business practices quickly on the surface, but in reality after years of planning, and he used allies and cats-paws for most of his more daring political moves. He was more interested in creating security for those who would follow him than in grabbing at glory and watching it fade. He was the opposite of her sister’s husband in that way. “Then I have a few cousins I may send him. Tell me, is young Millicent Bulstrode in the valley with him?”

Andromeda could not hide her astonishment this time, and he laughed at her.

“We have ties that you do not yet suspect,” he said. “We have reached out to this vates in our own way. Now is merely the hour to make ourselves known to him.” He grasped and kissed her hand. “Go back to England, my dear. You shall have your distractions, and your allies. The release of pressure will take longer, but there are favors and those who owe me favors. Your daughter will be safe, and our vates.” His teeth flashed as he smiled. “If Britain does not want him, we might as well show him how courteous France can be.”

Henry started to shut the door of the tiny contemplation room behind him, and then frowned as Draco ducked around it before he could. “You’re sure?” he asked.

Draco simply nodded. He knew what Harry was planning, and he wanted to be close. Harry seemed to think he would find the sensations too overwhelming. Draco didn’t believe so.
Besides, he wanted *something* to make up for the interrupted kiss that morning.

Harry eyed him, then shrugged and closed his eyes. For a few moments more, he breathed, and his magic, restored to normal strength after the draining of a few Black artifacts, drew in around him. Draco leaned against a wall and waited. This room was entirely made of wood, of course, and had no loose furniture, as was appropriate for a place where one was supposed to sit on the floor. That meant there would be nothing to fall into when Harry made his statement.

Harry opened his eyes and let his magic rise.

It started as the smell of roses, but it added so many more folds to itself in seconds that Draco could not think of it only that way. The air split open, and glittering diamond-edged blades of sunlight came forth. They rolled around Draco, flashing and spinning, and the illusion of a great cat bounded through them, silver-clawed and dark-furred. Draco was sure it was a lynx.

The taste of Chocolate Frogs filled his mouth, and the low hum of phoenix song his ears. Then there came a warm pressure on his skin. It was like the warmth Harry had called to face the Aurors in the pine wood the day before yesterday, but this didn’t dry out his skin. It pressed close, soft and delicious, and he realized with a start that Harry had drawn inspiration for it from the heat shared beneath their blankets this morning.

He managed to look at Harry through all that, and, fascinating as the magic was, this was more than worth it. Harry’s eyes were closed, but his hair shifted around him, and the light and the lynx began with him and extended from him, and the music and the smell of roses and the warmth *belonged* with him in ways Draco couldn’t articulate. He had changed out of his pyjamas into normal robes and tended to the cuts on his chest, and he looked calm and confident and stubborn.

Of course he did, Draco thought. He wasn’t doing anything all that extraordinary. Everything he did was an extension of things he had done before. This was only a message appended on to the end of a longer one, which the British public as a whole had been too stubborn to read.

The magic swirled, and rose. And it expanded up to the roof of Woodhouse, and then higher, and then higher.

Draco swore he could feel it pass through the edges of the place magic and the valley’s wards, pacing upwards, shimmering as it did so, a second sunrise in the west. It continued flowing, continued rolling, sweetness on all levels. There was nothing frightening about it, unless you were one of Harry’s enemies and hadn’t realized the sheer strength that was his to command.

It unrolled, and it kept on unrolling. Draco felt the overwhelming urge to close his eyes.

He did, and now he could hear the phoenix song more clearly than ever. The song took him down into itself and showed him the truth in the midst of the fire.

Harry did not promise death to his enemies. He promised resistance, and the resistance would go on growing until his goals were accomplished and his enemies’ fears dead. He would have rights for werewolves and freedom from webs for other magical creatures, reworking of Ministry laws and a change in the balance of things, and anything else he wanted. Blood would not stop him. Death would not stop him. Nothing would stop him.

It was a rational, calm, determined “Fuck you” to the rest of the wizarding world. Harry asked them to view his magic as hope and freedom if they could, but he was not overly worried about what would happen if they did not, because he was also asking them to view it as *power*. And it was a message of change, above all.

Draco basked in all the mingled sweetness, the greatest extent to which Harry had ever let his wings unfurl, and squinted through the maze of light at Harry. *So strong, so stubborn, so beautiful. And he’s mine.*

That thought inspired an emotion too possessive to be called lust. Draco stepped forward and curled his arms around Harry, dragging him against his chest. Harry stepped backward in the same moment, tilting his head so that he could kiss Draco at a less awkward angle than would otherwise have been required.

Draco cradled Harry’s face and let the dawn take him away.

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Rufus closed his eyes.

Yesterday had come the shine of Harry’s magic, and immediate reactions of panic and fear and wonder, and the first open attacks
on werewolf packs, most of which had resulted in the packs escaping with few losses and fleeing deeper into hiding. Rufus had had to listen to people bragging about relatives who had managed to kill werewolves, or congratulations for those who had. They were dealing with the “monstrous menace” that threatened to overtake Britain.

Three days ago, Priscilla had returned empty-handed, with the news that Rufus’s last hope for peace, the appeal to Harry for the greater good and greater number of lives in Britain, had failed. Not only had it failed, it had resulted in two dead Aurors. The others were baying for Harry’s blood and the blood of his karkadann—a karkadann, of all creatures—now. And she had told Rufus, in confidence, about how disgustingly at least one werewolf prisoner had been treated. Rufus knew the name of that werewolf prisoner. She was one of Harry’s closest allies, just to make things better.

Today brought headlines blazing across the papers. The *Quibbler* carried photographs of the dead werewolves that they’d obtained Merlin knew how, the bodies obviously unmarked in the way that meant the use of the Killing Curse, and asked loudly whether the Ministry had granted permission to use the Unforgivables along with their hunting season. The *Vox Populi* trumpeted support for Harry from every page, and demanded to know how the Minister felt concerning the deaths of his people and the retreat of the “real heroes” into one valley in Wales.

The *Daily Prophet*, and his own Floo connections, carried the worst news.

**NEPOTISM IN THE MINISTRY:**

*Amelia Bones’s Niece, Other Relatives of Ministry Officials Committed Crimes*

*By: Rita Skeeter*

The article contained extremely sensitive information concerning the arrests of various Ministry officials’ children, siblings, parents, and other family members, for everything from fraudulent sale of protective charms to use of the Imperius Curse. All that information had been contained in files in Amelia’s office; it could not be destroyed thanks to the fact that the arresting Aurors would be alerted by ward-alarm if that happened, but it could be hidden and hushed up and forgotten about. And it had been. No one was supposed to know it was there, and since the purpose of invading Amelia’s office had seemed to be to mock her and paint her face like a clown’s, no one had checked on the files.

Someone had stolen them, and then given the knowledge to the *Daily Prophet*.

Rufus knew what it would mean. Embarrassment, of course, but also demands for full-scale investigations into the Ministry, re-arrest of some of the worst offenders, and resignation of those who had done the most contortions to protect a loved one.

And then, this morning, he had received a firecall from one of his agents in the French Ministry, to warn him that the pureblood community in France was stirring like a beehive, and all the action was Harry-oriented. Rufus had barely finished speaking to that agent when another contacted him from the Portuguese Ministry. Minister Faria Santa Rita was preparing to issue a declaration condemning the British Ministry’s actions against the *vates*, the agent had said; obviously the British Minister could not see that the war against You-Know-Who was more important to every country of Europe than the war against werewolves.

Rufus’s Ministry was shaking to pieces around his ears.

It seemed that they were to have an earthquake, and a revolution, whether or not they wanted one.

Rufus considered the photograph that Skeeter had chosen to illustrate her story. It showed a scurrying Amelia Bones trying to get out of sight before the camera could capture her; each time she passed across the picture, she wrapped a fold of her robes around her head. It made her look remarkably guilty, which of course was part of Skeeter’s point.

Rufus didn’t feel far different, himself.

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**Intermission: A Leap Into Burning Light**

Snape crouched, his eyes lowered, and listened to the sharp shrieks and cracks ringing through the room. Most of the time, the Dark Lord used magic to torture his prisoners, or at least magic channeled through physical objects. It wasn’t often that he had a...
taste for the more mundane forms of punishment.

Now, though, he was having Lucius whip the Muggle mother of a Mudblood girl who had already died, her ribs piercing her lungs after uncounted rounds of Crucius. Lucius did it as perfectly as he managed every other type of torture. He moved around the woman, managing to make the whip come from an unanticipated direction every time, making her start and flinch and moan and beg for mercy long after she should have known she would receive none. The rest of the Death Eaters knelt on the stone floor of the torture room, in a loose half-circle, while the Dark Lord sat beyond Lucius, on the chair of black stone that he had used the first time Snape met him in the catacombs. Nagini coiled at his feet as usual, and hissed in time with the screams.

Bellatrix Black Lestrange watched with her mouth open, but Snape didn’t think many of the others were any more enthralled than he was. Regulus would certainly have yawned and made some sarcastic remark if he dared. Others trembled on the urge of whispering to a neighbor. But their boredom was real. They simply didn’t take the enjoyment out of this that the Dark Lord did, or they didn’t see the symbolic value of leaving a whipped and broken corpse among the others.

Snape knew that none of them carried the brewing cauldron of hatred, disgust, contempt, and self-contempt in their chests that he did.

And none of them had made the decision he had made—or almost had. He had attended the torture session tonight, even though Voldemort would have exempted him from it to brew a potion if Snape had asked, because he wanted to be sure. Did he really feel nothing as the whip fell again and again? Could he take no pleasure in the thought of doing the same to his own enemies, if the Death Eaters actually managed to capture James Potter and his wife and not let them escape time after time, or if the seduction of Sirius Black worked?

No. He could not. What he preferred was so much more real, the black bones of the world that his mother had always whispered to him were there. It did not cloak itself in symbols. It had no need for black robes and white masks. It did not tire, as the Dark Lord did, of the torture and order an execution too soon.

If he had one of his enemies at his mercy, he would not make mild work of them, and he would not make confusing gestures to show them his hatred. He would tell them of his hatred, and then he would cause them such pain that they could not be in doubt of it.

Of course, he had thought that a short while ago, and he had taken too much time killing the witch he had thought killed Regulus.

He no longer had the clear path running before him, the certainty that he knew the truths of the world even if no one else around him did. Nor did he have the acceptance he used to have, that he could do as others demanded of him, as his Lord demanded of him, and not be touched or broken by it.

Regulus had come into the darkness and was not the less himself. Snape could not say the same.

He wished for a challenge that would make him himself again. He wished for a path that would carry him, not out of the darkness, but through a tunnel placed in the darkness, a narrow beam he would walk upon or perish by falling from. He did not aspire to forgiveness. How could anyone but despise him, when he despised himself?

Except Regulus—but that was a confusing subject and not one he was ready to touch.

Snape wanted to tuck the confusion away, and know what he was. And there was only one man who might be able to tell him.

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It was not easy. It involved two months of dancing attendance on the Dark Lord just a bit too closely, so that he seemed anxious to curry a favor that had never faltered, jealous of a standing Voldemort had always granted him. Of course, he also had to avoid annoying his Lord so severely that he would be tortured or actually demoted. And he had to keep up his brewing and his attention to the politics of the Death Eaters in the meanwhile.

Snape did not mind. It was good practice for the status he expected to have when he returned from Dumbledore’s office. He would be a spy, and he must then keep himself in check at all times, or he would die. He focused the attention on himself, and with every small success he won, making the Dark Lord think a certain thing even when he was armed with the most piercing Legilimency Snape had ever met, he despised himself a bit less. Oh, the sea of contempt and self-loathing was still there and always would be, but he could build a bridge across the surface again.

And at last it worked. The Dark Lord grew just exasperated enough with him to want him at a distance, but not so irritated with
him that he considered Snape a bad servant. He gave Snape the mission on a night when most of the other Death Eaters were out tracking down Aurors and turning their ambushes on them. Snape knelt at the foot of the throne and allowed neither his body nor the surface of his thoughts to give him away.

“You are to discover the general location of both the Potters and the Longbottoms,” Voldemort told Snape. “Rumor is that both Alice Longbottom and Lily Potter are set to deliver at the end of July, but they have retreated into hiding. Find them, my faithful servant. You know why.” Snape was the one who had overheard the prophecy that claimed the one with the power to destroy the Dark Lord would be born as the seventh month died. He thought of it as a bit of stuff and nonsense himself, but bringing back that information—even if it was only a few lines of a more complete prophecy he had not had the time to overhear—had secured his position at his Lord’s side.

“Who is my partner to be, my Lord?” Snape laced his voice with just a bit of an ingratiating whine, as if he could not stand to be gone from his Lord’s side for that long without someone else to get one up on. It worked.

“No partner, Severus,” said Voldemort, and stroked Nagini with one hand, hissing something soothing to her as she lashed her head back and forth. Snape and Nagini had never got on. “You will do this alone.”

Perfect.

“As my Lord commands.”

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Snape felt the pulse of wards as he arrived at the school. He was not surprised. Dumbledore had raised wards that would alert him to the presence of anyone on Hogwarts grounds with a Dark Mark, after a surprise attack that had nearly killed several of the Mudblood children venturing to Hogsmeade.

He continued walking, but he bowed his head, and he limped. He had broken his own leg with a potion in his body to help him endure the pain, and then healed it again, clumsily. It would make him look as though he had taken a beating. That was what he wanted. He knew that Dumbledore would be much less inclined to accept him as truly repentant if he seemed to have planned this. It had to be an impulsive, spur-of-the-moment change of heart. That was what the Headmaster loved in his Gryffindors. That was the weakness that Snape would play to. He would make the Headmaster think he was volunteering to be a spy because his conscience was actually troubling him.

No one needed to know that it was justifications he had trouble coming up with any more, not reasons to keep torturing and killing.

“Stand where you are.”

It was McGonagall who stopped him, of course. Snape would have expected nothing less. He halted, huddling under his cloak, and then slowly lifted his head. He had also used a potion that would leave bruises on his face. He heard her swallow, but she kept her wand steady on him nonetheless as she called for Albus to come out and join her on the grounds.

The Headmaster came. With him came light. He had taken to freeing his magic more and more often since his open battles with Voldemort, and it hung around him in a glimmering white aura.

There is power here, Snape thought. That comforted him. It made it seem more likely, that he would think he could shelter under Dumbledore’s protection. No one sane would leave Voldemort’s side if he didn’t have a sanctuary to run to, another Lord to protect him.

He went to his knees as though the light had overcome him, and began to sob like a child. Another potion insured that the tears came easy. Both the Headmaster and McGonagall had known him as a student, and knew how hard it was for him to weep. It was not something Snape had done easily or willingly even after the attack by the precious golden boys of Gryffindor, the Marauders.

He heard Minerva swallow again. Then she whispered, “Severus?”

“Severus,” Albus echoed, and his voice was sterner. “Why have you come?”

Snape shook his head, letting the tears take his voice, and held up his left arm, shaking the sleeve back from it. He instantly had two wands pointed at him, but that didn’t matter. They would see the knife slashes around the Dark Mark, as though he had tried to cut it free from his flesh.
They would take him into their arms and their hearts. They would accept his tale of repentance and believe it, because they could not imagine why someone would join the Dark Lord in truth, unless they were mad or power-crazed. Hatred of the depth to which Snape bore it was beyond their ken.

They would never know that it was a mixture of Regulus and self-contempt and contempt for the other Death Eaters and Regulus again that had driven him here. They would demand sacrifices of him. No one could take the Dark Mark unless they were willing, and so the Order of the Phoenix had no way to obtain a spy in Voldemort’s camp unless a loyal Death Eater turned to them. The few who had changed their minds so far had simply fled. Snape could change that. They would demand that he do so. Dumbledore would say, with a sharp twinkle in his eyes, that it was the only way Snape could show he was truly sorry for his crimes.

Snape would let them believe he was reluctant. He would use the danger to learn himself again and steady his soul against the pounding waves of confusion. They would never think to look for that, because they would not believe that was important enough for someone to risk his life and his body.

Dumbledore would look for his motives, but Snape had hidden his motives from Voldemort, who was the better Legilimens. He would fail. He would think Snape was sincere, not least because of the tears and the show of weakness.

He would not realize that one could show a lesser weakness to protect a greater, and most especially to cure the greater.

That was another thing Snape’s mother had taught him.

On the night he changed his life to change his soul, his cheeks were wet with tears, but the innards of his mind were dry.

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Chapter Thirty: A War Within Their Hearts and Minds

“Come in, Severus.”

She had known it would come to this someday, Minerva told herself as she watched Severus stride into her office and sit down in the chair in front of her desk. Yes, other parents might have been able to refrain from following their children into battle, but most of those parents didn’t teach in Hogwarts, and none of their children were engaged in raising rebellion against the Ministry. And none of the parents were Severus, and none of the children were Harry.

In the moments before Severus began to speak, Minerva had time to study his eyes, and know she was losing him. Perhaps she had lost him long ago. His first loyalty had never been to the school. It had been to Albus at one point, the man who had rescued him from the darkness and given him a life worth living. Then it had been to Harry, and it had stayed that way even through arrests and battles and losses.

Best to accept that she would always have had a temporary Potions Professor and Deputy Headmaster in him, rather than a permanent one.

“You will need to hire Slughorn to fulfill the Potions position, Minerva,” he said, his voice astonishingly composed. “I fear that I can no longer give you my best service. He has years of experience. He will also make a good Head of Slytherin House. He understands those who do not have problems that consume the whole world.” And Severus smiled, faintly, the first time Minerva had seen him do so since the term began. “I have not understood them in some time.”

Minerva nodded, a deep stickiness in her throat that prevented her from speaking for long moments. It felt like the Sugar Quills she no longer ate for this very reason. “You are going to join Harry?”

“I did not say that.”

And she saw the deep lines carved around his mouth, and the wariness in his eyes, and realized that he did not know, even now, if she might turn him over to the Ministry if he admitted his destination.

Impulse made her lean across the desk between them and put her hand on his arm. Severus tried to sit back, or sit up, and reach for his wand. Minerva maintained her grip, staring into his eyes. It was rare that anyone who knew he was a Legilimens did that, and it gave him enough pause for Minerva to have her say.
“I am on Hogwarts’s side in this battle,” she said. “The side of Hogwarts is not the side of the Ministry. You are one of my students, and so is Harry. I would never betray either of you to the Aurors, Severus.”

“You may not have a choice.” His mouth was tight, his eyes shadowed, and still he looked better than he had on most days he taught Potions. “Not if the Unspeakables, who are also his enemies, come. They will take the information from you before you know what they are doing. They will insure that you can tell no one else about it, and that you do not even remember their visit.”

“They cannot corrupt Godric, or the other Founders,” said Minerva. “Godric assured me of this. The anchor-stones are older than the vast majority of the Unspeakables’ artifacts. Do not worry about me, Severus. I have my own defenses. Leave me to guard your back, and go to your son.”

He stared at her, and Minerva tilted her head up, letting his sight flare into her mind and soul. He would read everything there. He would read the determination to protect Hogwarts and her children; he would read the difference between what she wanted to do and what she could do; he would read how she had resolved that particular battle, by making herself into a protective Gryffindor lion and ensuring that no one would be able to use her or her inner knowledge of Harry as a political weapon.

He lowered his head, and blinked. Minerva waited. It was by far the deepest Legilimency she had ever suffered from Severus, and it made her head hurt. But if it reassured him, then it was worth it, it was all worth it.

And then Severus said, “I never understood you,” and it made her want to cry, and her throat burn fiercely that she could not, after all, go with him.

“No, you didn’t,” she said quietly.

He said nothing more, and he didn’t apologize. He stood and walked out of the office, with nothing more than a quick head-bob.

Minerva sat back and closed her eyes. She felt a hand on her shoulder: Helga, deepest and quietest of the Founders, coming to soothe her in this moment. That she could not do anything else didn’t help, because she had acted in accordance with responsibility and duty.

But if she had been able to act solely for herself, then she would rather have followed Harry to battle. Gryffindors might be born to protect, but they were also born to go to war.

The choice she had made did not invalidate that part of herself, and never would.

******

Her head hurt.

Priscilla drank a headache potion, choking at the taste. She had never liked it, but she had never liked the way that her headaches tended to linger for hours unless she drank one, either. It was rare that she had headaches any more, and even rarer the ones like this one, bristling across her forehead like bones shifting beneath the skin.

She set aside the vial when she was done, and leaned back in the chair, and closed her eyes. The dragonhide pushed against her neck, smooth and soft and comforting. That didn’t ease the feeling that the rest of her body was a wishbone tugged on by two impatient children.

She owed allegiances in both directions in this damn war, and she had no idea what to do.

Priscilla had hoped that matters would resolve when she went to Harry, which had been the reason that she had agreed instantly when Rufus offered the mission to her. If she could just persuade him out of starting a war, then her course would be clear. The rebellion would collapse without him. Thomas would come home. He might have to spend some time in Tullianum, but Priscilla was confident she could win him free. Harry was the one they all wanted, the prominent criminal. No one would care about a man who fired a few curses at Aurors to give them six legs, next to that.

And she would have answered her own honor, which had driven her to join the Aurors in the first place. It was not right that some people might get better treatment than others, that passions might rule over reason. If a murderer was killed because the Aurors let a member of the murder victim’s family into the criminal’s cell—while the criminal was chained and had no wand—then that was not justice. Priscilla disliked rage. She distrusted fanatics. She preferred the rules that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement used, because they were at least rules and they said that someone arrested for a particularly bad prank and someone arrested for being a Death Easter both still had the right to breathe without pain, to eat, to drink, and to stay distant from
vengeance-obsessed relatives.

Before Harry had sent the Dementors away, the Aurors had had holding cells in the Ministry for those criminals who hadn’t been sentenced yet, or who were to serve lesser punishments than going to Azkaban. Priscilla had preferred that. The cells were either in the Department itself or scattered on other floors. It was possible to know in an instant, or have someone see it, if a prisoner was being mistreated. It wasn’t possible in Azkaban, of course, with how rarely inspections came there, but at least in Azkaban one knew the prisoners had already been tried and sentenced, and they had been handled humanely before then.

And then had come Tullianum, with holding of sentenced criminals and criminals awaiting trial all in one place. More to the point, it was near the Department of Mysteries, and far away from the rest of the Ministry.

Inspections were rare now, and abuse was easier to hide.

Priscilla was disgusted and sickened to realize just how easy.

The Aurors were not what they had been, not if fear could push them to hurt werewolves that way. Priscilla had assumed that most of her people believed about werewolves what she did: they were monsters three times a month, and there were laws against them that one might feel one way or the other about, but a werewolf in custody was the same as any other prisoner. It wasn’t up to Aurors to change the laws. It was up to them to enforce them, and to act with honor.

And now she found out that wasn’t true.

She could not remain where she was.

On the other hand, she could not go to Harry. He had enacted no neutral standard, either. He would kill those who opposed him. Priscilla believed him when he said that he was willing to do anything to secure political freedom for werewolves and other magical creatures, whether he said that by word or by magic. That meant no limitations. That might mean a code of honor for prisoners and the like, but she had no way of telling that. And what would happen if he caught the people who had attacked the werewolf packs yesterday, or those of her Aurors who had abused Hawthorn Parkinson? Could they expect mercy?

Priscilla would have said yes a while ago, when Harry still acted within limitations. Now she horribly feared the answer was no. If Harry had set himself up as judge and executioner, then it almost certainly was.

She could not go to him on the off chance that she might make things better. She was no clever thinker, to come up with new laws. She enforced them, and she would not be able to stand by and silent if Harry insisted on doing things without the rule of law, or fudged matters because one person was a werewolf and another wasn’t. She would only be a thorn in his side, rather than a help.

And neither could she remain in the hypocritical Ministry that had betrayed everything she believed in.

Priscilla took a deep breath, drew out parchment and quill and ink, and began to write her resignation.

******

“I don’t know how to react. This is so far outside anything that I ever imagined happening.”

Connor had listened to an answer like that for the last few days. He had always been patient. He had always patted Parvati’s shoulder, and told her that he understood, and that he found it overwhelming sometimes, too. Then she would turn around and lean her head on his shoulder and cry, and Connor could stroke her hair and marvel over how ordinary all this was, and how it wasn’t the kind of life he would have expected to have after twelve years as the Boy-Who-Lived. He liked it that Parvati wasn’t a shining heroine of the kind that his mother had once whispered he would marry, because no one else deserved him. She was someone he had to work to deserve, just as he was sometimes a person she had to work to deserve.

But he thought this particular phase had gone on for long enough. They were Gryffindors. They ought to face what was bothering them. Parvati was hiding from the monster under the bed. Connor, though, thought that the best way to get rid of a monster hiding under the bed was to challenge it to a duel.

“Parvati,” he said.

As if she knew what he would say, her shoulders tensed, and she stared at the far wall of the sixth-year boys’ room, empty except for them. Ron had cleared out easily, with a look Connor didn’t have to work hard to interpret. Seamus and Dean were working
on homework down in the Gryffindor common room. Neville was—somewhere.

“I think we have to choose how to react,” Connor went on. “Draco joined Harry, and he’s loyal to him. And most of Harry’s allies are Dark wizards. If we think they’re doing the right thing, then we have to accept the fact that sometimes Dark wizards can do the right thing.”

“We don’t know if they’re right,” Parvati whispered.

“You think the Ministry is?” Connor would be thunder-struck if she thought that. She had often told him how much she liked Remus, and how she wished he could have come back to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts. She was not prejudiced. Connor knew his girlfriend better than that.

“No,” said Parvati. “But I just don’t think that anyone is. How can they be? They ought to talk to each other, not toss around magic like they don’t know what they’re doing.”

Connor thought for a moment. “Harry’s burst of magic frightened you, didn’t it?” he asked. She had done strange things before when she was frightened. Managed to hold innocent remarks against Harry, for example. She had also held not-so-innocent remarks against Draco, but Connor couldn’t blame her for that. He had done the same thing, and he wasn’t afraid of Draco; he just thought he was a right git most of the time.

“Yes,” said Parvati, tense as a bowstring, sitting with her arms wrapped around herself. Connor wanted to hug her, but she looked as if she would shrug off the embrace, so he kept his hands at his side. “How could—I didn’t know that he was that powerful, Connor. It was enough magic to destroy the school.”

“Yes,” Connor had to agree, because he really didn’t think she was wrong. “But he didn’t.”

“But imagine if he came back and got angry,” Parvati whispered. “What if he wasn’t able to restrain himself? What if he hurt someone?”

“He’s restrained himself so far,” said Connor, and felt his face heat up. “Think of the patience he had with us during that last week he was here. Do you think he wouldn’t have made our heads explode if he really wanted to? He must have wanted to, and it didn’t happen. I don’t think you need to worry about my brother’s self-control, Parvati. Besides,” he added, because he knew this had been a problem between Harry and Parvati somehow, though he still didn’t know exactly how, “you know that I love him and want to spend time around him. Would I really want to do that if he was a barely leashed killer?”

“I don’t know,” Parvati whispered, ducking her head. “I just really don’t know, Connor. I told you that I needed to have time to think about this.”

Connor narrowed his eyes. “And you’ve had some time. Now tell me your decision. Are you going to start saying tomorrow that you support Harry? Or are you just going to sit in scared silence like all the other rabbits?”

“It’s not that simple,” said Parvati. “Maybe you can trust him because he’s your brother. But what if he got angry at me and decided that he needed me gone?” She rushed on before Connor could object to that. “I did trust him before, somewhat. He went through all those awful curses the Ravenclaws fired at him, and never lost his temper. But this rebellion, and the magic he released—he’s changed, hasn’t he? How do we know he isn’t going to come back to the school and be so different that he might hurt someone, even if it is accidentally?”

“We don’t,” said Connor evenly. “But we can’t go around living in fear, Parvati. It’s stupid and not very Gryffindor. And I swore the oaths of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, that I would think rationally before I acted. I wasn’t thinking of those around Harry and Malfoy. Now I’m trying to do better. And I say that we give Harry a chance. Until he actually make someone else’s head explode, I don’t think there’s a reason to believe he will.”

Parvati sat in silence, head bowed.

“Well?” Connor prodded her.

She looked up at him, eyes flashing, and he realized they’d stepped beyond the boundary of her tolerance. “I do have the right to think about this on my own, you know,” she snapped. “You made up your own mind quickly, but that doesn’t mean that I need to.

“Yes, you need to,” said Connor, his own temper rising. “Because I need to know if I can count on my girlfriend to support me, or not.” So far, there was little open opposition to Harry’s rebellion in the school, but there were lots of stares and loud questions.
about whether Connor was sure that Harry was right. It was lonely. He wanted Parvati to stand at his side, or make up her mind to stand on the opposite one. Then he could argue with her, loudly, and have a different way of handling things.

Parvati shook her head, furiously, and her eyes shone with both anger and tears. “Don’t push me, Connor. It’s not that simple. It’s not.”

“So you’re on the opposite one, for right now,” said Connor, and pushed back from the bed, and stood up. “All right, then. That’s really all I wanted to know.” He glared at her. “So you can leave, now. This is my room, after all.”

“Shared with four others,” said Parvati, but she tossed her hair and got off the bed. “We’re going to talk about this later, Connor,” she said, catching his gaze and holding it.

Connor had one of those surges of intuition that he received sometimes from Merlin knew where. “Why?” he asked quietly. “Why are you surprised? You were the one who claimed to know how important spending time with my brother was to me, and you were the one who comforted me when Harry was too busy to notice. Are you actually surprised that I don’t want to choose between you? Or were you counting on me to choose you?”

Parvati turned away and padded to the door, but not before he saw her deeply wounded look. Connor stifled the impulse to go after her and apologize, and instead flopped down on his bed and crossed his arms over his chest, huffing.

He was right, damn it.

******

This was really dangerous. She couldn’t even Apparate. And if her family found out what she was doing, then they would punish her so severely that she cringed just thinking about it. She’d probably have to have a guard every time she left the Gryffindor common room, and her mum would probably get Hermione to do it. And Hermione would do it, because she would be horrified, too.

But Ginny didn’t care. She had felt Harry’s magic, and it had inspired in her a yearning she’d never felt before, to be there. It wasn’t as if she could concentrate on homework lately, anyway. Who cared about writing some stupid three-foot essay on the proper way to prepare chopped liondragon scales, where there was a war going on out there and she had to be part of it?

She’d packed all her clothes and all her school things; she wasn’t going to leave something behind, just in case they found her gone before she could reach Harry’s valley and got Hermione to cast a tracking spell on something she owned, which Ginny had heard Hermione talking about being able to do. Her trunk was shrunken and in her pocket; she’d had to wait a day because she hadn’t mastered the Shrinking Charm on the first try. She had left the common room with a casual remark about homework and the library, carrying a book; she didn’t think anyone had noticed it was one of her textbooks, which she shrank the moment she was out of sight and tucked in her robe pocket, too.

Then she walked briskly towards the Quidditch shed, looking over her shoulder every now and then, but trying not to be too obvious about it. She was a Chaser on the Gryffindor team this year, and she could claim that she wanted to go to a late practice if someone caught her. It was late, but not that late, just before dinner.

She planned to get on her broom and fly west and south. She knew how to keep out of sight of Muggles; that was one thing Arthur Weasley had taught all his children early, since they lived near plenty of them. And the track of Harry’s magic was still hanging in the air, the sweet delicious smell of it. Ginny knew she could follow it.

She made it down the stairs to the first floor. She made it through the stampede of students heading for the Great Hall early. She made it to the doors.

“Ginny?”

Ginny felt her back stiffen and her fingers twitch, reaching for her wand; the instincts Moody had trained into them for the Midsummer battle last year were still functioning. Then she reminded herself that the whole point was not to be caught, and there were still people passing towards the Great Hall. She couldn’t act like this was anything unusual.

She turned around and pasted a smile on her face. “Yes, Neville?”

Neville blinked at her and shuffled his feet. “Where—where are you going?” he asked. He had a pot in one hand, and a plant in it. Ginny didn’t recognize it on a quick glance. He was probably taking it out to one of the greenhouses, though.
“Out to practice,” said Ginny. At least Neville wasn’t on the Quidditch team, and was unlikely to know their schedule. “I missed the Quaffle seven times during our last practice, can you believe it?” She faked a little laugh, and hoped no one was listening, because it sounded horrible to her.

“Oh. B-but—” Neville bit his lip, then took a deep breath and said, “But Ron is in the Great Hall already. So how can there be a practice?”

_Damn. Damn bloody damn._ Ginny controlled the impulse to just Stun Neville and make a run for it. She might make it to the Quidditch pitch and grab her broom before anyone stopped her, but it was unlikely.

On the other hand, Neville had been part of the dueling club, too, and he’d fought in the Midsummer battle. There was the chance that he just might understand. Ginny darted a glance left and right, and saw no one watching them. Even the cluster of Hufflepuffs passing right by were talking about dinner and speculating about whether there would be treacle tart for dessert tonight.

“Listen, Neville,” she said, and stared into his eyes. She’d found that intimidated people. “I’m running away to join Harry.”

“Why?” Neville whispered. At least he had the sense to keep his voice down.

“Because I feel so _useless_ here,” said Ginny bluntly. “And there might be something I can do there.” She winced as she said the next words, but she had to say them. Moody had taught them too well. Useless bodies in battle weren’t worth the time it took to protect them. “I can fight, if he needs someone to do that. And even if he just needs people to chop potions ingredients and help with mundane tasks like cooking—because he’s not getting food from house elves, now—I’d rather do that _there_ than _here_. I feel like—I have to do _something_ to help. I can’t just sit in Hogwarts and ignore what’s happening.”

Neville considered her for a long moment. Ginny shifted from foot to foot, and hoped he wouldn’t make it much longer. Someone was bound to start looking at them sooner or later. If he did it for a minute more, Ginny promised herself, she would Stun him and run, consequences be damned.

Finally, he smiled. Ginny blinked, her hope rising. _Does he understand? Is he going to let me go?_

“You can come with me,” Neville whispered. At least he had the sense to keep his voice down.

“What?”

Neville flushed pink, but nodded. “I—he asked me to research plants that could help stop Indigena Yaxley,” he said. He hefted the pot in his hand. “I’ve finally developed this, but Professor Sprout said that she doesn’t want to send the seeds to Harry. She had relatives killed by werewolves too, y’see. So I’m taking the plants to him, and then, if he tells me to leave, I will.”

“How are you going to get there?” Ginny whispered back. Neville was hopeless on a broom.

“Gran’s taking me,” said Neville proudly, his ears picking up the flush from his face. “She’s happy I’m taking my responsibilities seriously. So I’m going.” He smiled, and Ginny thought she saw a glow of magic around him, bright and content. He had been so happy last year when the Light had called on him to contribute magic to Harry’s fight against the wild Dark, she remembered. “She’s meeting me on the outer edge of the grounds in five minutes. She can Apparate us both.”

Ginny grinned. She couldn’t wait until they both got to Harry and he saw that he had more help than he’d ever imagined.

“You’re the bravest of them all, Neville,” she said. “Even his brother is just sitting around here.”

Neville flushed and smiled, but luckily didn’t stammer. In fact, he swept a ridiculous bow, nodded to the doors, and said, “Shall we go, my lady?”

Ginny laughed, and hooked her arm with his, being careful not to jostle the pot he carried. “Lead on, my gallant knight.”

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“Hermione? I’d like to talk to you.”

Hermione marked her place in her book with a finger and looked up. “Changed your mind about the Grand Unified Theory, Zach?” she asked sweetly.
His face mottled with red. “I asked you not to call me that,” he hissed at her.

“You also asked me not to remind you that I was Muggleborn, last time we talked.” Hermione turned to face him, trying to stir her face from the distinctively evil grin it wanted to settle into. “By all means, Zacharias. What have you come to talk to me about this time?”

Zacharias took several deep breaths, but if that was actually an effective way of calming himself down, Hermione had yet to see it. She studied him and waited. He was handsome enough, she supposed, and he had taken some effort with his robes this morning.

But that was the point. Hermione wouldn’t have minded if he wore fine robes; he had money, he could afford it. But he had chosen robes that had a badger over the heart, and badgers dancing all along the hem, as if he wanted to remind her he was of Hufflepuff’s blood. Hermione didn’t think he needed them. The badger-shaped scar on his cheek said that he was of Hufflepuff’s blood, and, more, it documented the risk that came from that, and how Zacharias had accepted the risk anyway, and gone angry into war for love of her. Why he wanted more than that—why he wanted to make her think he was an arrogant pureblood instead of a wizard who would use whatever magic he possessed to avenge his loved ones—was beyond Hermione.

“I think we should be friends again,” said Zacharias.

“Just friends?” Hermione asked.

He flushed once more and shook his head. “More than that,” he said. “I love you, Hermione.”

“I think I could love you too, Zacharias,” said Hermione consideringly. “But you haven’t given me much reason lately to think that you love me. You talk about my having to abandon all the things I’m interested in if they’re Muggle. You don’t want me to visit my parents, or you want me to ‘educate’ them in how to be the parents of a pureblood witch and the grandparents of pureblood grandchildren. And you want me to marry you right out of school. What if I don’t want that?”

“But that’s the way everybody does it!” Zacharias exclaimed. “Then you can have time later to work on whatever you’re interested in. You raise the children first, and have heirs. But you’re going to live at least a hundred years, Hermione. Do you really want to be raising children when you’re forty-seven or fifty-five? You do it when you’re younger.”

“If and when I marry and have children, I wouldn’t think of it as a chore to finish as soon as possible, or just a way to have heirs,” said Hermione quietly. “I would treat it like a good thing, an important thing, because it deserves to be treated that way.” She pushed a curl of her hair behind her shoulder. “But I don’t even know if I want children, Zacharias. Not right now. Maybe I’d change my mind in a few years.”

He stared at her, and couldn’t seem to think of anything to say.

“I know,” said Hermione. “I know that you want children to have heirs. But I’m not pureblood, Zacharias. I can learn the rituals and wear the clothing, but I’m not going to think like one just because you want me to. I don’t care about securing the next generation of the Smith line. I wouldn’t care if we had a child who was a Squib, and I would try to make her life as easy as possible. I don’t care that much about the definitions of Light and Dark, except that I think the Light does make things better for Muggleborns in general. I can’t care about the things that you want me to care about. The Grand Unified Theory just showed that up, not made it happen. I think we would be awfully unhappy if we did get married.” She leaned forward and held his eyes. “Don’t you think so?”

“Hermione—”

“What?”

“My mother—” said Zacharias, and stopped.

“I know,” said Hermione, and shrugged. Even though Zacharias was legally the adult heir of the Smith line, since they preserved the old custom of majority coming at fifteen instead of seventeen, Zacharias still craved his mother’s approval. Hermione had met Miriam Smith briefly last year, when she’d come to the school to ride one of the golden horses. It had been a brief and chilly meeting. “But you did say in June that you loved me, and that you didn’t understand pureblood ideals if they made you reject someone like me. What happened to that, Zacharias?”

“There wasn’t this—thing then,” said Zacharias stiffly.
Hermione took a deep breath. “So it would have been all right for you to say that you loved me and didn’t care I was a Muggleborn in the privacy of our own home, but outside it you would have cared what people said and did about you having a Muggleborn wife?”

“Hermione, there are people who will be happy to help us and sell to us and trade with us,” said Zacharias, putting a hand on her arm. “As long as you behave like a pureblood. But if you go around saying what—you say, then they’ll get offended. Surely you can see that? They’re all representatives of very old families. Muggleborns who are too loud threaten them.”

_I did misjudge him._ Hermione met his eyes. “It’s fun to make people think I’m a pureblood,” she said. “But it’s not enough any more. They’re going to think I’m some kind of—trained monkey in the end, once they find out the truth. I want things to really change, Zacharias, and fitting in won’t do it.”

He looked at her, his face a picture of misery, and then turned and left the library. Hermione supposed that was an improvement over their last two fights, which had ended with them screaming at each other.

She sighed and turned back to her books. Revolution hurt.

*******

Rufus barely studied Priscilla’s resignation before he tossed it into the fire. He knew it would be serious. Priscilla always was.

He sat back and put his hands together, and took several deep breaths. What he planned to do would have been easier if Priscilla stood with him. _No matter._

“Sir?” Percy Weasley was watching him anxiously from behind his desk.

Rufus stood. He would have Percy, and the two Aurors who had been with him when he went down to try and stop Harry’s invasion of Tullianum; embarrassment about their utter failure to do anything that day seemed to have made them more loyal. And he would have help from Aurelius Flint, he was fairly certain. There was a portrait on the wall of his office, one of a parrot, and Rufus’s grandmother Leonora had proven amicable to slipping into it now and then and conveying information to Flint that the Unspeakables couldn’t hear. At least, Rufus hoped they remained unaware of it.

And there were allies outside the Ministry, if he chose to call upon them.

“Sir?” Percy repeated.

“Come with me,” Rufus ordered, and the younger wizard fell into place behind him, no questions asked. There were times, Rufus thought, when Auror training was definitely good for something.

He made his way to the door of his office and stood there, his hand resting on the knob. The moment he opened it, then things would change, and he would lose what was at least a secure seat in the middle of the maelstrom, even if it was no longer a comfortable one.

He reminded himself it was secure only because no one considered him worth paying attention to anymore, and opened the door.

The two Aurors who waited outside snapped to attention.

“Come with me,” he repeated, and they hastened to do so. Rufus strode up the hallway, walking fast enough that he didn’t think his bad leg showed.

He was going to get his Ministry back.

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**Chapter Thirty-One: The Ritual of Cincinnatus**

Rufus met Aurelius Flint on the fourth floor, at the entrance to the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Flint had two other people with him, muffled in cloaks. Rufus eyed them sharply before he relaxed. The cloaks were dark green, not gray, and really, while he still thought Flint might betray him, he wouldn’t do it via the Unspeakables. Flint seemed to have as much reason to be tense around and frightened of them as Rufus did.
“Only two?” Rufus asked, in the low voice, less piercing than a whisper, they’d taught him to use on Auror raids. He looked Flint in the eye, and saw him make a shallow movement, more bob of his head than nod.

“Fewer willing than I thought,” he said.

Rufus could understand that. There were some people who, driven against the wall, would gather their courage and be willing to stand up and fight the Unspeakables, but there were many who were too afraid, or simply determined to retain a neutral position where the Unspeakables would have no reason to bother them. Rufus had been one of the latter himself at one point. When he’d become Head Auror and then Minister, he had to deal with the Unspeakables, but he still thought it better to remain outside their webs when possible.

So we are seven. Rufus let no one see his grimace. He could only hope that Griselda Marchbanks had managed to sweet-talk nine people into coming with her. Of course, he needed to hope for a lot of things, including the luck to reach Courtroom Ten safely.

“This way,” he said, and made for the walls. He carried the stone plaque that would grant them access to the Ministry’s inner staircases in his pocket; he had also hoped he wouldn’t have to reveal its existence to any strangers. If Flint had gathered others, then perhaps—

Rufus cut off the thoughts with a shake of his head. Blaming his comrades was a bad move. He wouldn’t get any more.

He touched the plaque to the wall, and the wall yawned. Rufus looked down into the darkness, and wondered if it was a metaphor for what they were walking into. The Unspeakables had plenty of magic he didn’t understand. Would they step down into the staircase and never emerge? Or would only their bodies come back, talking and smiling, their minds locked into new thoughts or altered by Unspeakable artifacts? They would have to pass far too close to the Department of Mysteries for Rufus’s liking.

You are thinking too much.

Rufus put his foot on the staircase leading down.

******

“And you think you are ready?”

“I think I am.”

Joseph said nothing, but Snape had learned to read his silences. The Seer was not convinced. It had only been a few days ago, he might as well have said, that Snape was struggling to rebuild his mental walls after one of the dreams. Did he want to go to Harry as a guardian, or the burden he had turned out to be when he couldn’t control his own temper in a house with werewolves? And in Woodhouse there would be many more werewolves, including the one who had threatened to infect him and reached out and placed her hand on his arm…

Snape shrugged the memory away, and slid the last vial into the traveling case. Those were thickly padded with bicorn fur to insure that the glass stayed intact through the vagaries of Apparition. They would have to be. Joseph had never seen Woodhouse, so Snape would have to Apparate them both, along with all the Potions supplies he intended to bring with him.

“What will you do if you aren’t ready?” Joseph asked the question of the walls, the door, the hearth, everything but Snape.

“Make myself ready.”

“You cannot know—“

Snape turned around and fixed him with a sharp eye. “Yes, I can,” he said, with an intensity, if not a volume, that seemed to convince Joseph to shut up. “I was—weak before.” He grimaced, but this was a man he had already told far more damning and humiliating weaknesses to, so he pushed himself to speak. “I preferred to remain within my own head and content myself with my bitterness, how no one would ever understand me, and that others were lauded as heroes while I, who had done far more, received stares and sneers and sobs.” He held up his left arm, and shook the sleeve back to force Joseph to confront the Dark Mark. He had noticed the Seer still found it hard to look at. Sure enough, he glanced away, and Snape calmed as he regained a measure of control over the situation.

That had been the problem all along, he thought. Control. He had allowed others to define him. He had snapped at the werewolf’s taunting as if he were once more a schoolboy. He had flung objects at Harry’s head as if he were younger than that—a child of
four or five unable to control the simplest and most laughable impulses. He had endured the dreams with the ultimate weakness. A stronger choice would have been to accept the Seers’ help with them from the beginning, or else to take Dreamless Sleep and avoid them.

The moment he had grasped the fact that he had no choice and began pulling himself out of the pit with both hands, his life had improved. He still required Joseph’s help, but even his need for that was lessening day by day. And with a small number of simple techniques rooted in the more disgusting memories, he had more and more control of their interaction.

He had always known that about himself. It was why he had such an affinity for Potions, why he had hated Walpurgis Night, why he had wished there was some way to control what happened to Harry long after it became clear there wasn’t. He needed to feel as though there was something he controlled. The focus had needed to change from his wallowing in self-pity to his life, and that had actually worked when he made the change.

“And now that is done,” Snape continued. “Now I have remembered once again that many of my enemies and those who hurt me are dead or in confinement—” reminding himself of James Potter rotting in Tullianum had helped hurry his recovery enormously “—and that those who remain will never grant me the respect I wish as long as I hide in the past. I know that while I remain distant from Harry, others could influence him in ways I would not approve of. No one will grant me the gifts I wish to receive. I must take them.”

“I fail to see,” Joseph said, in the water-voice, “how that life is different than the one you were living before you came to the Sanctuary.”

Snape met his eyes and felt able to really sneer at him for the first time. The Seer could glimpse souls, find words that irritated and pinched and forced Snape to think of things he would rather not, and persist through flares of temper that would have made even Dumbledore back off. But he did not know everything, and with this remark, he proved how little.

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“Because I intend to keep having the dreams;” said Snape. “I intend to keep talking to you. Is that not why you came from the Sanctuary? To keep me talking?”

Joseph frowned. “Yes, but I will not allow you to simply put everything back together the way it was. You can’t. The walls are shattered, and there would only be death, if not for you, then someone else—“

“I understand this,” Snape interrupted. “But I need no longer make healing my sole passion. I have advanced far enough in it that I can do other things at the same time. That is what Harry once said he would do, and what I have finally gathered enough courage to join him in. It is foolish to think the healing could be completed all at once, when you yourself said it would take years.”

“Years that you need,” said Joseph.

“Years that I do not have,” Snape snarled, “when my son is at war—“ he had also gathered the courage to call Harry by that name in Joseph’s hearing, now “—and I could aid him in ways that no other can or will. I will continue the healing. I will speak with you. I will have the dreams. But I will not become a whimpering patient and then a new man. I will have more of the past in me than you approve of.” He took a step forward, and Joseph backed away, the first time he had done so. Snape exulted inside, but kept it off his face. “Harry did the same thing, though it took me some time to realize that. He did not become the Slytherin hero I wanted when I first started training him. He changed. His present is always marked by his past. Like father, like son, I would say.”

And like past, like present. The dream two nights ago had reminded him that he had been a good actor, that when he first came to Dumbledore he had carried the weight of two Lords’ gazes on his shoulders and made them both think he was their man. That his convictions had shifted later was of no matter.

He should have remembered that he could fool most everyone he chose, when he wanted to make the effort.

He would act as if he were more healed than he really was. This time, he would allow no taunting werewolf to pierce his shields, any more than he had allowed Lucius Malfoy’s taunting to do the same when they were both Death Eaters. And in time, the act would become reality, the lie truth.

Joseph, he saw, had nothing to say in response to his declaration. Snape raised an eyebrow and turned to make sure the final set of vials was securely packed.

******
That journey downstairs in the darkness was one of the most surreal Rufus ever experienced.

He expected, at every step, to be stopped. Or perhaps the walls, barely seen in the light of the *Lumos* carried on Flint’s wand, would blur and time would stretch around him, and he would wake in his office with new, Unspeakable-planted, thoughts in his head, and think this had all been a bad dream. He accomplished each step, and still he knew the next one would be the end of this. Even wondering why the Unspeakables had let them get this far if they knew what he intended did not ease Rufus’s worries. They would be waiting at the end. They would be waiting on the next turn of the staircase. They would be waiting in Courtroom Ten when he opened the door, if by some miracle they got that far.

And then they reached the bottom, and opened the door onto the tenth level of the Ministry, into the corridor where Draco Malfoy had stunned him. Rufus blinked for a long moment. There were no Unspeakables in sight.

There would be, at any moment.

He led his people past the hidden door of Tullianum, and through another door into a different corridor, the one that most visitors were likely to see, if they were summoned to stand before the Wizengamot. He frowned as they walked up it, because something was different. Some pressure and presence of magic he usually felt was gone, or something new had been added. He could think of only two candidates. Neither was good news. Either the Stone had noticed them and was extending its influence into the tunnel, or the Unspeakables had removed the wards that usually guarded the place and were no more irritating to a trained Auror than music in the background. Yet there was no sign of the Unspeakables.

Flint gave a loud sniff beside him. Rufus glanced at him, unable to decide if that had been a snort of contempt or not, and then realized it was an actual sniff. Flint’s nose was wrinkled, his eyes studying the corridor ahead as if he would force the stones to give up their secrets.

“What is it?” Rufus asked.

Flint shook his head, but his eyes didn’t stop scanning. “Familiar smell,” he said shortly. “Smelled something like it before, on some of the artifacts we handled. Don’t know what it is, though.”

Rufus had to accept that. They reached the door of Courtroom Ten, the one that led to the gallery, and stepped through it.

The room was empty, and so quiet that the echoes of their footsteps sounded as if there were half a hundred of them. Rufus shut the door behind him, still tense. Flint’s information had indicated that Courtroom Ten was specifically warded against the magic of the Stone—something one of the Ministers had done years ago, so that the Wizengamot’s decisions would be truly objective, without influence from the Department of Mysteries. Rufus could have laughed at the idea that the Wizengamot would manage objectivity at all, outside influence cut off or not, but he had been too grateful at the news that a place might exist where they could talk unheard by the Unspeakables.

And too pessimistic, at the same time, that they would ever manage to use it. He looked one more time for the Department of Mysteries people he was sure must be here. Nothing and no one greeted his eyes. The room remained empty, and since they had stopped walking, the loudest sounds were Flint’s sniffs.

Rufus looked out into the vast sunken courtroom with the single chained chair where Minister Fudge and Severus Snape and Harry and Harry’s parents had all sat in their time, and shook his head. He wondered if he would ever stand trial there. If Amelia Bones or someone else took the Minister’s office, he probably would.

But things had gone too far. He had to take this risk, even if it killed him or threw him out of office—and he suspected it would.

He turned to his people. “Griselda Marchbanks is coming, with enough other people to make a difference, I hope,” he said, and drew his wand, his gaze going to Percy and the two Aurors who had followed him down. “Flint, I’ll ask for an oath from you later, and your companions, if you are sure they can be trusted to give one.”

“They can,” said Flint. One of the green-cloaked wizards moved his head in a nod. And Rufus had to accept that, because they needed the numbers.

He turned to Percy, whose mouth was open. “I need you to swear an Unbreakable Vow, Percy,” he told him quietly, catching his attention less with the words than the use of his first name. “What we’re going to do here cannot leave this room, and I’ll need you to tell a number of extremely dangerous lies to safeguard it. Can you do that?”
Percy’s eyes were wide, though less wide, Rufus noticed, than the ones of the second Auror who had followed him downstairs. He shook his head, but not in denial. “I don’t understand, Minister. What is this?”

“Invocation of a tradition that most wouldn’t expect me to invoke,” said Rufus, with a small smile he knew was nasty, “because I don’t have enough people. But what I need is bodies. There are going to be seventeen of us here, if all goes well—a third of the number of the Wizengamot, and one of them the Minister. That’s what we need. Of course, we also need all our stories to agree.”

Percy swallowed, the click in his throat bouncing off the walls. “Unbreakable Vows kill you if you don’t fulfill them,” he whispered.

“They do.” Rufus refused to look away from his face.

Percy stared into his eyes as if he’d never seen him before. Rufus looked back. He was fairly sure Percy’s loyalty was to him, not his family and not the Ministry and not the Auror program, but if he was wrong, this would be the time he found out.

“What happens if I refuse?” Percy breathed.

“Then you’ll be Obliviated,” said Rufus. He made sure Percy heard the regret in his voice, and also the adamant. “We can’t take the chance that you’ll be questioned under Veritaserum and give away our secrets.”

Sweat broke out on Percy’s forehead. Rufus didn’t move, didn’t flinch, didn’t blink. He could have cast a modified version of Imperio on Percy and made him follow through, but he wouldn’t. There were certain standards one did not break, no matter how far one was willing to descend.

The thought came to him that perhaps an Unbreakable Vow wasn’t that different from the Imperius Curse, when all was said and done. Rufus put it aside. It was almost certainly true, but truer was the fact that he couldn’t afford to deal with it right now.

Percy passed the test. He exhaled through his nose and nodded, his face pale as salt next to all that bright red Weasley hair. “All right, sir.” He knelt.

Rufus knelt with him, and reached out to clasp his hand. He looked up at Flint. “Will you be our Bonder?”

“Certainly, and welcome.” Flint stepped forward and aimed his own wand at their joined hands. Rufus took Percy’s eyes in a gaze that was not going to allow either one of them to blink.

“Do you swear to hold secret the truth of all you see here?” Rufus asked.

Percy swallowed again, but said, “I do.” Flint nodded, and a narrow stream of fire shot out of his wand and encircled their hands. Rufus felt it slide and tickle along his skin, and for a moment he was forcefully carried back to a night sixteen years ago when he’d made an Unbreakable Vow of his own, one he would probably refuse now if he could.

He shook his head. The First War is behind us. “Do you swear to tell the lies we shall ask you to tell, up to and including to members of your own family or others you trust with your life?”

“I do.” Percy’s voice was a little stronger this time. The fire moved again, and now their wrists looked as if they were bound in a knot. Rufus moved his gaze to those bonds as he asked the third and final question.

“Do you swear to remain loyal to all those you meet here, no matter who they are or what they ask of you?”

Percy jolted. Of course, he didn’t know most of those people or who they were. He held Rufus’s eyes for a long moment, asking without words if he could actually trust strangers, and then he bowed his head. He had come this far, his slumped shoulders said. He might as well go farther.

“I do,” he answered softly.

The bands of fire coiled tight and sank into their skin. Rufus hissed out a breath and then stood. He held Percy’s hand for a moment longer than necessary, squeezing, he hoped, hard enough to brand the impression into skin and bone. It was the only thing he could do, since he couldn’t apologize and he couldn’t say that the Vow would be broken someday, if Percy was patient and kept his silence. That wasn’t true. It would always need to hold, or Rufus would have chosen some lesser form of commitment.
They weren’t spinning history here, he thought, as he turned to face the two Aurors who had accompanied him down. They were spinning lies, but it was the lies that would become the history, not the truth. The truth would go behind guarded tongues to the grave.

The first of the two Aurors, the woman called Hope, stared at him for a long moment. Then she knelt and held out her hand for his. Rufus repeated the oath with her, seeing her eyes watching him with less trust than Percy’s but something deeper behind them. She understood what was happening here, he thought, probably better than Percy did.

Then came the second Auror, a young man barely out of training, called Frederick. He stammered and looked away and mumbled and flushed, but he knelt in the end. Rufus felt a sense of peace settle on him as the last words of that Vow were said. Now he could take his own, and Flint and the ones with him could take theirs.

“The Vows are a good idea,” said Griselda Marchbanks’s voice abruptly from behind them. “But my allies will back it up with their own magic, since the Unspeakables might have a way around the Vows for all we know.”

Rufus turned. Griselda was there, and she had brought the required number of people with her, so they could truthfully say there were seventeen of them at this little meeting.

Rufus had thought they would be humans, though, not goblins.

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Hawthorn leaned on the door, gently, until it opened. Then she peered in through it. None of the others had been willing to disturb Harry, but none of his other close allies, the ones he might accept an interruption from, could move as silently as she could.

She saw him dropping the final pinches of a shredded plant into the potion that simmered in the vial in front of him. Then he closed his eyes and bowed his head. Hawthorn felt the same ripple she’d encountered before, when Harry yielded his magic to help Peregrine’s wolves, move into the liquid. It gave a shiver, and then it turned the color of silver. Hawthorn flinched in spite of herself.

Harry turned and looked up at her; perhaps her flinch had made her arm brush against the door. “Hawthorn,” he said. “You can come in.” He gave the silver liquid a final, thoughtful glance, then sat down on the chair waiting beyond the table where he’d brewed the potion. Those were the only pieces of furniture in the room. “Was there something wrong?”

Hawthorn shook her head, and, taking out her wand, Transfigured a piece of dust on the floor into a chair she would have to remember to Vanish later. Woodhouse’s rooms were so narrow that extra furniture simply crowded them. “No, Harry. We just—” And then she paused again. One reason she had been the one to volunteer was that she might be able to find words where the others couldn’t. And now that she was here, she found Tonks was right. What she was about to say sounded stupid.

“Are you all right, Mrs. Parkinson?”

She didn’t want to provoke that from him, though, that retreat into formality. And perhaps the best thing she could do was engage him with informality. Treat Harry like a Lord, and he responded like a servant. Treat him like a person, and he often didn’t know how to hide.

“I’m not, Harry,” she said. “I was worried this afternoon. We all were.”

Harry frowned. “I know he did, ma’am, but I don’t think all the new werewolves share his views. Most of them know that they can’t just go home as long as the Ministry is hunting them. A few of them were berating him the moment he finished yelling. He hates being a werewolf, yes, but some of them have learned to accept it, or think they can. And they know that they don’t really have a choice but to fit into the valley right now. I don’t think we have to worry about the werewolves from the Department turning on us in battle. If the Ministry were offering shelter and safety to everyone turned by Loki’s bite, then yes.”

“That wasn’t the reason we were worried,” said Hawthorn. “He accused you of not killing Loki when he had the chance.”

Harry’s frown grew more pronounced. “I know he did, ma’am. I was there.”

“And you started to grow angry, as anyone would at an unjustified accusation,” Hawthorn said. “Then you closed your eyes, and your magic stopped rising and your anger vanished as if it had never existed.”
“Of course it did,” said Harry. “I put it away.”

That was the answer she had been afraid of. Severus Snape had owled her when Harry’s parents were first arrested, with copies of the memories of Harry’s training he had retrieved from Dumbledore. Hawthorn knew about the box or the cage that had contained a great deal of Harry’s emotions at one point, and she knew that he could not be allowed to build another. At best, it would be a temptation for him to go on putting emotions into it even when there was no reason to do so. At worst, it would become a permanent weakness for him, and at some point in the future would open and do more mental damage.

She reached out and clasped his hand. “Where did you put it?” she asked.

Harry tried to pull back from her, but only managed to retreat to the end of his arm. Hawthorn saw his eyes change again, but then the emotion was gone and Harry was settling back into the chair, as if he couldn’t imagine why he’d wanted to move away from her in the first place. That frightened Hawthorn more than all the rest, and made her sure was doing the right thing.

“In the Occlumency pools,” he said. “The way Professor Snape taught me to.”

Hawthorn breathed in and out, holding his eyes. Harry just looked at her with polite puzzlement.

“Harry,” said Hawthorn, “we’re concerned that you’re shedding your anger too quickly. If you keep too much of it suppressed, it could break open—in the midst of battle, perhaps, but there’s no telling when it would happen. And then it could hurt those who are dear to you as well as your enemies.”

“That won’t happen,” said Harry, with the same confidence he had exuded after he’d thrown his magic in the Ministry’s face.

“Why not?” Hawthorn asked.

“Because that’s why I’m controlling it,” said Harry. “So that I won’t yell the wrong words at the wrong moment, or upset someone else’s healing with rage when they need calm.”

Hawthorn hesitated, wondering if she should tell him the rest, but decided it had to happen. Otherwise, he would be caught by surprise. He had other people watching, but they did not have a werewolf’s nose, and his pack was focused on Harry to the extent of ignoring other packs.

“I think Peregrine and her wolves need anger,” she said. “So do some other packs, like the one I helped escape, who were attacked out of the blue and are frightened and enraged. They need to know that you take this threat seriously. They arrive here, and you’re so calm, Harry, so coldly determined. They would like to see a bit more fire, to reassure them that you won’t make a compromise at the expense of their lives.”

Again a shadow moved across Harry’s face, and again it vanished between one blink and the next. “I’m doing what I can,” he said, and nodded to the silver potion on the table. “That’s the first stage of a cure for lycanthropy, I think.”

Hawthorn stared. “What.” She felt so much sheer astonishment that she could not ask it as a question.

“I think so,” Harry went on earnestly, staring over his shoulder at the potion. “The problem is, the potion has to be made by the person whom the curse clings to. That means that you’d have to brew the potion to remove your own wolf, for example. A potion I brewed would do you no good.”

“I could do that,” Hawthorn whispered. “If—if this is true, Harry, why hasn’t it been discovered before?”

Harry looked at her with a sad smile. “Because it’s also a poison that has a sixty percent chance of killing lycanthropes,” he said. “One of the major ingredients is silver, and the potion turns silver, too. That’s fatal to werewolves, even though it isn’t to most other kinds of curses.” He shivered. “And it requires the willing sacrifice of magic. No matter what happens, that magic is gone from you forever.”

“I could do that.” Hawthorn found she couldn’t take her eyes from the potion. “I made part of my magic into a ring for your partner. I can remove it, willingly sacrifice it.”

“That won’t work,” Harry said quietly. “That kind of sacrifice slides the magic into a solid object, or makes it into a solid object, like the stone on Draco’s ring. The potion is a liquid.” He hesitated, then continued, “Also, the reason that most willing sacrifices work is that the witch or wizard yields his magic to gain something he or she wants more. You knew that Draco would be indebted to you, for example.”
Hawthorn nodded.

“Only part of this sacrificed magic is supposed to go into the potion,” Harry confessed. “A tiny part. The rest is simply wasted, spent on the air. Not many witches or wizards can muster the will to sacrifice their magic and leave themselves permanently weaker with so small a potential reward. And without will, of course, a willing sacrifice doesn’t exist.”

Hawthorn shifted uneasily, trying to keep from looking at the potion. It didn’t work. The silver gleam only seemed to make it more tempting, not less, even though it had caused her to flinch when she first saw it. “I think I could stand the loss,” she said.

Harry shrugged. “There may even have been some wizards who fit all that criteria and managed it,” he said. “But the potion recipe is rare, the ability to muster the will and pass the magic into the potion is rarer—and, of course, it doesn’t work at all for those werewolves born Muggle—and then the fact that the poison could kill most of its victims makes people reluctant to try it.”

His mouth quirked with a smile that Hawthorn might have called bitter, but she couldn’t read the shadows underneath it in her fascination with the potion. “At least, they tend to live under the werewolf curse.”

“Why did you make this, if you knew it wouldn’t work and you aren’t a werewolf?” Hawthorn asked softly.

“To see if it would work.” Harry rubbed his forehead. “I can regain the magic I put into the potion, since I’m an absorbere. And that same thing allows me to pass the power into a liquid; it’s just a matter of opening my gift and pouring the magic elsewhere, not using a spell. I was hoping to learn a sure way for someone else to put his magic into the potion, if he wanted to do it. But I didn’t learn anything useful. I’ll experiment with the recipe, next time. Some substitutions won’t make it explode, and might produce differences in the final result.”

Hawthorn nodded in distraction. The potion was useless, she reminded herself. And even if she managed this on her own, there was no guarantee that it would work instead of kill her.

But she could not stop thinking about what would happen if she did manage to brew the potion and drink it. And if it was not poison, then when she woke as a pureblood witch again, what would her life be like?

She could hardly imagine it, and she didn’t know if that was because she really had forgotten what it was to be human, or because so many evil things had happened to her that she could not imagine good fortune.

Harry’s touch on her arm brought her back. “I promise, Mrs. Parkinson,” he said gently, “if something happens with this, if I can brew a cure, then I’ll let you know immediately. But I should start the second batch now. Some of my ingredients won’t keep fresh for very long.”

Hawthorn nodded, and let herself be herded out the door. She wanted Harry to have absolute calm for his experiments. Who knew what he might discover?

She did pause on the way up the corridor, certain she had forgotten something she’d meant to say to Harry, but then the wondrous possibilities of that potion preoccupied her mind again, and she shook her head and forgot it.

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“Griselda.” Rufus couldn’t take his eyes from the goblins, particularly one large female who stood next to the Wizengamot Elder and appeared to have chains actually braided into her flesh. “I—I didn’t know that you were bringing these friends. Are they here as witnesses?”

“Yes,” said the female goblin. “We are slaves no longer, Minister. We have no reason to keep serving you, except that we desired to keep our freedom locked in stone until the best moment for releasing it.” She smiled, showing a mouth full of unfortunately pointed teeth, no less bright than the chains woven around and into her skin. “Our web has been gone for more than a year. Now
is the time for our moving.”

Rufus breathed in and out, and tried to think. Granted, he knew very little about webs, and less about the ancient wizards and witches who had woven them. Guilt and lies and forgotten history had covered up so much that, when he’d tried to learn what he could about them, he mostly found historians engaged in blaming other factions for the necessity of webs in the first place. “Does this mean,” he asked at last, “that you would no longer serve in Gringotts?”

“We have not served since our web was broken,” the female goblin said. “I am the hanarz, and I lead my people again. Our magic has returned, since it is no longer bound. And we have stayed in the bank. But if you do not grant us a part in this, now, we will withdraw.”

Rufus tried to imagine their economy collapsing, and could not. The devastation that it would do to not only the British wizarding world, but those other communities who had financial ties to Britain, was intense. And the goblins were the only ones who knew how to open most of the vaults, the only ones who knew the ways past the traps, the only ones who knew to the Knut how much money each vault contained.

They could have held us hostage at any time, he thought. They waited this long to show us they were serious, and to put themselves in a position where we wouldn’t have the chance to refuse, I suppose.

He had no choice, literally, and not only because they needed seventeen people for this. Traditionally, the choice to place the Ministry’s control entirely in the hands of the Minister had to be made by seventeen people, a third of the Wizengamot, in the room where the Wizengamot most often met. That pulled an old ritual into play and set wheels turning that would, Rufus hoped, keep him safe from the Unspeakables long enough for deeper changes to take place.

He had avoided doing this so far because he had seen no way to persuade sixteen members of the Wizengamot to agree to it, and he had still hoped to avoid what was essentially short-term dictatorship. Then he had studied the wording of the old documents again and discovered that they said seventeen people, a third of the number of the Wizengamot, not actually “a third of the Wizengamot.” He needed seventeen bodies, and he needed a way to insure that those other people would not tell the truth about what had happened, and he needed to locate sixteen Wizengamot members—well, fifteen now, since Griselda had joined him after all—to Obliviate and convince them they had voted this way. Actually kidnapping the Wizengamot members and bringing them to Courtroom Ten would have been too risky, too likely to attract the Unspeakables’ attention, and would have taken too long to arrange—and there was no reason for them to agree, once they were here.

The goblins would agree, if he agreed to certain other things. Rufus needed them as much as they needed him, he suspected. They must not want open war, or they would have declared it already.

He watched the hanarz, and Griselda Marchbanks standing implacable beside her, and knew they must have reasoned this all out already. They were only waiting for him to catch up.

He caught up. “Your people will swear the Unbreakable Vow?” he asked the hanarz, barely restraining himself from asking Marchbanks if the goblins would. He had to treat them as equals, and speaking to a human about them in front of their faces was not the way to do so.

“We will,” said the hanarz.

Rufus nodded, and then turned to the wizards with Flint. “I’m going to ask you to remove your hoods now,” he said. “I want to know who I’m swearing to before we decide this.”

They did so, and Rufus received his second shock of the night. It didn’t come from the witch standing on Flint’s right, a hard-faced woman whom Rufus didn’t know, but suspected worked in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.

It came from the wizard on Flint’s left. Tall, pale, cool and blank-faced as he met the Minister’s gaze—Lucius Malfoy.

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Harry frowned and studied the bubbling potion once more. He should have made it do more than bubble when he’d added the pinch of comfrey. He wondered if he had read the recipe wrong, and turned his back to fetch the book.

Luckily, therefore, his eyes were not aimed at the potion when it exploded. Harry felt the flood as a rush of sticky coolness across his back, which soaked his shirt and his robe and felt almost soothing for a moment before it began to burn.
Harry shoved the pain into an Occlumency pool and dropped to the ground to roll as he stripped the clothes off with smooth movements. A good portion of the potion came off, but some still remained. Harry heard himself make a noise of annoyance, but it all felt distant, as if it were happening to someone else. He just rolled over and over, and shook his head when he felt his scalp beginning to burn, before he concluded that he would need water.

He conjured water above himself, and let it flood down with an enormous splash. That quieted the burning on his scalp and across most of his back and shoulders. Some places, though, still continued to hurt as if the potion were acid eating into his skin. Harry stood and looked over his shoulder, to see that globs had dripped down and were clinging to his lower back, edging towards the base of his spine.

The door opened then—well, opened was a mild word; it was more like it flung itself open—and Snape strode in.

Harry stared at him, caught so far out of his zone of expectation that he had no idea what to say or do.

Snape took one look at the potion, sniffed, grimaced, and snatched up a handful of comfrey leaves waiting on the table Harry had set up on the far side of the room. “The source of the pain cures the pain,” he lectured as he stepped forward and pressed the leaves against the drops of silvery liquid on Harry’s back. Harry let out a loud sigh and closed his eyes; the acid-like burning dropped away as if potion and leaves had ceased to exist together. “When you’re working with demiguise hair and powdered bicorn horn, at least. And you were, weren’t you?”

Harry sighed again and peered up at Snape, trying to feel something other than sheer surprise. “What are you doing here, sir?”

“Rescuing you,” said Snape tartly, and dropped what remained of the smoking pinch of comfrey leaves on the floor. “Guarding you.” He caught Harry’s chin and looked into his eyes. Harry, confused, allowed that, and Snape’s face bore a truly alarming scowl in the next instant. “What have you been doing to yourself with Occlumency?” he asked, giving Harry’s shoulder a sharp shake with his other hand. “It is a good thing that I came when I did. I doubt anyone else here would have recognized it.”

“I’ve been suppressing my anger, and letting compassion and sympathy and determination through, so that I can keep working and give people what they need from me.” Harry rubbed at his eyes with his hand. Legilimency that keen always made them water. “Shouldn’t you be back at school and recovering, sir?”

“Joseph agreed that I was well enough to come to Woodhouse.” Snape picked up Harry’s stained robe and shirt and flicked his wand at them. Most of the potion vanished. On consideration, though, Snape handed only the shirt to Harry. “The robe is ruined beyond repair,” he explained shortly. “And you should know that suppression of emotions is dangerous, Harry.”

Harry felt the anger rise, but he grabbed it automatically and smoothed it back under the surface of the Occlumency pool as he pulled the shirt on, reminding himself that while Snape might have been well enough to come, he would still be recovering. “Thank you, sir,” he said stiffly.

“No one else has spoken to you about this?” Snape demanded.

“They tried,” Harry muttered, wondering why he felt like a sulky child. This was Snape. He knew how to deal with Snape now. He extended understanding and compassion as much as he could, while keeping in mind that Snape might always want distance from him. It was not all that different from his relationships with most everyone else, except that he loved Snape more and Snape was more damaged. Snape had no right to put him in a child’s role again, as if he really were still Harry’s guardian, rather than one to be protected.

“And you distracted them, I would assume.” Once again, Snape caught Harry’s chin and looked into his eyes. “No more. I am here now, and I am not so easily distracted.”

Harry felt discomfort squirm like a worm in his belly. He had trusted Snape to handle things like this, once upon a time, but that had changed, and why should it change back? Snape was not fully recovered. And if Harry let the Occlumency barriers fall apart, then he might start yelling at people who didn’t deserve it.

Some of them would prefer that.

But some of them wouldn’t, Harry pointed out, with the more reasonable side of himself, and pulled away again.

Snape didn’t seem to be angry. Harry eyed him cautiously. Either the new Snape or the old one would have snapped at him—the
new one for Harry upsetting him in the midst of his own pain, the old one for putting himself in danger by suppressing emotions and dropping comfrey in a volatile potion. This Snape only nodded and said, “It shall take some time, of course.”

“You should be back at Hogwarts, sir,” Harry tried again. *I don’t think he can play the role of guardian, even if I need one. And I can’t let myself depend on him and be let down again, not when so many people are depending on me. I can’t.* “You should be taking up a challenge that’s easier than this one, if you do think you’re partly healed. Teaching a Potions class all the way through and actually talking to the students, for example.”

He supposed from the flicker of Snape’s eyelids that that stung. But it only won him another nod and the words, “I did not expect to walk back into your life and be welcomed with open arms, Harry. I meant that. It shall take time.”

“Listen,” said Harry desperately. “Sir. Please. I can’t—I don’t trust you the way I used to. I trust you to heal at your own pace, and to know what’s best for you most of the time. I trust Joseph to protect you. But I don’t know what you’ll do in a valley full of werewolves, and I don’t know if I can trust you to—to take care of me the way you seem to want to.” The words sounded embarrassing as they fell from his lips, and he could feel his cheeks heating up. Harry grabbed the embarrassment and smoothed it under the surface of the Occlumency pool, too, so he could face Snape with adult calmness. Stammering and flushing like a teenager would only convince Snape he was in need of care. “Please. If you stay here, you’ll find a place, I know that, sir, but it won’t be as my guardian.”

“Yes, it will,” said Snape.

Harry stared at him. *Merlin, I want to trust him, but how can I?*

“In the meanwhile,” Snape added, without a change of expression, “you should wash. A swift soaking spell will not clean the rest of the potion off as a shower will.”

Harry nodded. That, at least, made sense. He turned to leave the room and go to the loo, feeling Snape’s eyes on his back the entire time.

He felt two emotions fighting in him, both too strong to be shoved into an Occlumency pool right away. One was a frantic concern. Snape shouldn’t be among people who would upset him yet. His barriers were too fragile. Joseph might think he was healed, but he’d tended Snape in isolation. Who knew how he might act in company? Who knew what harm he might be inflicting on himself, standing here?

The other was a desperate yearning to trust Snape as Snape insisted he could, to have *someone* who didn’t need constant consideration of his more delicate feelings and wouldn’t care if he yelled, to be able to lean on someone else.

The clash hurt, but Harry had accepted that most of his emotions would. He would wait until these grew less passionate, so he could tuck them away. Then it wouldn’t really matter how much he trusted Snape; he would still be able to react, and think, rationally.

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“You,” Rufus said.

Malfoy only smiled at him. The smile had no content, Rufus thought, cold and blank as a winter sky. “Me,” he agreed. “And I will swear the Unbreakable Vow with you, Minister, and I will participate in this ritual. I said that I would. I made my choice.”

“Why?” Rufus demanded. He realized he was aiming his wand at Malfoy, and that both the woman who had come with Flint and the goblins were shifting uneasily. He didn’t care. This was *Malfoy.* The memory of battling him in the midst of a flesh-eating rain had never quite left Rufus, and he had long since suspected that Malfoy interfered more in the Ministry than he let on, that some of the people who should have been loyal to ideals of justice and law were instead loyal to Malfoy’s coin. He could not believe the bastard would dirty his fingers with something this risky, rather than watching as the Ministry thrashed itself to death and then picking over the corpse.

Malfoy shrugged. The motion barely disturbed the pale white-blond hair that lay on his shoulders, and it barely disturbed his composure, either, it seemed. “Because things have not turned out as I hoped,” he said. “Because certain promises were made and not kept. Because those I counted my allies have turned on me in ways I did not anticipate.”

“I heard that you disowned your son,” said Rufus. “Did you really believe that that would make Harry happy?”
A slight widening of those pale gray eyes was all that remark earned him, that and the words, “Do not speak of what you do not understand, Scrimgeour. I am ready.” He knelt and held out his hand, poised as if he would crush the one laid in it. “Or do you really intend to swear Vows only with those who already pant at your heels like dogs?”

Rufus restrained himself from a snarl with difficulty. He knelt and clasped Malfoy’s hand. It made no attempt to put pressure on his. It was barely a weight. Holding Malfoy’s gaze, he said, “Griselda. Will you be our Bonder?”

She stepped forward, and Rufus demanded the same three terms of Malfoy that he had demanded of Percy and his Aurors. Malfoy swore them without complaint, without flinching. Rufus didn’t think he blinked, either, but perhaps he simply timed his blinks to Rufus’s own, and thus hid them.

When that was done, Rufus had to take his own Vow; honor would allow him to do no less. Malfoy asked for the vows without a hint of mockery, which made it worse. Rufus pulled away as soon as the ritual was done and turned to take Griselda’s hand, feeling as if he had held a corpse’s fingers.

They all swore to the oath alike, human and goblin, and so put themselves on an irrevocable path. It was far more dangerous than a vow to simply be loyal, Rufus thought, as he swept them over again with his gaze. There were things in existence that could make them tell the truth, Veritaserum foremost among them. If the Unspeakables captured one of their little group and forced Veritaserum down his throat, that was the end, because the potion would force them to tell the truth, and the Vow would kill them before they could.

Committed. Changed. Altered. The faces that stared back at him were uniformly anxious—except for Malfoy, who probably wouldn’t show much more emotion than a vampire even now, and the goblins, whom Rufus had no practice in reading.

Rufus took a deep breath, and held his wand high. The Minister had to begin this ritual. “I arrive at this moment,” he intoned in Latin. “I come to the turning of the world and foresee darkness ahead for wizard and witch, and death for those laws we have kept sacred. I am the Minister of Magic for Britain, and I ask that you hand control of the Ministry over to me, for I am the one who knows the path through the darkness.”

He saw a silver mist emerge from the tip of his wand, and form into a shape. He waited, mildly curious, even through his desperation, to know what the shape would be. The ritual documents had said only that it would be an animal symbolic of the situation at hand.

He suffered a moment of shock as it became a wolf, and then shook his head as the wolf loped over to sit down at his side. Of course. I should have known. What else could it be, given what’s caused this unrest?

Griselda spoke the next part of the ritual; they had decided that was safest, since she was the only actual member of the Wizengamot in the room. “We hear and heed you,” she said, also in Latin. “The Minister knows the path through the darkness. The Minister can bring peace to us, but only if we give him the power to do so.” She faced the people, both human and goblin, who had drifted into a loose circle around her. “We are seventeen. We stand in the room where the Wizengamot has met most often for the two years. Do we grant power to the Minister?”

“Yes,” said the hanarz, in English.

The other goblins replied one after another, their voices harsher and more croaking than anything human. Rufus could feel the magic in the room growing stronger, and now he could smell what he thought Aurelius Flint had smelled, the unusual, stony tang of goblin magic. Flint must have encountered it on goblin weapons and other objects that his Department dealt with. Rufus found it hard to breathe as it surrounded him, imprisoning him in a block of invisible marble. The silver wolf sat motionless at his side.

“Yes,” Griselda echoed, when that finished, and turned to the wizards.

“Yes,” said Flint.

“Yes,” said the woman who had come with him.

Malfoy held Rufus’s eyes, long enough to make Rufus wonder if he would choke to death before the bastard made his choice, and then inclined his head and murmured, “Yes.”

Percy, Hope, and Frederick gave their answers almost at the same moment, as if they were desperate for this to be done with. Rufus understood. Now he felt as if his body had turned to stone, and he could barely lift his wand and speak the next part of the ritual, the part that sealed the end of it and subjected his mind to examination by the magic—and was the reason, apart from the
distrust and independence of the Wizengamot members, that so few Ministers had ever invoked this particular form of control. Rufus had to be sincere in his desires. If he were doing this for his own personal power, and nothing else, the magic would kill everyone in the chamber.

“I promise,” he said, again in Latin, “to lead us through the darkness, to bring us to peace in the end, and to lay down the crown I carry when I am finished with all the reasons I call this power. In the spirit of Cincinnatus, who yielded control when his task was done, I speak, and in the spirit of no Emperor.”

The pressure grew inside his head. Rufus felt as if hands held his brain. He felt the magic looking at him for a moment: a presence cool as Malfoy, with little interest in why he was doing this or who he was. It examined him to make sure he was the Minister of Magic, as he’d claimed to be, and it examined his intent and his motives. Rufus closed his eyes as the pressure increased steadily into agony, and tried to think thoughts that were as truthful as he could.

And then the silver wolf tilted its head back and howled, and leaped into the air. Rufus opened teary eyes to see it multiply, many small wolves rising up the walls and running into the ceiling of the courtroom. He blinked, and wondered if he should feel any different. Of course, perhaps the pressure flooding out his ears was release enough.

Then he felt it. His fingertips tingled, and his muscles jerked as if he’d received a lightning shock. He felt tiny threads grow from his eyelashes and the strands of his hair, and the awareness of wards grew in the back of his mind like so many small birds chirping at their mother.

The others were watching him, he realized, and waiting for an answer.

“It’s done,” he whispered. “I control all magic used in the Ministry.”

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Chapter Thirty-Two: The Hills In Their Might

Rufus waited. He had sent Percy and the others on their way immediately after they’d emerged from Courtroom Ten, having handed them the names of Wizengamot Elders he wanted them to find, Obliviate, and tell the story about their having voted Rufus power to. He’d glanced dubiously at the goblins, but Griselda, who was staying with him to support his story just in case someone arrived earlier than they expected, had assured him they could find the Elders and perform the Obliviate.

Rufus suspected that meant at least one of them had a wand, and the ability to use some wizard magic, probably from some wizard blood. It had been illegal for goblins to have wands for several hundred years—a provision that most people accepted as common sense, and which most goblins didn’t apparently care about.

He didn’t say anything about it. Laws could change, and they would have to.

“What can you feel from the Department of Mysteries?” Griselda asked now. She sat in a chair in front of his desk, holding a cup of magically warmed tea. Rufus had granted permission for any warming spells to be performed in the Ministry, as long as they were only strong enough to warm a cup of tea. It was an odd thing, that granting of permission. He needed to locate the spell spluttering in the back of his mind, unable to form until he agreed to it, and then nod or shake his head. If he nodded, the spell went forward. If he shook his head, the spell died, and no one else could perform that kind of spell in the Ministry, either.

It was a frightening and exhilarating power, even if it was bounded by the walls of the Ministry. Rufus supposed he was discovering what it was like to be a Lord-level wizard.

He wondered that Harry had not gone mad with the power, either with the temptation to use it or with hatred of it.

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“Little,” he answered Griselda now. “It’s closed off. The Stone’s pulses are dimmer than before, and vary with my breathing. I think all their artifacts are under my control now.” He sipped at his own tea, but it didn’t soothe him the way it usually did. He knew what the newspapers would say when he made his announcement. Minister Gone Mad—at least one of them, probably the Daily Prophet, would use that or a variation of it. There would be claims that he was crazy with power, that he was a child playing a game he didn’t understand, that he was in collusion with the werewolves to bring the Ministry down. Dionysus Hornblower would be ecstatic, Rufus thought sourly. The man considered himself a rebel oppressed for all his pure blood and his money, and he would love to be able to see Rufus as a personal enemy.

“You think?”
“If they’re within the walls of the Ministry, then I can control them,” Rufus told her. “They’ll have to receive my permission to function, and I won’t grant that if I don’t know what they do, or if they’re intended to harm someone. If the Unspeakables took the artifacts out of the Ministry already, there’s not much I can do to prevent the Unspeakables from using them.”

Griselda nodded grudgingly, accepting that. Then she said, “And what about this Stone? It’s sentient, isn’t it?”

Rufus inclined his head. “And I can no more keep it from plotting and planning than I can control your thoughts just because you’re in the Ministry. But if it tries to use magic, it has to come through me.”

“You’re not going to have an easy time of it for the next few days,” Griselda murmured.

Rufus shook his head this time. “No, I won’t. I’ll be taking Pepper-Up Potion and wishing there were more hours in a day before I’m done with this. But that’s what I knew would happen when I invoked the Ritual of Cincinnatus. I have no reason to complain.” He squinted thoughtfully at Griselda. “I’m more curious about your reasons for being there, Griselda.”

The old woman snorted, a formidable sound to come out of such a tiny body. “Why should you wonder, Rufus? You know that I’ve always been in close contact with the goblins. I was part of the ritual where they freed themselves. This is the best chance for them to make their freedom mean something more than a war against the wizarding world. If they make themselves indispensable to solving your problems, then you’ll have to listen to them when they demand certain concessions from you.”

“And for you?” Rufus persisted.

Griselda gave him a cold smile. “You think that I must have some tie to the goblins, Minister? A goblin ancestor? A goblin husband?”

“No,” said Rufus. “But I’ve never understood what began your support of them. Why you cared. You can’t say it was because you were a compassionate witch. I know many compassionate people who don’t think about the goblins, who just accept them as there to be our servants.”

She nodded. “But I was the one who looked, and the one who thought, Rufus. And if I had to make compromises and become part of alliances that I found distasteful in my years as an Elder, at least I preserved that one motive uncorrupted. At least I knew I was fighting for one thing purely good.

“And then Harry came. He is vates. He is the actual fulfillment of hopes that we thought were going to be disappointed for as long as we both lived, the hanarz and I.” Griselda shrugged. “I’m one hundred and sixty-seven years old. I certainly thought that I would die before a vates arrived.

“I didn’t. And now that world is possible, and I may have a chance to see some of the future come true myself, before I have to go.” She fixed him with a steely eye. “I’ll make the world better for my friends. And I’ll make the world better for the vates who freed them, if at all possible.”

“I am fighting for the Ministry,” said Rufus. “And for your goblins, perforce. That’s not the same thing as fighting for Harry.”

“You’ll restrain his enemies,” said Griselda. “You’ll change the Ministry’s stance towards werewolves. Both of those are enormous gifts to the rebellion.”

Rufus said nothing. He had the feeling that Griselda would take what he had to say badly, and he was distracted by the tickle in the back of his mind. A few people were trying to use the Floo to arrive in the Ministry. He granted permission, and let them come in. But he could almost feel their wariness as he felt the magic. Someone would be suspicious about why the Floo connections had taken so long to work, and then someone would try to cast a spell that had nothing to do with warming tea, and then the better-informed would guess.

Rufus intended to tell them the truth before then. His allies had had several hours to reach the Wizengamot members and Obliviate them, so he would have to hope that he could produce the men and women who had “voted” him into power when all was done.

“Come with me, Griselda?” he asked.

She nodded and stood. “Tell me, Rufus,” she asked, “when do you have to give the power back?”

“When it doesn’t help me any more,” said Rufus. “When I know that I’ve accomplished the task I set out to accomplish. That’s
not in anyone else’s eyes, mind you, but mine. And my mind could change. Something I think is necessary now might turn out not to be necessary after all. If that’s the case, I’ll need to complete this ritual earlier than I suspected.”

“Otherwise, the magic will kill you,” said Griselda.

Rufus gave her a grim smile of his own as he opened the door and went to tell his people that he was their dictator for now. “And all our allies, too. There’s a reason that Ministers didn’t often invoke this ritual, you know. They usually couldn’t find anyone to stand with them.”

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Snape had decided that his first order of business—well, if one did not count rescuing Harry from the explosive potion, and then settling his effects into one room and ignoring Joseph, who took the one next to his—ought to be talking to those who had seen Harry in the past few days, and finding out how bad his use of Occlumency pools was. He stepped into the kitchen, confident that Harry would still be in the shower.

Camellia was sitting at the table, and she stood up when she saw him. “You,” she snarled.

Snape didn’t wish to be unoriginal, so he simply looked at her and didn’t respond. He knew she might have spent time around Harry in the past few days, but he would learn nothing useful from her. Either her hatred or his own fear would overcome what she might say. He turned on his heels to find someone else.

He heard quick footsteps crossing the floor towards him, silent but not silent enough; she was human right now, not a wolf who could pass through the forest without a twig snapping. He turned, and let her see his face, rather than his wand. He wore the expression he had used when he killed victims among the Death Eaters who didn’t matter to him personally. He let her see that she didn’t matter to him. She was only a piece of flesh and blood that stood in his way. He denied her any independent existence, any past outside this moment.

Camellia flinched and cowered. He had expected that. Harder people than this werewolf had done so, and the werewolf’s strength was the pack. Or the alpha, perhaps, but Harry wasn’t nearby right now.

That was the best way to shut them out, Snape thought. He couldn’t control what they read in his scent, but he could control what they read on his face, and there were few werewolves who trusted their noses over their eyes. They spent most of their time as humans, and humans were visual creatures. Feed them the right expressions and the right gestures, and they would have to question whether he was really afraid.

He said nothing, and left the kitchen with a ferocious stride. A simple Point Me led him towards the bedroom where Harry had spent most of his time, and where he was showering now. Snape was glad to find Draco standing in the half-open door, staring towards the loo as if he couldn’t figure out what had possessed Harry to bathe in the middle of the day.

“Draco.”

The boy startled most satisfyingly, and then turned around. “Sir,” he breathed, his eyes widening only a bit before they narrowed. “What are you doing here, sir?” he asked, with a frigid courtesy that reminded Snape of Lucius. “Have you only come to hurt him?”

“Save him from himself, rather.” Snape snapped his fingers and gestured with his head, and Draco responded automatically, moving out of the way so that Snape could enter the room. Snape concealed his smirk. Draco had spent years thinking of him as the Slytherin Head of House and someone with almost parental responsibilities; that he would obey him was a good thing, and let Snape know where the point of control was in their interactions. “I found him in the midst of suffering from an explosive potion that hit him across the back.”

Draco caught his breath. “Is he all right?”

Snape nodded. “He’d removed most of it. I applied comfrey, which caused the mistake in the first place, to it, and then sent him to take the shower.” He raised his eyebrow and looked at the chair at the end of the bed, and Draco took it. Snape remained standing, as he would have in the classroom. “He will live through it with no scarring and only faint burns,” he reassured Draco. “What I want to know is other behavior he’s been exhibiting during the past few days.”

“Such as?” Draco had his shoulders set tight and his chin lifted. Snape knew he would have to tread carefully. He was Draco’s professor and Head of House still, somewhere in that young mind, but Harry was Draco’s partner and, by now, surely lover. If
Snape ran into too much of a protective wall, he would get nothing from him.

So he would have to show Draco that they were allies in this, that they might need to cooperate in saving Harry from himself as they had so often in the past.

He decided that a bit of bluntness, honesty on a subject Draco wouldn’t have known about for himself, was in order. “When I looked into his eyes, I could see Occlumency shields impeding the progress of normal emotions to the surface of his mind,” he said, and saw Draco’s face twitch. “He’s been preventing himself from feeling angry. Most of it simply fades. That which does rise, he sinks. He’s been doing the same with other emotions, including fear and desperation. He told me himself that he lets sympathy, compassion, and determination through. What he neglected to mention, and what I could see from the state of his shields, is that it’s nothing else. He’s been living in a distant shell for the past few days, hasn’t he?”

Draco was staring at the far wall, and his face twisted with an anger that did not at all resemble Lucius’s, somewhat to Snape’s surprise. Then he remembered where he had seen it before: on Narcissa’s face, when she told Snape the tale of how Harry had left his mother’s house on Christmas Eve almost three years ago. “That’s what it means,” Draco breathed. “I did notice he was withdrawing, but I thought the pressures were overwhelming him. He wouldn’t talk to me, but he always seemed to be working on that damn werewolf cure, or talking to werewolves, or reassuring other people that Woodhouse would protect them whether or not the wards were in place, or—doing something. And then he’d climb into bed and use a Sleeping Charm on himself, because he said he would lie awake worrying otherwise. He’s been making himself into someone who can answer the pressures, whether or not he really can.” Draco stood and kicked the leg of his chair. “The bloody bastard. Why didn’t we notice?”

“You did not know the mechanism,” Snape murmured, his mind working hard. He could not simply burst through Harry’s shields and insist that he express the emotions he’d been suppressing. That could be disastrous, given the tendency of Harry’s emotions to influence his magic. Besides, Harry would probably feel anger at him before anyone else, and that wouldn’t help Snape in winning his trust back. “And abuse of Occlumency can look like competence to someone who does not realize what’s happening.”

“Talking about me behind my back, sir?”

Snape turned swiftly. Harry had come out of the loo, his clothes firmly back in place; at least he’d retrieved a clean shirt. His hair still drizzled and dipped water, and his glare was steady.

Snape chose the truth. There was no other tack that would work. “Yes,” he said calmly. “Knowing that you would not tell me this.”

Draco stalked past him and halted in front of Harry. Harry stared at him, then looked away.

“Do you think that I, or anyone else, wants you to sculpt yourself into something you’re not, just so that we can win this war?”

Draco asked him. Snape couldn’t tell if his voice was actually calm, or simply bereft of any emotion but a building anger, strong as a tsunami. “None of us do, Harry. We understand limitations. We all have them. We’re all human. And that you’ve been making yourself surpass those limitations, not because you really have the ability but because you can twist your emotions like a puzzle…” Yes, building anger, Snape realized, and the anger was here now. “It’s a cheat, and it’s stupid, and it’s a lesson that you should have learned by now. And it’s going to fail, probably at the worst moment.”

“I have no choice,” said Harry, voice pitched low. That surprised Snape. There was a time when Harry would have snapped back that of course he had changed and learned his lesson, and couldn’t Draco see it?

Then he remembered for how long Harry had been sinking his emotions, and grimaced. Harry didn’t differentiate now between anger that would do harm and anger that would do no harm. He’d probably sunk any irritation he felt as soon as he felt it.

“I have to win this rebellion,” Harry went on, looking up. “I have to be the kind of leader who doesn’t flinch anymore. I’m the one who took up the responsibilities, and said I would do them. I shouldn’t have done that if I was going to fail, because the people depending on me deserve better. And there’s no one else I can hand the task over to. So I’m doing what I have to to get through it, Draco. Yelling at people won’t help. Nor will working myself into exhaustion. I understand that, now. I know what I need to do, so I’m doing it.” He shrugged, eyes locked with Draco’s. “And I won’t fail simply because I have the urge to shout at someone else, or lose my temper over something stupid. That’s something children do, not adults.”

Snape felt a moment of profound sadness. Harry believed that, it was plain to see. He wasn’t skating on a skin of rotten ice as he’d been when he tried to ignore his abuse. This conviction went all the way down.

They would have to work hard to get through it.
“You’re still an idiot,” said Draco. “The reason leaders can get so much done, Harry, is that they delegate. Assign someone else to work on those projects you think you need to sink your emotions for. I know that Mrs. Parkinson would love to work on the werewolf cure. And if certain werewolves do nothing but snarl when talking to you, then have them talk to someone else. You don’t need to do everything, Harry. That was the lesson you told me you’d learned and didn’t.”

“Certain werewolves will talk only to me,” said Harry. “That’s the way of it, Draco. I know they aren’t perfect.” He smiled briefly. “They’re human, after all. Some don’t like me, some don’t like other packs being here, some don’t like the situation. And that’s normal. How can I get upset over that, when the motivations behind it are so normal?”

“Tell them to talk to other people,” said Draco. “Tell them to shut up for right now, because you can’t just send them home. Or come back and yell in private, if you don’t want to yell in front of them.”

Harry shrugged. “There isn’t a reason to yell later, either.”

Snape moved, then. Draco would dash himself against the walls of Harry’s Occlumency until he hurt, and achieve nothing. Harry’s Occlumency was entwined with his thinking processes to the point that he was saying things he would have known were irrational at once in any normal frame of mind.

But Harry had shown his anger in front of Snape.

He took a step forward, and Harry’s gaze came to him. At once, his shoulders tensed and his eyes hardened. He even backed a step away. Draco started and glanced over his shoulder, then moved silently out of the way.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Harry breathed. “You’re not healed.”

“And neither are you, if you can speak such nonsense,” Snape retorted. He remembered the trick Harry had played on him when he said words he would have taken back a moment later. He waved his wand, and the spell captured the words Harry had spoken a moment before and played them over so he could hear them.

“There isn’t a reason to yell later, either.”

Harry’s face paled as he listened. Snape repeated it, and repeated it, and, before he set it singing for a fourth time, he asked, “Would you agree that that is true of anyone else, Harry? Draco? Myself? Your brother? You who were so understanding of my anger, and Draco’s, and your brother’s? You, who yelled back at us when you felt unfairly pressed on the matter of Rosier and Durmstrang? You, who found anger a source of strength when you battled Voldemort?”

Harry bowed his head. “Those were all different situations,” he whispered. “This has to be handled with diplomacy and tact, or the werewolves are in danger, or people are in danger from me. I already made things worse by yelling at my brother when he fought with Draco, and then ignoring him for two weeks, just because I was angry.”

“Your brother is young,” said Snape. “And not the standard for all intelligence and all emotional reaction.” He was tempted to add thank Merlin, but he didn’t want Harry pushed into defending Potter. “That does not mean you must never get angry at anyone else again, Harry. With this example in front of you, you are unlikely to ignore anyone for two weeks now.”

Harry’s breath was rushing now. For some reason, Snape thought, it was much harder for him to maintain his calm and patience around his guardian—perhaps because he was still so surprised to see him here, perhaps because he knew Snape could read his mind.

“I know I’m going to make mistakes,” Harry whispered. “But the mistakes are so much more severe in their consequences now that I have this many people depending on me, and the anger usually makes things worse. How can I be sure that it won’t make things worse if I get angry?”

“Decide from situation to situation,” said Draco impatiently, before Snape could speak. “You’ve always said that, Harry. You’ve always done that. I don’t understand why this is so different, why you’ve locked yourself into this shell. Why?”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t know,” he whispered.

That took less time than I thought it would. Snape was wary of his capitulation, for that reason. It might be false, and Harry would retreat behind his walls again the moment he was alone. Snape wanted to follow it up, and make sure that Harry’s lack of a rational answer meant he had changed his mind.
Draco again moved before he could, catching Harry’s chin and tilting it up. He was smiling now, where Snape would have thought he would be scowling. He kissed Harry. Snape raised an eyebrow as the kiss went on, but ruthlessly controlled the several sarcastic comments that he would have used if he had caught them snogging in Hogwarts’s rose bushes. If he could control his interactions with others, then he could control his own responses.

“You don’t,” said Draco. “And this is another mistake, Harry. That’s it. It hasn’t caused irreversable damage yet. It might, though, if you let it go on. Will you repair it before then, Harry? Yes, it’ll be harder than what you’ve been doing, but—”

“Nothing is ever simple,” Harry finished, and he had a smile on his face, and if he avoided Snape’s eyes for now, at least it was much better than what he might have done.

Snape could have said many things just then. He might have done so. But then Harry’s head lifted, and the blaze that filled his eyes was, if not anger, so passionate that Snape paused to admire it.

And then Harry said, “They’re attacking Woodhouse.”

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Woodhouse was angry.

It could ignore the small rushing things. Why should it care about them? What they did in their lives outside the valley was not its concern. And as long as they were inside the valley and did not try to move or hurt its parts, that didn’t matter at all. They might strike at each other. That was almost expected. But Woodhouse would dream around them, and past them, and soon they would be gone and other small rushing things would take their places. They lasted less than the life of one tree, and they could not even dream of matching one of the hills in age.

But its stones and pebbles and blades of grass and air were all aware now, because of the leafless tree that had entered the dream and made itself part of it. And there were small rushing things coming towards it who wanted to hurt that part of it. That was wrong. They could have other small rushing things, but not that one anymore, because it was part of Woodhouse.

Creatures swooped through the sky. They had four legs and feathered wings and other creatures seated on their backs. Those sitting ones carried magic that was not part of the magic of the valley. So long as they only flew, they did not matter.

But then they entered the air above Woodhouse, and it felt their hostility towards its leafless tree. They had four legs, and feathered wings, and creatures seated on their backs.

And they had lungs.

The air above Woodhouse turned around and left them alone. Small rushing things could not survive without air, and winged creatures could not fly without it. They fell. Their legs kicked, and their lungs gasped and cried. Woodhouse did not care. They tumbled on the grass, and the grass turned and swept over them, binding and drowning them. Legs were seized and held. Small rushing movements stopped. Woodhouse was a master of the game of stillness, while small rushing things needed to move. It bound them, held them. They lay still, and that meant they could not hurt anything that was part of itself any more.

Small rushing things appeared on the hills. Woodhouse had shut off the tunnels through nothingness that most of the two-legged things used to reach the valley, but these had opened them anyway, through devices of magic that buzzed and stung like bees not of Woodhouse stinging bees that were of Woodhouse. The valley was angry.

The devices of magic rose, and aimed into the valley. They would strike the grass, if Woodhouse let them. They would hurt the leafless tree.

But the small rushing things had legs, and they stood on the hills.

The hills danced.

Ripple and shake and shudder and shrug. Not a large dance. Nothing like the dances that Woodhouse remembered being part of it when it had been larger than it was now, and the earth had danced for joy to music that played out in the oceans, and the hills had changed their very shape. Just a small movement, and only in the hills, not the grass, because movement in the grass might hurt the leafless tree and the houses and the trees.
Such a small dance, and the outsiders lost their balance. They rolled down the hills, and into the grass. The grass wrapped them in moments, and held them still, and air went out of their lungs, and stones leaped on them. They had tried to hurt Woodhouse. They had hurt it, by carving tunnels where no tunnels should be. That was wrong.

Outsiders came through the pine woods, small rushing things that the stones and the grass let through, because they could not sense hostile intent. And then they reached the pine woods and cast flames at the trees.

Woodhouse did not like flames.

The pine trees lashed their branches and gathered the small rushing things into their embrace, drawing them close. Then they were not small rushing things anymore, because they could not move, but leafless trees. But they had not entered the dream and not asked Woodhouse to protect them. They had attacked.

The pine trees could bear storms, bend and thrash before them, and if they shed needles and lost branches, at least they were still alive when the storm ceased. But Woodhouse knew that the leafless trees could not bear storms. The pine trees gripped them and twisted their branches, and they broke. Then they dropped the leafless ones under their roots and grew over them, and that ended that. They were gone, and Woodhouse looked around for other attackers.

There were others on the very fringes of Woodhouse, sensed by pebbles and grasses, but they vanished, stepping into what was not Woodhouse and carving their tunnels through nothingness. They had learned.

That satisfied Woodhouse. It looked around one more time, and then dropped back into stillness, and awareness, and dreaming.

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Harry came out of his trance to find himself kneeling on the floor and Draco shaking his shoulders. He wasn’t surprised. He had lost track of his limbs entirely, enveloped in the greatness that was Woodhouse. It would move his arms and legs if it needed them, but otherwise he was no more or less important than the hills and the pebbles and the seed-heads in the grass.

“Harry! What happened?”

It took Harry a moment to respond. He felt settled into his own head once more, but where he could have spoken by means of wind and twitch and leaf-rub a moment ago, now he had to speak with words.

“They’ve stopped attacking,” he said.

He could hear howls through the window, though, and the enraged trumpeting of the karkadann. He stood and led the way through the halls towards the door from the house and thus the outer quadrangle of buildings. Snape and Draco followed, not attempting to prevent him from going. Harry wondered if the very strangeness of the experience had forced them to reconsider their stance towards him. He hoped so.

He knew what he would find when he stepped out into the valley, perhaps the only one who did. He had another example of rage to confront, and another consequence of the course he’d taken.

The werewolves were gathered in a thick clump around the downed winged horses. Harry went to them. Bavaros was the first to notice him, and to jerk his head down in a sharp bow that he’d never given Harry before.

“This is your work, Wild,” he said, and there was no question in his voice.

Harry looked at the twisted bodies. They were all Granians, the same swift-flying gray pegasi that had attacked Draco on the Hogwarts Express in September. They lay with twisted legs and wings, barely visible under the tight mesh of grass that covered them. He didn’t think he could persuade Woodhouse to let them go any time soon. The land considered that small rushing things were only not a danger when they were still, and it hadn’t held these for long enough.

The riders had worn cloaks and hoods, but the hoods were flung back from their faces by the force of their landing. They’d all died choking for air. Harry saw splayed hands that had clawed for it, and the edges of darkened faces and bruised throats and blackened tongues.

They were all corpses. Woodhouse had made them so in the space of just a few minutes, and Harry knew he would have to visit more corpses soon.
“They were from Shield of the Granian,” he said, stooping to gently nudge a wooden disk free from the grip of a blade of grass. Since he was part of Woodhouse, the valley didn’t object to him taking it. Harry lifted the disk high, to show everyone the flying horse carved on it. “They struck at us twice before—though I never knew for certain what they wanted. They were working with Unspeakables during the last attack.” He turned the disk over in his hand. “I suspect that we have made fiercer enemies of them, this time,” he added, so softly that he wondered if anyone overheard him.

He had forgotten the keen ears of werewolves. “It doesn’t matter,” Bavaros told him, voice just as fierce. Harry lifted his head in surprise. “They attacked. We saw them come flying in the moments before the air split and they fell and the grass bound them. You said that the valley would defend us, and it did. It’s not your fault that it defended us so well the attackers died.”

Harry looked from amber eye to amber eye. A few did look regretful, as though they would have preferred a lesser cost, but most shone like Bavaros’s, probably reflecting the dominant mood of the packmind. Or packminds; the group included werewolves who had fled to refuge in Woodhouse in the past few days.

Harry remembered what Hawthorn had said. Some other packs, like the one I helped escape, were attacked out of the blue and are frightened and enraged. They need to know that you take this threat seriously.

Woodhouse had shown them that, Harry realized. He could not see a trace of resentment amid the regret. The people here considered Shield of the Granian enemies, no matter what grudges they might have had against Harry, personal or economic, and they were quite pleased with a defense that cost not a single life of theirs. They were pack. They felt every loss like a gaping wound, and they had lost enough people to make them hate the notion of losing another.

Harry had simply not realized that would be quite so strong.

He inclined his head back to Bavaros, slowly, and moved on to the next group of corpses, the ones spilled down the hills and bound with grass and rocks. He did spare a glance for the pine wood, but he doubted he would find any bodies there. The trees had buried the leafless trees—the attackers—quite well. From what Harry could remember, they’d worn dark robes. They might have been more ordinary wizards with the location of the valley somehow betrayed to them. They might have been Aurors.

Harry grimaced, and then put the thought away. He’d killed two Aurors a few days ago, or at least been present during their deaths. What he had to worry about now was the living, and those dead he could see. Until he knew for certain they were Aurors, he would not waste time in fear.

The goblins were the largest part of the group clustered around the bottom of the hill. Harry saw why when he drew closer. They stood with their chains blazing white in their hands, facing off against the karkadann, who was snorting and grumbling and swishing her horn back and forth, with an occasional angry shriek to make up for it. Harry frowned and caught Helcas’s eye.

The goblin’s voice was deep enough that Harry could hear him beneath the karkadann’s cries. “She wants to get near and kill him,” he said. “There’s one still alive. We thought to save him for you.”

Harry quickened his pace until he’d reached the karkadann’s side. He raised his hand and laid it along her flank. She planted her forelegs and lashed out with her hind ones. Harry thought it was mostly instinctive. He did manage to duck out of the way in time. But he didn’t want her to go on kicking at him, so he sent a small lightning shock into her hide to remind her who he was.

She whirled to face him, and went from enraged to calm in such a short time that Harry blinked. She lowered her head and rubbed him with her horn, which felt cool and slightly scaly. Her snorts had the sound of coaxing to them.

Harry nearly laughed when he realized what she wanted—for him to open the ring of goblins and let her at the living enemy. He stroked her face-fur, still stained with dried blood from the dead Auror, and shook his head. She snorted sadly and flicked her ears forward so that they half-covered her eyes, looking at him and waiting to see if that would do the trick.

“No,” said Harry, and the karkadann pulled back with a sulky little stamp of her foot. Harry stepped forward, and the goblins let him pass. The karkadann gave a prance. The ring tightened again at once, and Helcas shook his chain so that it made a sound like falling arrows. The karkadann stepped back and tried to pretend it had never been her intention to come forward in the first place.

Harry shook his head and looked at the prisoner. He lay still bound by the grass of the valley, with tendrils trying to writhe their way into his mouth and choke him, and a constant rain of pebbles bombarding his body. Some magic obviously protected him,
however, turning the grass back whenever it reached its goal and making the pebbles recoil with sharp *dings*. He ignored them entirely, staring straight at Harry. His face was pale, his eyes dark and his eyebrows heavy, and the gray hood of an Unspeakable framed them all.

Harry felt a surge of vicious satisfaction, especially when he glanced in several directions and noticed that all the sprawled bodies wore gray cloaks. They had possessed the magic to Apparate here, despite the protections Woodhouse had set up against that, but not enough to actually combat the place magic.

“Your name,” he told the captive Unspeakable.

Scornful silence answered him.

“You realize that you’re a prisoner now?” Harry asked. “That you won’t be able to leave?”

The silence grew more edged. Harry smiled, and knew the smile had edges of its own. “Woodhouse is very patient,” he said. “It won’t give up until it breaks through whatever spells protect you. And the only way that you’ll get any food or water is if we give it to you.”

The man spoke at last, grudgingly, as though speaking was like letting precious diamonds fall from his lips. “You wouldn’t do that. We know you. The Stone has told us about you. You would not let me starve, no matter what I said or did.”

Harry felt anger trying to rise. There came a poised moment when he nearly shoved it back under the surface of the Occlumency pools and spoke to the man in a hushed, soothing tone, persuading him to see how much better cooperation would be.

And then he remembered what Snape and Draco had said about anger, and he remembered the feeling of the valley’s rage. It had certainly not thought it was doing something wrong. Conceptions of morality had little place in Woodhouse’s thinking. What hurt it was painful and wrong, and protecting any part of itself, no matter what the small rushing things’ motives for hurting it, was right.

Harry had been the one to bond with the place magic and unleash this carnage. On the other hand, he had hardly forced his enemies to attack him—especially the Unspeakables, whose grudge against him he still didn’t know the source of, and Shield of the Granian, who had allied with the Unspeakables for equally unknown reasons.

He had said that he was serious about defending his people. That was the reason he couldn’t get angry, because they depended on him so much.

On the other hand, if they *needed* him to get angry, *needed* him to back up an attack like this, and not undermine it, with sheer fury? Would he still refuse, because he was afraid of what might happen?

*I will not let them make me afraid.*

*Even of myself. Especially of myself.*

He let the rage seep into his eyes in answer, and remembered what the Unspeakable time-globes had nearly done to Draco on the train, to everyone when they invaded the Ministry, to him during the initial attack in the Atrium. He remembered the *Obliviate* they’d used on Erica, and the attack on the Maenad Press, and their influence with Scrimgeour.

His magic flared around his body and hissed like a pit of vipers. The Unspeakable lost his composure enough to look briefly startled.

“I’ve tried to hold back,” said Harry softly, “and all that has done is encourage the Ministry to legalize murder, my enemies to think that I’m too soft to punish them, and you to continue with this.”

The Unspeakable snorted. “And you believe that I’ll be won by that? That I’ll fear you?”

Harry tilted his head towards the man’s dead comrades without taking his eyes off him. “Will we torture you?” he asked. “No. Will we kill you? If you try to kill us. Will we keep you and get the truth from you? Oh yes.”

The Unspeakable only sneered. Harry knew why. Honoria had told him after the attack on Hornblower that those who worked in the Department of Mysteries were immune to Veritaserum.
“Professor Snape,” he called, without taking his eyes from the man’s face.

Snape strode forward through the goblins, who let him in without question. He stood looking down at the man for a moment. The man looked back, defiantly, and then started and looked away. Harry smiled. It seemed their prisoner had just discovered that Snape was a Legilimens.

“His name is Croaker,” said Snape. “And he believes that more of his people will be along to attack you and rescue him shortly.”

Harry nodded. “Do you think that you can get more from him, sir, given time?”

“Yes,” said Snape softly, and then undid his left sleeve. Croaker was looking at him again now, though he kept his head bowed so that he didn’t make eye contact. Snape didn’t try for it. He just held the arm out so that Croaker could see his Dark Mark.

Harry saw the Unspeakable’s face turn gray, just a bit. He let his own smile bare his teeth, to add to the impression.

Of course I’m not really going to let Snape torture him. But impressions are useful. And if impressions can keep me from having to actually kill or torture someone, I’m all for them. Harry felt a moment of intense regret. If I’d been stronger earlier, perhaps it wouldn’t have come to this open war against the Ministry, and we could have found a more peaceful solution.

But he hadn’t done that, and it had come to this. Flinching now, in such a way as to put his people in danger, would be the greatest mistake he could make, Harry thought. Forget rage. Forget upsetting someone who would only talk to him. Losing Woodhouse and the lives of everyone in it would do more damage to his people, his cause, and him personally than anything else.

And did he really think that someone else could never forgive him if he lost his temper and said something unfortunate?

Harry took a deep breath. He knew what was happening now. The Occlumency pools had opened one leak, and he had suppressed so many emotions that they were breaking through in a tide now. In one way, it was a good thing. After all, he could see how irrational his former behavior was. And his recovery period had been much shorter than it would have been if he’d done this last year.

But in a few moments, they were going to rise all at once, and that was rather more of a problem.

He snapped his head at Croaker. “Make him talk as soon as you can, Professor Snape,” he said, which was a suitably ambiguous command, and turned around, looking at the goblins. “Make sure that the karkadann doesn’t kill Croaker on his way to confinement.” Helcas nodded. “Don’t bother with the other bodies for right now,” Harry continued. “Woodhouse will hold them until it’s sure that they’re no threat. I’ll dictate letters later, letters that I hope will go to Shield of the Granian and the Unspeakables and show them how useless this is. Any attack on Woodhouse will only result in more deaths for them. They may be more willing to talk terms now.”

He finished in a rush. His head felt flooded with the same silver liquid he envisioned as lying in the Occlumency pools. Emotions sloshed and stirred in him, joy and rage and irritation and gratitude and so many other things that he wondered how he’d gone a few weeks without feeling them.

He asked Woodhouse if it would open a path through nothingness—a way for him to Apparate—to his bedroom. Woodhouse did it without fuss; he was part of it, after all. Harry leaped, and landed lightly on his own bed a moment later.

He took the time to string wards around the room, and then curled up and let his own mistakes catch up with him. He hoped it wouldn’t last very long; from the intensity of the coming storm, he suspected it would be short but fierce.

Gratitude was at the forefront, marching like rain, and Harry thought that was only sensible. If it hadn’t been for Draco and Snape and Woodhouse, Merlin knows what might have happened to me.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Thirty-Three: Breakthrough

Harry felt anger sweep around him. Apparently, the flooding emotions had decided to leave him at the mercy of others, and let the anger come back later. He felt it as a vast current, but hovering somewhere in the background, while fear took him first.

He panted, his eyes tightly closed, his body jerking with all the worry, all the terror, all the concern he’d forced himself to suppress in the last few weeks. Images of Connor turning his back on him flashed through his thoughts, and images of Draco
killed by Shield of the Granian or the Unspeakables, and thoughts of somehow hurting Snape so badly he never recovered, and what seemed half-memories of werewolves dead and dying, as though he had been at all the attacks on the packs’ safe houses himself.

It hurt.

But the fear left him, because other emotions had to take their place. Irritation bit him with sharp teeth, and skittered up and down his arms with scaly feet. How often had he wanted to scowl because someone else was making no sense, or because the Minister refused to move and refused to move, and Scrimgeour didn’t see that was just as bad as what his Ministry was doing, in some ways? It made their actions seem as if they occurred under his aegis and with his approval, not independently.

He plunged so suddenly from irritation into lust that he didn’t know where one emotion ended and the other began. He caught his breath as his groin tightened and his mouth dried out. He pressed his face into the pillow and tried not to think how much it smelled like Draco. That would make everything worse.

His magic lay along his skin now, warm and purring sweetly. Harry was vaguely surprised it didn’t manifest more violently, but then his attention went back to the building heat in his belly and the urge to touch himself. He moaned softly and slid his hand along the pillow instead. The lust wouldn’t last, and already he could feel embarrassment stinging his cheeks. He was as close as he had ever come to not caring about that, though.

The magic gave another purr, and Harry realized it wasn’t violent because it wanted him to open the wards and let Draco through. Harry laughed weakly, a croaking sound given the absence of moisture in his mouth. “Not a chance,” he told it. “It’s going to change any moment.”

A golden pinwheel whirled across the room and detonated with a long bang on the wall, as his magic began to sulk. Harry had to ignore it. Another wave of heat traveled through him, gripping his muscles and making his hips lift, and Harry closed his eyes and wished it would go away. Merlin, who knew I was suppressing this much of it?

Luckily, it did change then. Odd darts of happiness stung his skin, and he remembered when he had managed to bond with Woodhouse, when he had seen Draco appear, when he had realized that Narcissa Malfoy cared more about her son than she did about her husband. He laughed, and the sound ended in a gasp as the joy leaked away again. He hadn’t been suppressing that much of it; some had come through the Occlumency pools as his own grim determination to do even more when he accomplished something.

A pause succeeded the joy. Harry felt the currents that surrounded him swirling and plunging into his body, and he thought he was prepared for the anger.

He wasn’t.

Rage burst inside his head like a thunderstorm. Harry pushed his face into the pillow to muffle a scream. He felt flames springing up through his skin, and he could only hope that the wards would help with that. Ordinarily, Woodhouse would lash back at anyone who used too much fire magic here, but he was part of Woodhouse now. Parts of itself were allowed to hurt itself, under Woodhouse’s sure and certain conviction that the damage wouldn’t last for long.

He lifted his head, and saw his magic stalking the wards, looking for a way out. It had manifested as a Grim, the great black dog the size of a pony, the omen of death that Sirius had so resembled. Harry knew the old legends of Grims. They paced behind people walking home at night, their breath hot on the back of the walking person’s neck. If the victim turned around and saw the Grim, he would die soon.

The Grim faced him. Its eyes were red, more crimson than Voldemort’s when he had still had eyes. Harry met them, and felt the Grim’s longing as if it were his own, the longing to hunt and tear and rip apart. The people out there had infuriated him. Why should he protect them? He could destroy them. He had the power to do that, and might made right, always.

Harry let out a low whimper. He had assumed that he could control the rage, that he only had to let it fly at the wards and the wards would hold secure. He hadn’t realized the Grim would want more than that.

He shuddered, and the anger twisted like a fishhook in his belly, dragging the guts out. Why should he wait? Why should he lock himself up for the good of those who could defend themselves if they knew what was good for them? The Grim was not going to hurt those who hadn’t angered Harry. It would administer a bite to some werewolves, a stab to Snape, a snap here and there to Draco…
Harry had to grip and try to reel in the rage again. This time, he didn’t mean to tuck it behind Occlumency shields, but he could not let it hurt anyone else.

“No,” he whispered.

The Grim’s body rippled, and then the magic that made it up vanished into a whirlwind of black sparks. The sparks surged directly at Harry and bit into his face. He cried out, and then the rage and the magic were back inside him, doing pain and inflicting pain and making him see what he suffered when he locked up every bit of anger.

Insults rang in his ears as if they were being spoken for the first time. He felt the same breathless frustration he had when Connor and Draco and Parvati argued and he wanted to tell them to shut up and fuck off. His scar ached from tension, and his teeth hurt from clenching them together.

He managed to bury his mouth in his pillow just before he uttered one long, endless scream of fury that he was sure would have brought someone running to try and break into the room, wards or no. He pounded his fist beside him on the bed, hard enough to tear a wound open on his palm, and growled.

His magic ran shimmering over him in endless flames, not burning the bedcovers because once they were burned they could not resurrect and be targets for its wrath, but simply lapping him with fire again and again. And his clothes had no such protection as the blankets did. A dim part of Harry was aware that burning the blankets might bring him to burn the wooden walls and the windowsill and the other parts of Woodhouse he shouldn’t burn. But carrying the flames on himself? He could do that. His clothes vanished into ashes, and then he felt the anger over every inch of his skin.

Why shouldn’t he be upset over the obstructions the werewolves put in his way? If George and the others who had been part of the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts really wanted not to be here, they should have stayed in Tullianum and trusted to the Ministry’s hospitality. Harry hadn’t forced them to come with him. He had told them what they could expect, and they had had the choice. And now they whined and fussed and wanted to go home to a place where they could expect to be killed on sight? Oh, yes, that was much better than what they had here, a place where they were protected and would have Wolfsbane and could learn how to control their lycanthropy around others who had much more practice than they did.

He had done them such a wrong.

And Connor! What in the world was wrong with his brother? Didn’t he see that he was falling into the same trap James had, trusting the word of the woman he loved above anything else? He had the example right in front of him! And he was doing it anyway.

And Parvati! Harry snarled through his teeth, and the bedclothes around him once more came close to igniting. But Harry concentrated, and the rage created an image of her face in front of him instead and then punched it in the teeth, sending it off into a cloud of dissipating sparks.

What right did she have to ask him to spend more time with his brother? If it was something Connor wanted, he should have come and asked Harry himself. He was a big boy, an adult. He could do that.

And then for him to insult his boyfriend, to say that Draco was a Dark wizard and they couldn’t trust him—

Harry held out his hand and conjured a sphere of glass in it, the size of the time-globes the Unspeakables had used on him. He threw it at the wall, and listened with satisfaction to the sharp singing of shards. He made another and threw another, and then another, and then another. His magic swept up the shards and danced them in the air, making a maze, a mosaic, of patterns.

He had a right to ask for some consideration. And if Parvati was that afraid of powerful wizards who used Dark magic, she was probably afraid of him right now. He wondered idly if that was why Connor hadn’t said anything about her the last few times they’d spoken.

And Draco! The blow of that fury caught him in the stomach and threw him backwards. He claimed to be more mature, and Harry had even thought he was, and then he insulted Connor and Parvati and refused to be quiet and cool and composed under their insults in return—even as he insisted to Harry in their bedroom at night that he was quiet and cool and composed, and what Harry thought were insults were merely truths wrapped in cutting sarcasm.

But he could not be too angry at Draco, because so much of that had been healed when he appeared in Harry’s bedroom with the Portkey-bracelet, and that led to thoughts of joy and lust. Harry shied away from those and back into the rage.
Snape was next. Bloody selfish git, what did he want? Harry left him alone, and that wasn’t what he wanted. Harry gave him help, and that wasn’t what he wanted. He moved Snape out of the house so that Snape wouldn’t hurt the werewolves or be bitten, and Snape accused him of not loving him enough. Harry gritted his teeth to hold back another scream, then decided Why not? and screamed anyway. The sound was satisfying, and the magic ornamented it with a parade of red sparks that broke apart into decorative streams of blood as Harry watched.

Nothing he could do would give Snape what he wanted, and nothing he could do would give other people what they wanted, Harry thought, his mind plunging down in a dizzying spiral. His anger wasn’t right. Holding back the anger wasn’t right. Rescuing them wasn’t right. Leaving them to rot wasn’t right. He might think he was committed to making mistakes and learning from them and going on, but how could he when every step was a mistake, including the ones he tried to make with his previous mistakes in mind?

He should have been able to find other solutions to this. He should never have let it come to war. And when the first werewolf murders began, he would have been responsible. He would have been like Scrimgeour, wringing his hands and saying he would win peace in a while and then never doing it. How many werewolves would have to die because he didn’t want to kill regular wizards?

Someone like Dionysus Hornblower had more courage than he did, because at least he stood up and spoke what he honestly believed in and didn’t feel guilty for fighting back. But Harry was guilty for hurting everyone he’d hurt.

Oh, here comes the self-loathing, Harry thought, as he wrapped an arm around his eyes and let the few tears that would fall. For the most part, the emotion coiled up in his gut as a black ball, too tight to permit any expression but a sore throat and burning eyes. Right on time.

He lay there while he thought through most of his actions and envisioned all the other roads he could have taken. Of course, the roads ran out when he got to the memory of the Midsummer battle; he still did not know what he could have done differently to stop Voldemort from killing those dozen children one way or another.

Not killed them yourself, whispered his conscience. Not have blood on your hands. Or at least made sure that the wards were secure beforehand, and escorted the students down to the lake yourself. That would have made more sense. Why did you never think that Voldemort would attack before Midsummer? You lured him, made him think the date important. He might wait to launch his full forces until then, but there was no reason to think he should wait until the day of the battle to arrive.

He writhed, and made a sound in his throat that was neither whimper nor sob. Then he rolled over on his back, and repeated what he had learned in the Sanctuary, the lessons Vera had drummed into his head until they stuck.

You cannot change the past. You can live for the future and try never to make those mistakes again, but if you once begin to think that you can pay for the past, then you will be paying the price for the rest of your life, until you begin thinking that even breathing is too selfish.

His breathing calmed, and he sighed out, waiting for the next emotion to come. But nothing happened. He lay where he was, a hollowed-out shell, surrounded by the pieces of glass that his magic was still dancing and dandling, and decided that the storm was done. His mind was back in its proper place.

And I’m naked, and the room’s a mess, he thought, wiping at his face. Almost certainly my face as well. But I can wash, and the room can be cleaned.

Harry lowered the wards, and called the glass pieces out of existence. After making sure no small glittering shard lingered in the corners for someone else to step on, he walked towards the loo for the third time that day, wincing. His muscles ached as though he’d kicked and lashed—perhaps he had, he didn’t remember—and his head was clear but hollow. He hoped that a shower would help him figure out what to do next. At the least, it should soothe the aches and pains.

Then the door opened behind him, and he heard Draco’s voice ask, “Harry?”

******

“You can do nothing to me. I know what your Lord’s like. He won’t permit you to torture someone.”

Snape paid no attention to the ramblings of the man who called himself Croaker as he warded the room where they’d put him. This was one of the smaller studies at Woodhouse, but that made no matter. For what Snape planned, the room did not have to be large.
He did ward the walls against the sound of screams escaping, making sure to speak the incantation aloud so that Croaker could recognize it.

“Do you think that will intimidate me?” Now that the Unspeakable had decided to speak, he seemed to have decided that Gryffindor-like bluster was the appropriate course. “I’ve been through more than you can imagine. I’ve gone through trials to approach the Stone that will make whatever you can do to me look like love taps.”

Snape said nothing. He finished the warding and turned to face Croaker. The man had been stripped of his gray robe, and then his clothing. Snape wanted none of the nasty artifacts that the Unspeakables carried with them to protect Croaker during this. He’d then cast a spell to make sure that Croaker had none of the artifacts embedded into his body, and at last was satisfied.

The nakedness had been a common trick the Dark Lord used when interrogating his prisoners. Hard to feel proud, hard to feel worth something, when all the cloth that protected you from the outer world was stripped away.

“What are you going to do? Do you really want to risk your own Lord throwing you out just because you wanted to fulfill your sadistic Death Eater urges?”

Snape still said nothing. He simply looked at the man.

He knew Harry would not allow him to torture Croaker with pain curses as the fool deserved. And he knew that if he began with such curses, he could keep going, until he hit the edge of Crucio. This man had tried to kill his son. Snape could have spoken the Avada Kedavra now and succeeded, given his hatred of anyone who tried to do that.

So there were good reasons not to begin the torture.

But Snape didn’t have to. He was an excellent actor, and that was what was needed to break Croaker.

“How long have you served the Stone?” he asked, his voice neutral and without inflection.

Croaker laughed. “Long enough to know what you’re trying to do. It’s not going to work.”

Snape raised his wand and intoned another incantation, one he doubted Croaker was familiar with. He was remembering the graveyard at Midwinter, and the vines that had held Harry still so that the Dark Lord and his Thorn Bitch could do what they wanted to him.

The vine formed in the upper right hand corner of the study. It turned its head back and forth, a vegetable snake, and then began to unroll across the floor, heading steadily for Croaker. Its end thinned and sharpened as it came, growing spikes that Snape knew would look like teeth. They were supposed to.

“Have you ever imagined,” Snape asked, in the same neutral tone that he’d used before, “what it is like to have something grow through you?”

“You can’t frighten me, I told you that,” said Croaker.

“It is exquisitely painful, I’m told,” said Snape, reaching down and stroking the vine when it came to a stop beside him. The tendril rubbed against his hand. “Imagine being bound down on top of a patch of bamboo. Bamboo grows through anything. And it grows quickly. Imagine it growing through you. Imagine the ends of the stalks sharpened so that it impales you as it grows.” He raised an eyebrow, and studied Croaker’s face. A slight movement of his left arm, and he brought the Dark Mark into view once more.

“Now, of course, I have no bamboo, and we do not have the time for such a torture, anyway,” he said. “I want you able to speak in the end, even if we have to wait for your throat to heal from screaming. But I have something almost as good.” He touched his conjured vine again. “This is small, and it will grow.”

He leaned forward, holding Croaker eye to eye. “Imagine if it were laid against your face,” he whispered.

Croaker said nothing. His skin was pale, and a sheen of sweat had started on his forehead.

“Imagine,” Snape whispered, making his voice into the one that he used on the first day of classes to tell his students about the mysteries of Potions, “that it grows as slowly as I tell it to. Imagine that you see the teeth on the end drawing closer and closer to
you, inch by inch.” He reached down and skimmed his finger across the end of the vine. When he lifted it, he let Croaker see the blood slipping from the small cut. “Quite sharp,” he said. “So sharp that you would not feel the cut at first. But you would be waiting for it, every muscle straining, hoping against hope to sense and stop the moment when the integrity of your eye was breached.

“Slowly, slowly, it grows. Imagine it chewing through your cornea, slowly blinding you. Do you know what it would be like, to suddenly lose sight in one eye and not be able to get it back? You would sit there while the vine coiled around your skull, around the eyesocket, growing and growing, chewing and chewing.

“You may think that you would find escape in death, but that is not the case. There are spells that can keep the victim alive through this.” Snape flicked his wand, murmuring, “Vita usque.” The spell tightened as a silver crown around Croaker’s skull, sinking into his hair. Snape smiled. “And now you will be kept.

“The vine crawls into your brain. Imagine the pain depriving you of language, of sight, of memory. The brain is a wondrous and delicate thing, Croaker. Disrupt one connection, and you may be able to think a word and not say it. Disrupt another, and you may be able to have no sight again even if I heal your eyes when this is done. And the vine, blindly burrowing, going where I tell it to, is merciless. It travels through your brain and comes back.

“Out the other eyesocket, of course. This time, you may feel the teeth chewing from the back of your cornea. Can you imagine the pain you will feel when it severs your optic nerve? Well, you need not imagine it, as you will soon enough be able to feel it for yourself.

“The vine will grow out through your other eye. Then its journey will take it to your cheek, I imagine. It will eat through the skin. I’ll hold it there, because it’s not often that I get to admire the sight of teeth and gums, open to the air through shattered flesh, stained with running blood.

“Then to—yes, your tongue, I imagine. It will shed its seed on the stump of your tongue, because of course I do not need that to remain when you have no intention of speaking aloud. More vines will grow from that and down your throat, the more easily to reach your stomach. Thanks to the Vita usque, you will be alive to enjoy all this, Croaker.

“The pressure on the inside of your body is intense, I’d imagine. The vines were not meant to travel the esophagus, but they will make do. And then they will reach the stomach.” Snape chuckled. “That part, I must admit, I cannot wait for. The human stomach contains a number of potent acids to aid in digestion. I sometimes use distillations of them in my Potions work, though sadly, some of them must be bought on the black market, as international wizarding law frowns on the practice. Imagine what happens if the stomach lining is pierced, and those acids pour through and onto the other organs. Can you imagine? The white-hot end of a sword in the belly would be kinder, I think. It would at least take less time, because with the Vita usque, no one could—”

Croaker screamed.

Snape knew that scream. That was why he had put the wards up, so that no one would hear it and try to interfere. It was the sound of the defeated, the broken, the sound that said no more, no more, I’ll tell you what you want to know, just make it stop, just make the pain stop.

And he had won this with no more than words. Snape was quietly impressed with himself.

Of course, given Croaker’s training, there was always the chance that he was pretending. Snape cupped his chin and tilted it up. At his command, the vine coiled around his arm and halted with its razors not that far from Croaker’s eye.

The man flinched and sobbed and almost bit, trying to yank away. Snape got a good look into his eyes, though. He had broken. And he was no Occlumens; that much, at least, Snape would have recognized. Most Legilimens could recognize an Occlumens, if not read what was behind his shields.

“You’ll tell me what I want to know?” he asked, making his voice disappointed. “Truly? Or must I take an eye?”

Croaker screamed desperately. He had reached that place where one threat was as bad as another, Snape knew. He could have threatened to tie Croaker to a bed and tickle him, and he would have received the same reaction.

“Very good,” Snape said softly.

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Rufus stepped out of the lift and into the bare corridor that led to the black door that led to the Department of Mysteries.

He had been through the rest of it: the stares of disbelief when he had announced he was invoking the Ritual of Cincinnatus, the bellows that he couldn’t do this, the comparisons to a dictator—which he had accepted, of course—and the resignation of several Ministry employees at once. But many others had stayed, and Rufus knew they were already persuading themselves that this was not so bad.

*Of course they are,* he thought. *They were frightened enough to think the anti-werewolf laws were a good idea. At that level of terror, there’s not much they won’t convince themselves of.*

And now he faced the Unspeakables.

He halted in front of the black door and waited for someone to come out to him. No one came. He felt the breathing pulses of the Stone in the back of his mind, and the throb of contained magical artifacts. Those felt more like a toothache than anything else. He couldn’t tell what they were or what they did, and if he commanded one of them into life, Merlin only knew what would happen.

Rufus waited, giving permission for someone to use a filing spell and denying an Apparition while he did. The latter irritated him. He supposed that there were some idiots who of course would test his control over the Ministry and think that now that things had so changed, things always forbidden might be possible, but he wished the sensible people outnumbered the idiots.

The door opened at last. An Unspeakable stepped out, clad in the gray robe that covered his face, as usual. He shut the door behind him and stood in front of it. Rufus scrutinized him, but if he was actually bracing himself against the door in a defensive stance, Rufus couldn’t tell.

It made his voice sharp. “You know what I’ve done?” he asked. “The Ritual of Cincinnatus has been invoked. Do you know what it means?”

“Of course we do, Minister.” The Unspeakable’s voice was a blank, bereft of tone or age or gender. It could have been the same voice that had spoken to him in his office, back when he still trusted them. It might not have been. “You control all magic used in the Ministry.”

“I do,” said Rufus. “And I will categorically deny you the right to use any artifact that I don’t understand.”

The Unspeakable shuffled a foot. Rufus had no idea if that meant discomfort, or a simple shifting of weight. “There are artifacts we are studying that we must be permitted to use, Minister,” he said. “And there are people in the Department whom the artifacts keep warm and fed and sheltered. They would be uncomfortable if you severed their connections to them.”

“Show me these people,” said Rufus. “Let me see the magical objects that you claim are warming and feeding and sheltering them.”

“Even a Minister who has invoked the Ritual of Cincinnatus cannot enter the Department without the Stone’s permission,” said the Unspeakable.

Rufus suffered a brief spark of shock at the defiance, and then wondered why he was surprised. The Stone must know that he distrusted it and its children, or he would have come to them for help with controlling the Ministry, instead of doing something that would explicitly give him control over the Stone and the artifacts.

“Then have it give me permission,” he said evenly.

“I cannot do that,” said the Unspeakable. “No one tells the Stone what to do.”

“Save me, now,” said Rufus.

The Unspeakable stopped moving. Then he said, “The Stone was very distrustful when it first came here, Minister Scrimgeour, frightened of the enemies of the Ministry. It built traps into its Department, traps that do not depend on magic to work. Poisons and the like.”

“Are you threatening me?” Rufus made sure to keep his voice soft and his hand away from his wand. He had been in situations like this before, facing the criminals and Dark wizards he had chased as an Auror. Make the wrong move, and what was a tense but working moment would dissolve into chaos.
“I am giving you a history lesson, Minister,” said the Unspeakable. “You seemed curious as to why no Minister had entered the Department without the Stone’s permission. And now you know why.”

_They’ve booby-trapped their home ground. Of course they would have._ Rufus evened out his breathing, as well as his anger about not being able to accomplish everything he wanted. He bowed to the Unspeakable. “Then I will not disturb the Stone,” he said.

“And you will give us permission to use our artifacts?” the Unspeakable asked.

Rufus gave him a smile. He would bet that it startled the man, though the Unspeakable betrayed no emotion, so that might have been only his hope speaking. ‘Of course not.”

“People will die, Minister.”

“Which people?”

“People in our care.”

“Tell me.”

The Unspeakable was silent.

Rufus nodded. “I thought so. I control the magic in the Ministry, sir. You control your home ground, and presumably do so with the Stone’s help. What you’ve forgotten is that I have no reason to trust you any longer.” He sharpened his gaze. “I’ve heard about the attack on Woodhouse. I may be unable to stop you from using the artifacts outside the Ministry, but I can do other things.”

“Those things would be, sir?” The Unspeakable’s voice remained as featureless as a new snowfall.

“Watch the newspapers,” said Rufus, and turned and departed with a sweep of his robes. The Unspeakable watched him go, but made no move to stop him. Of course not, Rufus thought. Any spell he might attempt, any artifact he might throw, owed its functioning to Rufus at the moment.

And if they killed him—

Rufus smiled a smile he knew was wolfish. A Minister dead during the Ritual of Cincinnatus, through no fault of his own and no natural cause, roused the magic’s ire. It gained the motive and the ability to avenge itself on the Minister’s killers, It would know who they were.

The Department of Mysteries, trapped or not, remained part of the Ministry’s physical building. Rufus doubted they wanted to see what would happen when all the power in the building’s stones was turned against them.

Besides, they would have to deal with the storm when it broke tomorrow. Rufus was rather looking forward to the storm. It would make people wail again, but there was nothing they could do in the Ministry as long as he controlled the magic there, and at least it would change the balance of power.

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Draco had lingered in the corridor until he felt the wards crumple and fall away. He didn’t have the strength to break through them—he didn’t think anyone in Woodhouse did—and while the silence from behind them unnerved him, he wouldn’t let himself think that meant anything bad.

But they were gone, and he opened the door, and saw Harry walking naked towards the loo, as if it were something he did every day. Draco was distantly aware of a cut on Harry’s hand that looked as if it were already scabbing over, and of some odd scorch marks on the walls, but he was mostly aware of the fact that he had Harry in the same room with him, entirely naked, for only the second time. And this time, while Harry had suffered, it was nothing like what he had gone through in the Chamber of Secrets.

“Harry?” he called, and realized his voice was husky with arousal. He didn’t care. In the moments it took Harry to turn around, he drew his wand and cast a locking spell on the door, one that would sting whoever tried the handle. He was _not_ going to let anyone interrupt this.
Harry at last, slowly, turned to face him. Draco was delighted to see that he had an erection. Harry’s skin immediately flushed red absolutely everywhere, but that was only to be expected.

Draco took a step forward.

Harry took a step back.

Draco halted, and made himself wait, difficult as that was to do against the impulses that were urging him to simply take Harry to bed, that said the lust would overcome the fear for both of them. “Harry,” he said quietly.

Harry breathed in and out, and that was the loudest sound in the room for long moments. Then he shook his head slightly, and said, “Draco. I ache all over, and my face—” He gestured to it. For the first time, Draco noticed the tracks of tears there. He’d been rather more occupied in looking elsewhere on Harry’s body, he had to admit. “I’m a mess. I should shower.”

“I think you look fine,” Draco whispered. *This is perfect. It would be a crime to waste such a perfect opportunity.* “Harry, tell me the truth. If I let you shower and run the aches out of your muscles, will you come back and get into bed with me and do what we both want to do?”

Harry swallowed. “I’d lose my nerve,” he whispered. “No.”

Draco nodded. He felt slightly detached from what was happening, soaring above it, but that was all right. The wind that carried him was dizzying arousal, heat, white-gold lust. He wasn’t going to make a mistake. He didn’t think there was a mistake he could make, at this juncture.

“Then come to bed with me,” he said, and held out his hand.

Harry stared at it. Draco waited. He could see the longing in Harry’s eyes, longing that *existed*. The problem wasn’t that Harry didn’t want him. But he was afraid of what would happen if he lost control of himself.

Draco decided that he could probably help, as the moments stretched on and Harry still didn’t move. He unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it over his head. He made the movements casual, without hurry and without a deliberate slowness that would tease. He suspected Harry wasn’t ready to be teased right now.

“What are you doing?” Harry whispered.

“Making your decision easier,” Draco said, and laid his shirt on the floor. Then he kicked off his shoes, then his socks, and reached for his trousers. He glanced up to see that Harry’s flush had deepened. Draco smiled. *It’s not all embarrassment this time.* “You’ve said before that you enjoy bringing me pleasure, Harry,” he murmured. “Should we start with that?”

“I do,” Harry breathed, as though the words had been charmed out of him. “I’ve missed that.”

Draco hid his joy behind a grave nod. He pulled his trousers down, then his pants. He noticed Harry’s shoulders fall a little when he did. *He did feel more vulnerable when he was naked and I wasn’t. Good. This should calm him down, then.*

*Not to mention make this a hell of a lot easier.*

Draco stretched out on the bed and extended his hand once more. He wouldn’t force Harry to come to him. He couldn’t. He let his gaze, and the evidence of his arousal, and Harry’s own, do the work for him.

Harry closed his eyes and whispered, “What am I doing?” But he took a step forward.

“Nothing wrong,” Draco said softly. His words seemed to die as soon as he said them. He wondered if it was his imagination that the walls were turning dark blue and purple, and then realized it wasn’t; it was Harry’s magic. That might be the same thing insuring his voice was quiet. “Something very right. Come here, Harry.”

Harry, though still hesitant, came to the foot of the bed and stood looking at Draco for a moment. Draco waited. He could wait. Harry’s magic had turned the walls a deep purple, the same color as the *ianthinum* he remembered from the Room of Requirement when Harry had exercised his emotions in there. Heat moved shimmering through the room, but it didn’t resemble the heat of sunlight that Draco remembered from their earlier encounters; it felt like heat from a jungle, thick and old and—

*Wet,* Draco thought, before he could stop himself.
Harry took one final deep breath, and climbed onto the bed.

Draco clasped his hand and pulled him forward. He already leaned back against the pillows, and Harry knelt between his spread legs. Draco could feel his cock twitch with the heat, the nearness, of Harry’s skin. He was glad that Harry showed no signs of backing off, now. He didn’t think he could bear to let him go when he was within touching distance.

He leaned forward and did something he hadn’t had the time to do before, kissing Harry gently, then deeply, then more insistently. Halfway through the kiss, Harry began to respond, leaning nearer, uttering a soft, stifled moan, taking his hand out of Draco’s so that he could slide it into his hair.

Draco leaned back further. Each movement seemed subtle, as slow as a dance. Harry’s elbow poked him in the stomach, and he flinched for a moment, but even that hurt less than he supposed it should. Harry was no longer trembling with fear, but suppressed eagerness. Draco felt gladness sweep through him, joining the rest of the emotions and the deep color of Harry’s magic.

Merlin, he felt as if he contained music.

He shifted Harry slightly to the side, or Harry moved; at this point, Draco found it hard to tell. His head was hazy, the world slow. But he noticed it when Harry aligned their groins, and when Harry’s chest came to rest against his. That added a sharpness to the heat that ran through him. Draco bucked once, then twice, and saw Harry’s mouth open in a gasp he couldn’t hear, saw his eyes close.

Draco thought he said something. But then, he was always thinking he said something, and in the press of Harry’s magic, it kept being lost. He kissed Harry again, and lifted his hips again. He would do what he could, but he couldn’t move that well, trapped by Harry’s weight. It was up to Harry, too.

Harry swallowed, and opened his eyes. Looking steadily into Draco’s, he braced his hand and the stump of his left wrist on Draco’s shoulders, and then lifted his body and brought it down.

Draco shivered, a full-body shiver that seemed to start with his hips and end up somewhere around his lungs. This time, he definitely said, “Yes,” and Harry took that for encouragement—which he bloody well should, Draco thought, somewhere through the fog—and lifted himself to come down again. Draco’s hands found their way to his hips and stayed there.

Harry’s face shone above him, pink and red, flushed with sweat now, his dark curls dampened with it, his green eyes bright as jungle flowers, but what Draco remembered more than anything else was the feeling of it. Heat and silence and softness and pressure, wound up and around and in and all about them, and now and then he could hear the magic crooning through the silence, a sound like a bird singing faint and far away.

He waited. He rocked between his body’s rhythms and Harry’s on top of him, but he knew there was a moment coming when he would be able to do something he wanted to do.

And then he knew when it was. His own body told him the time. Draco shifted, locking his legs abruptly into place behind Harry’s ankles and thighs, urging him downward faster and harder than he was ready for.

Harry blinked, his face startled for half a second. Then he tilted his head back and gasped out, and Draco knew a moment of intense satisfaction as Harry permitted the pleasure to sweep over him. He could feel him jerking, the wetness splattering his own stomach, and hear Harry’s soft intense cries. They were so close Draco could feel the individual muscle spasms, in fact, as Harry allowed his body to do what it wanted, for once, and stopped worrying about what it would mean for his mind and his magic.

It meant a wonderful thing for his magic, as far as Draco was concerned. The skin of heat around them wove tighter and tighter, binding them together into what felt like a cocoon. Harry couldn’t stop moving, his hips flexing, and that meant Draco could tilt his own head back and give in just a moment later; he couldn’t move that far away, with magic above and below insistently pressing them closer.

He held tight to Harry as pleasure ran through him like water or light, hollowing him out and sating his hunger at the same moment. The warm wetness smeared between them a moment later seemed almost an afterthought; what Draco really felt, more than just wet or warm, was good.

He let his own body move lazily, his hips rising and falling, until the cocoon of magic unbound them and the moment was done. Then he ran his fingers through Harry’s hair—he had to do it twice, because it was so slippery with sweat that he lost his first grip—and lifted his head for a kiss.
Harry was smiling. Draco kissed him firmly, rolling them both to the side meanwhile so that Harry lay next to him instead of on top of him. Harry broke the kiss to yawn and stretch his arms over his head.

“Well?” Draco asked, and wondered if he should have waited to speak, given the smugness in his voice. Then he decided that, no, it didn’t matter.

“That—“ Harry swallowed, and Draco wondered if it was nervousness or simply awareness returning to his eyes. “That felt so good, Draco.”

“You won’t be so nervous doing it again, then, next time?” Draco stroked Harry’s face and cheek and mouth. Harry’s magic had drawn back, but Draco could still hear it singing to itself, the sound somewhere between crooning and purring.

“Only because I think it might distract me from other things,” said Harry, and smiled again, and then kissed him with unexpected fierceness, driving him back into the pillows. “Thank you, Draco,” he whispered into his ear when he finished. “Thank you.”

Draco yawned in return and reached for his wand; while he enjoyed the warmth of the wetness on his stomach, it was turning cool and too sticky for his tastes. A wave of the wand, a muttered cleaning charm, and that was gone. Draco didn’t want to Vanish the sweat, but—

“Do you still want that shower?” he asked Harry.

Harry didn’t answer. When Draco glanced at him, he realized Harry was asleep, his breathing slow and quiet, blending with his magic’s purring.

Draco smiled. It was the second time Harry had slept without Consopio since arriving in Woodhouse; the first time had been the night Draco joined him. He wrapped his arms around Harry and pulled them both together, luxuriating in the fact that Harry never woke, so deep and natural was his rest.

That’s another reason beyond the pleasure to do this, he thought, as he let his own sated exhaustion run over him in languorous waves. He sleeps well after it. I’ll have to remember to remind him of that.

The magic purred. Draco, infinitely pleased with himself, Harry, and the world, drifted off.

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Interlude: The Liberator’s Fifth Letter

October 10th, 1996

Dear Minister Scrimgeour:

May I congratulate you on your new and much bolder move? I think the wizarding world will be happier after this, though at first we may have to endure a period of chaos. But that is always the truth. When any storm comes, at first people complain how hard the rain is, and then they accept, when it is done, that the storm watered the grass and made the air clearer and more beautiful.

My family’s fortunes are declining, and they are inclined to blame you and Harry vates. I cannot tell you how much this gratifies me. They still speak of Falco Parkinson as a savior, but their voices when they do so are tentative, questioning. They will, before long, abandon him as a bad joke. They must.

Do you know what he has done, Minister? Of course not, because he keeps to the shadows. But my parents have a glass that links them to him, now. This is a treasure of the Order of the Phoenix, passed among the various families and members, and always moved hastily when they think that someone who is not part of the Order might have seen it. That is the reason it was taken from its last hiding place and passed so swiftly to us.

I risked a beating to catch a glimpse of the glass while my mother prattled on and on to my elder sister, but it was worth it. It is indeed what I suspected. It shows the view of the leader of the Order, but they must make a special effort to communicate with him. My parents have not made that effort. They claim that they don’t want to disturb Falco in his important work, but I think now that they were always less connected to him than they said they were. He may not even know they exist.

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…Forgive the stain on these first words, Minister. My father came into the room to lecture me on duty and threaten again to
confine me to a coffin, and I had to fold the letter hastily so that he would not see what I had written. I nodded meekly and tamely long enough, and he went away.

The glass showed Falco in a misty gray place, weaving images between his fingers. The images were small, but they appeared to me to be werewolves and the full moon. Then he waved his fingers, and the images flew through the air, with Falco flying beside them in his sea eagle form, as if escorting them. He landed at the windows of sleeping wizards and witches. The images slipped into their heads, through their ears.

He is sending dreams, I think. What does it mean that he makes people dream of werewolves? Nothing good.

Please do not be surprised if the resistance to your reforms is stronger than you ever expected it to be. It is not your fault, nor the fault of your reforms’ language. Parkinson is inflaming people against you and your plans. Speak about strange dreams, Minister. Work it into a speech, if you can. That might persuade people to listen more to the world outside their heads and less to the one inside it.

My mother will search my room soon, and she may find this letter. I send it to you as-is, sir, and ask for no response, as always.

May we all be unbound.

Yours,

The Liberator.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Thirty-Four: Ward-Eaters

“Harry!” A hand was shaking his shoulder, and someone was shouting his name, but it was from so very far away. Harry didn’t see why it couldn’t wait a touch, so that he could wade through the rest of the very interesting dream he was having.

“Harry, you have to see this!”

That woke him, at least. Harry opened his eyes, and blinked. He didn’t remember taking off his glasses before he and Draco had had sex yesterday, but he must have, because everything in front of him was a blur, including the white object Draco was trying to show him. “What?” he asked. His voice trailed off into a sleepy yawn.

Draco shoved his glasses onto his face, and then held up the paper in front of him. Harry rubbed at his eyes to remove the last traces of sleep-dust, and leaned close to see what he could see in the *Daily Prophet*.

The headline shocked him speechless. When he didn’t respond in enough time to content Draco, he began bouncing up and down on the bed behind the newspaper, saying, “Harry!”

“I saw,” Harry whispered. “I’m just not sure if I can believe. This is real? This isn’t some trick of Hornblower and his *Vox Populi*?”

Draco made a rude noise. “That’s printed on coarser paper, and the newsprint isn’t as even,” he said, as if those were things that Harry should have noticed for himself. “He can’t afford the best like the *Daily Prophet* can, no matter how rich he is.”

Harry shrugged. He honestly hadn’t noticed. As long as he could read the newspaper, he tended to care about what was on the page, not its consistency or the quality of the printing.

There was certainly nothing wrong with the screaming headline that stood up and called out a turning point in their battle before him.

**ANTI-WEREWOLF LAWS REPEALED**

*Minister Calls Them ‘Archaic,’ Announces A New Way*

By: Melinda Honeywhistle

The article wasn’t that complimentary to Scrimgeour—most of Honeywhistle’s articles weren’t—but Harry got the gist of it. The Minister had summoned the Wizengamot and told them what he thought of the anti-werewolf laws, how they damaged the noble
cause of peaceful relations between wizards and werewolves, and how he wanted them to think long and hard about the laws and whether there was a one of them they would really want to keep.

The Wizengamot had voted thirty-one to twenty to repeal the existing laws. They were drafting new ones to deal with the situation, and expected to remain in seclusion until they’d finished.

Honeywhistle concluded the article with a sulkily suggestion that the Wizengamot was dominated and controlled by the Minister. “Their compliance is to be perhaps expected,” was the last sentence, “given that Minister Scrimgeour now controls all magic used inside the Ministry.”

Harry had no doubt that was part of it, but the Wizengamot Elders could leave the building and vote elsewhere—and they would have done so if it was something as simple as Scrimgeour telling them to vote the way he wanted because he was temporary dictator of the Ministry. No, Scrimgeour had done something else, but Harry was damned if he could figure out what.

“Does that mean the rebellion is done with?” Draco whispered. “Does that mean that we can go back to Hogwarts?”

Harry looked up at him. “Do you want to?”

Draco’s face convulsed in irritation at once. “I want to be wherever you are, idiot,” he said. He leaned down and kissed Harry so hard that Harry was gasping and dizzy when he pulled back. “So I can do that,” Draco finished. “I simply wondered if the rebellion was done, now that you got what you wanted.”

Harry caught his breath and licked his lips and tried to think about something other than the smooth, bare expense of Draco’s shoulders, and what he would see between his legs if he moved the newspaper. “No,” he said. “The Minister is drafting new laws, but no one has any idea what those laws will be yet. They might be less restrictive but still not grant werewolves the rights of full citizens. And there’s no word of what might happen with the goblins and the centaurs and other magical creatures. So we’ll stay here until we have those gestures of good faith—either actual laws or binding oaths—that we asked for.”

Draco nodded. “Woodhouse will protect us,” he said, and kissed Harry insistently once more. The paper crinkled between them, and he started to shift it out of the way. Harry might have protested, but he was remembering exactly how Draco had made him feel yesterday, and he wanted to feel like that again.

Someone pounded on the door.

Harry heard Draco’s locking spell undone, and barely had enough time to spread the Daily Prophet over them both when Snape stepped into the room. He knew him by the firmness of his left step and the slightly dragging nature of his right, and the sweep and snap of his robes, before he ever saw his face.

There was a pause. There was a very long pause. Harry, lying with his head on Draco’s shoulder and most of his face under the paper, felt Draco shaking with silent laughter against him. He wished he could laugh. His flush was all embarrassment and not lust now, at the thought of Snape catching them.

Finally, Snape’s voice said, in the depths of freezing cold that he usually reserved for when a seventh-year-student made a mistake that he should have corrected in first year, “You must come to the kitchen. We are having a strategy meeting.”

“So were we,” said Draco innocently.

Snape’s response was to shut the door with a massive slam. Draco rolled off Harry and laughed, and went on laughing even when Harry hit him on his shoulder, which should have hurt since he had no clothes on.

“That didn’t even make sense,” Harry told him. “That joke, I mean. What do you mean, a strategy meeting?”

“It didn’t have to make sense,” Draco said, rolling over and smiling at him. “What was important was that he saw he couldn’t intimidate us. There are times I think he’d want to roll you up in bicorn fur and prevent you from moving for the rest of your life, Harry. He has to learn that you’re an adult now, and that includes having sex.” He started to kiss Harry again.

“A strategy meeting in the kitchen, he said,” Harry reminded him, and rolled out of bed. His embarrassment had reduced his lust to ashes.

“You should shower first,” Draco said. “You’re all over sweat. And we could share.”
Harry performed a quick cleaning charm on both himself and Draco, listening to Draco’s yelp as it roughly scrubbed his skin with some satisfaction, and then summoned a new set of clothes from his trunk to him. “You’ll have to get dressed, too,” he added, keeping his back turned to Draco. “I don’t think you’d want anyone else in the kitchen to see your strategy.”

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Harry stepped into the kitchen, and blinked. Among the faces he’d expected around the round table were a few unfamiliar ones.

“Neville?” he asked in astonishment.

“Harry.” Neville, holding a pot in which a small, spiky plant grew, beamed in pleasure and something Harry recognized a moment later as nervousness. He wasn’t sure he’d be welcome. He gave a quick little motion somewhere between a nod and a bow, and held out the pot. “This is one of the plants I was breeding to counter Yaxley’s magic-binding vines.”

Harry accepted the pot and stared at the plant inside. This close, he could see that it was mostly dark green, but had crimson spots here and there, and the spines were thorns, thick and furred at the ends. He shuddered and shook his head, shutting off the awful memories that wanted to rise.

“What does it do?” he asked Neville.

“It’ll react to the presence of the vines.” Neville said. He nodded to the thorns that curled around the plant’s stem, his nervousness fading as he talked. “It grows a lot deeper; the roots extend down like the coils of entrails, you see, so they’re much bigger than they appear at first, folded again and again. Those shoot straight out, and they bear thorns of their own. Those claw the vines apart.”

“This is wonderful, Neville,” Harry murmured, setting the pot aside. “And you’re welcome to stay here, if you’d like.” He was uncertain. Neville might only have come to turn over the plant. Of course, he could have sent it with an owl if that was the case.

Neville stood straighter, and inclined his head in a small, formal bow that Harry recognized after a moment. Light purebloods used it as a token of pledging loyalty, if not formal allegiance, to a Lord-level wizard. “I was hoping that you would say that, Harry,” he said.

Harry nodded back, and turned around again, towards a face he’d only seen a glimpse of before Neville distracted him. “And Ginny?”

Ginny beamed at him. “Yes.”

“Why?” Neville might have used his errand as an excuse, but Harry couldn’t imagine what Ginny could have told her family that would have permitted her to come. Her parents had been upset with her, or so Connor had told him, even for fighting in the Midsummer battle, where they really couldn’t spare anyone from the field. They had thought her too young, or not a good enough fighter, or—this was Connor’s opinion—their baby girl. She could have been a sixth-year and they would have still objected to her fighting in a way that they didn’t to Ron or the twins doing so.

“Because I was tired of being useless.” Ginny lifted her head and glared at him as if she wanted to intimidate him. Harry wondered if he was the only one who noticed that her lower lip was trembling; like Neville, she’d been uncertain of her welcome. “No one knows what to think in Hogwarts, everyone changes their opinion daily, and there’s just too little firm ground. I wanted to come here and help any way I can. I may not be able to fight like a fully-trained wizard, but my mum taught me other things.”

Harry nodded. “And did your family say you could?”

Ginny flushed to match her hair. Harry sighed. “I’m not looking forward to the Howlers,” he murmured. “But you’re fifteen, and you fought last year, and it’s true that I do need people who want to help.” Many of the werewolves didn’t really want to help; they wanted to complain. Now that he was allowing himself to feel angry again, Harry was aware of a steadily rising irritation with that. What had happened to those afflicted with Loki’s bite was horrible, but could he help it if they refused to make the best of a bad situation and instead would rather lie about lamenting? “So if you still want to stay, you can.”

Ginny smiled and clasped her hands. “Thank you, Harry,” she said. If she heard Draco’s mutter about weasels, she ignored it. Harry reached back and slapped Draco’s shoulder without turning from the gathering in front of him. He had noticed two other new faces now.
“I think I met you briefly at the alliance gathering in the spring,” he told the young man who stood next to Millicent. “But I don’t remember your name, sad to say.”

The man smiled. “My name is Pierre Delacour,” he said, with only a slight accent to his English. “And this is my cousin Adrienne.” He nodded to the slight young woman at his shoulder, whom Harry had had trouble seeing. He squinted, and now he could see her fully, including the slight shimmer of a silver cloud that seemed to cover her magic. He felt his hackles rise.

“How is she wearing a web?” he demanded.

Adrienne laughed and gave a curtsey; the robes she wore were more like gowns than robes, Harry noticed. “I am full Veela,” she said, in an accent that sounded more Spanish than French. “I drink a potion so men will not notice me so much. It is entirely willing, I assure you.” She had long silvery hair and blue eyes—features Harry remembered from Fleur at the Triwizard Tournament, and from the Veela at the Quidditch World Cup. She wore a ring on the hand she held out to Harry. Harry clasped her hand and kissed the back of it, studying the ring. It was heavy, with what looked like silver layered on top of silver, surrounding a square stone that was flat and blue and had the gloss of metal.

“What does this mean?” he asked.

“I am an official representative of the Veela Council,” said Adrienne, with another smile. “I come to see if you are a good option for alliance. You are vates, and we must look at you.”

Harry nodded. “And you came for the same reason?” he asked, turning to Pierre.

Pierre smiled, and Millicent flushed. “Not entirely,” Pierre said softly. “There is more than one kind of alliance to be made here.”

Harry let it go, though he could tell some of his allies were puzzled about what that meant. It wasn’t their problem to worry about.

“We’re having a strategy meeting,” he said, “because of the headline this morning. I assume that most of you saw it?”

Some heads shook, so Harry cast an Accio for the nearest Prophet, and heard someone yelp as it tore out of her robe pocket. Harry shrugged an apology and spread the paper out so that everyone could see the headline.

An immediate babble of voices started. Harry let it continue, at least until he heard someone saying, “We can go home.”

“Not yet,” he said. The voices cut off as if an axe had fallen. Harry didn’t know if that was a good thing or not. “We don’t know what new laws the Wizengamot will come up with. That could include granting werewolves the same rights as wizards, but we don’t know that for sure. And that does nothing for the goblins—” he inclined his head to Helcas, who stood on the other side of the table and listened—“or the centaurs.” Only Bone was in the room, but he brought a hoof down in a solid stamp when Harry looked at him. “The only thing we know is that the new laws will presumably be less restrictive.”

“We can go home, though,” George said, leaning forward across the table. Harry restrained his groan. George was the most vocal of the new werewolves, always asking when they could go home, hinting that he wouldn’t have any trouble fitting back into the wizarding world—ignoring the fact that most people would know he’d worked for the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts, and would know what it meant that he’d survived Loki’s attack—and saying that he knew spells to keep his lycanthropy concealed.

“There is one danger you have not considered,” said Snape, and his voice silenced George quite effectively. The werewolf turned around and gaped at him. Harry looked at Snape, wary.

“What is that, sir?” he asked.

Snape nodded several times, as if to say that the due of respect Harry accorded to him was acceptable if not quite what he wanted, and said, “I questioned our Unspeakable prisoner, Croaker, yesterday. I wanted to make sure he was holding nothing back, and after some time, he did tell me what I wanted.” Harry masked a shiver. Snape’s blank face and tone said nothing about whatever methods he’d used to get that information out of Croaker—but then, Harry had told him, basically, that he had a free hand. “The Unspeakables wanted werewolves in Tullianum for easy access to them, because they were indeed conducting experiments with your kind.” Harry hoped he was the only one who noticed the sneer on the last words, but given the expression that appeared on Camellia’s face, he suspected he wasn’t.

“What kind of experiments?” Remus leaned over the table to challenge, and Harry wanted to bury his head in his arms and groan.
Did Remus *always* have to take the most exasperating course?

“Why, experiments to see if they could duplicate the werewolf curse in some respects,” said Snape, his eyes glinting. “However, they know lycanthropy has its drawbacks. What they wanted was the ability to change a person into other animals, on other dates than the full moon, without the vulnerability to silver—and to control the transformation for themselves, rather than having a wolf within the person’s body control it. Imagine a world in which the Unspeakables strike from afar, turning an enemy into a great cat and having him attack and kill someone else, then revealing him as an unregistered Animagus all along. With their ability to *Obliviate* others and control a person’s mind, they could have the wizard himself believing it. And such cases do occasionally happen. Who would question it?”

“And what would happen to those people who were already Animagi?” Harry asked, sick at the thought.

“Why, the Unspeakables would want to control those transformations as well, of course.” Snape’s face was a blank. “There is much they would give to be able to do that, and as long as they are giving the lives and magic of werewolves, they are paying no price themselves.”

“What are they doing to the werewolves they took into the Department?” Harry was not sure he wanted to hear, but he was sure he couldn’t afford not to.

Snape gave a piercing glance—to Harry’s surprise, it was in Ginny’s and Neville’s directions, as if he thought they were the ones who should not hear this, rather than the werewolves themselves. Then he turned back to Harry. “Taking them apart is the delicate way of saying it, Harry.”

Harry stifled a rush of sickness, and nodded. “And why did the Stone aim them at me in particular?”

Snape shook his head. “Because you are a champion of werewolves. Because your magic is very strong, and they thought your character and the fact you had not Declared for a Lord made you vulnerable.” He steepled his fingers. “Croaker told me something fascinating, something I never knew. When a Lord Declares for Light or Dark, the power of Light or Dark wraps that wizard and protects him. It is not a conscious thing. As we have seen, the wild Dark may still be angry at the Dark Lord. But it makes them safer from attempts to mentally control them. This may be because Lords usually use compulsion themselves.” He leaned forward, hands flat on the table now. “They considered you a prize, Harry.”

Harry snorted. “Many people do.” He paused. “Did you uncover any information about why they might have allied with Shield of the Granian?”

“The Granian breeders do fear that you will try to take their horses, and thus their source of profit, from them,” Snape said. “So they intended to destroy you or capture Draco as a bargaining chip, if they could. The Unspeakables talked them out of killing you, and sent them after you to reach you in places they could not.”

“And do they actually have webs on their horses?” Harry asked.

“Croaker was not interested in that, and did not bother to find out.”

“If they do, then I’ll ask them to break them sooner or later.” Harry drummed his fingers on the table. “A separate offer of peace to them might not go amiss. Pointing out that the only people of theirs who have died are the ones who have attacked me would do, and telling them what I do with webs is imperative. If the horses aren’t sentient, and they don’t use webs, then all I can really do is ask for better treatment, not break them free.” He turned to Narcissa. “Do you know anyone connected to Shield of the Granian, Narcissa? Anyone who would be willing to carry a message to them for us, and do it without distorting its content?”

Narcissa frowned slightly. “It is years since I was friends with the women connected to those families,” she murmured. “But it may be that it is time to renew old acquaintances.”

Harry nodded. “Do what you can. I don’t consider that a particularly urgent matter unless they attack again. I think they may have learned their lesson, while the Unspeakables will keep coming because of the Stone.” He looked back at Snape. “Did you find out what the Stone wants?”

“New magic,” said Snape. “It is an experimenting intelligence, apparently. It wants to learn and know new things, and to make new things. It does not care what it must sacrifice in order to do so.”

“Just like all my other enemies,” Harry murmured, and smiled in spite of himself. “And it wants to use me as a source of fuel?”
“Yes.”

“At least it’s more honest than Dumbledore wanting to use me as a savior for the world,” Harry mumbled, and this time sought out Ignifer. He hadn’t heard any reports from Honoria in the past few days—obsessed as he had been with working on the werewolf cure and trying to keep his emotions in check, he hadn’t made much time for those of his people outside the valley—but she would have come to Ignifer, or told her if anything unusual had occurred. “What is happening with the Maenad Press, Ignifer?”

She frowned. “Hornblower is already swinging from supporting you whole-heartedly to questioning your decisions,” she said. “Some of the articles appearing in the Populi have called you a murderer, and insisted that you be tried for your part in killing those fine Aurors, Unspeakables, and independent wizards who tried to stem the bloody tide,” to quote one of them.

Harry nodded, and decided that he could feel all the guilt about that he wanted, but later. “The situation is delicate, then,” he said. “And no matter what Scrimgeour’s intentions, we can’t count on the repeal of the anti-werewolf laws bringing in much support. To some people I’m a murderer, and they’ll remember that no matter what happens legally. We do need to settle the rebellion if we can, show that we can compromise if possible, but not at the cost of everything we’ve worked for.”

“Does this mean that you won’t allow yourself to be taken and dragged off to prison?” Remus asked abruptly.

Harry faced him and arched an eyebrow, wondering what was going through his head. “Of course not. I may ask for sacrifices from myself that I would not from anyone else, because I know that I can pay them, and I may pay those sacrifices the other side asks if they seem reasonable. But I won’t give up as I would have last year, especially not to avoid violence. I chose violence when I started on this course.”

Remus lapsed into silence. Harry studied him and wondered if he could talk with him later, work out what was bothering him, and why in the world he had asked that bloody question. Then he snorted to himself. Oh, yes, I’ll add arguing with Remus to my list of other essential things that need to be done. At this point, I’ll have to wait until he comes to me and actually demands my attention. I can’t waste time chasing down people who don’t want to talk.

“Given that the Unspeakables want werewolves so badly, we can’t end the rebellion yet, end of the anti-werewolf laws or not,” he said, ignoring the sounds of dismay from George and the others who supported him. “The Unspeakables are still part of the Ministry, and even Scrimgeour controlling all the magic in the building doesn’t help much when they attack outside it, as we’ve seen. Will he risk open conflict with the Department of Mysteries? If he will, then I think we can trust him to back us. Otherwise, we’ll continue to wait.”

Someone else started to ask something, and then the karkadann bugled from outside. Harry caught his breath against the tide of battle-lust that swept his blood, and told him it was probably nothing, just an unusual maneuver by a centaur that she didn’t like. Woodhouse would have warned him if attackers were near.

Then she screamed again, and this time it was a cry of pain, and Harry’s uncertainty whispered, If anyone could get through the place magic, it would be the Unspeakables.

He asked Woodhouse if he could Apparate outside, and received permission in seconds. He leaped, and then he was standing in the grass, near the place where the broken corpses of the winged horses still lay, clutched and held by Woodhouse’s defenses, and staring at the gray-cloaked ranks who had appeared on the nearest hill.

They were holding spheres of intense white light, and the karkadann was charging them. One of the spheres flickered as Harry watched, and a burst of white flew at her. It carved a bloody trail down her back. She stopped, screaming and tossing her horn in rage, and then ran on again.

Harry knew how they must have passed Woodhouse’s defenses then. The last time, what had triggered Woodhouse’s response was hostile intent towards Harry himself, who was part of it, and its trees and grass, also part of it. If the Unspeakables had brought weapons that would only harm the living things not part of Woodhouse and no hostile intent towards Harry himself, then the place magic wouldn’t rouse. It was the same situation the Death Eaters had been in last year when Harry and his group attacked them, since none of them had bonded to the valley.

He wondered if any of the Unspeakables realized what would happen now.

Probably not, he told himself, or they wouldn’t have done this.
And his magic unfolded its wings.

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Indigena snatched her hand back from the page of the book as if it’d burned her. It took her a moment to realize that it hadn’t been a surge of magic from the ancient leather that had hurt her. Her thorns were vibrating from the surge of power from the west and south, as Harry’s magic roared full-throated.

Indigena blinked at nothing for a moment. She wondered that she should so easily distinguish Harry’s magic from Falco’s, and she worried that her dedication to her Lord might be fading if she could.

But then she realized there was a simple explanation for that, and smiled. Harry’s magic had a sharp, dark edge from its indebtedness to Voldemort’s. Falco stank to her. Voldemort’s magic smelled like fresh, deep earth, damp with the smell of rain. Harry’s magic bore the scent of fresh, damp earth that someone had not made the best use of in attempting to plant too many flowers at once.

There was nothing she could do to influence the battle, since nothing she could do would let her leave her Lord’s side. He would be unhappy even to hear about the battle, unless it ended with Harry wounded. She silently wished Harry good luck instead, and then turned another page and bent over the beginning of Chapter 13. *Since he already has the compulsion gift, I doubt that this will be useful to him.*

******

Harry could have done a number of things, he supposed. He could have flung fire at the Unspeakables, and they would have roasted; he didn’t think they had artifacts that would protect them against all attacks. He could have chosen something uncommon, like lightning or acid. He could have called on the karkadann and sent her charging at them; she was already running straight towards them again, despite the spheres of white light in their hands and the wound on her back.

Harry didn’t see a reason to do any of those things, though. He simply opened his absorbere gift and began swallowing the magic from their artifacts, and from their bodies, and from their wands, and from anything else they might carry on their persons. He felt none of the reluctance to do this that usually plagued him, only a grand disgust that their constant attacks had made this necessary at all.

One sphere and then another went dark, and Unspeakables gave the low, pained screams of wizards who had suddenly become Muggles. Harry snarled in his throat, and turned towards the ones who had wounded the karkadann—and did it again as he watched, with what looked like a sword but shot darts that made her scream and rear as they caught her in the forelegs.

Then another held up something dark and mottled gray. Harry could see it weirdly well from that distance, which he shouldn’t have been able to.

His absorbere gift hit it and ended. Harry let out a loud gasp, and nearly lost control of the magic he had gathered. It felt like being punched in the teeth.

He watched, narrow-eyed, as the mottled gray thing twisted in the Unspeakable’s hands and reared out a slender neck, dragon-shaped, with a blocky dragon head on the end. It roared, and the sound traveled up into the air as an almost visible cone of pure force. Harry followed it, and saw one of the wards still hanging over the valley crackle like burning paper and disappear.

*I should have wondered about that,* he thought. *I only hung the wards to make the werewolves feel safe, but they should have warned me when someone approached, even if Woodhouse didn’t.*

He focused on the ward-eater the Unspeakable carried, and wondered what it was made of and what to do with it. He was sucking magic from the rest of the Unspeakables, still, but he was approaching the full amount he could carry—they simply had so many artifacts, and defensive spells, and small surprises sewn into the pockets of their robes—and when the ward-eater roared in his direction, he lost control briefly and staggered to his knees, panting harshly.

“What can we do, Wild?”

Harry glanced up. Camellia stood at his side. He wasn’t surprised she had come first of all of them. Her eyes were brilliant, but she looked at the wizards with understandable frustration. Born Muggle, this wasn’t the kind of battle she could participate in.

*Unless.*
Harry held out his hand. “Take my hand,” he said. His voice was weird, distorted, as if he were underwater, from all the power he carried, but Camellia clasped his wrist with utter trust. Harry pulled, and she knelt in the grass beside him. Harry stared into her eyes, and still saw nothing but trust there.

“How can you carry some of the magic for me?” he asked.

“I—it’s me.” Camellia blinked. “Though I don’t see how I can hope to contain it, Wild.”

“I’m going to try something,” said Harry, and ignored another scream from the karkadann. She wasn’t dead yet, he thought he would know if she was, and the ward-eater would block most of what he could do, and he was going mad under the pressure of the magic racing around him. He moved their joined hands so that his palm rested on Camellia’s shoulder, and closed his eyes.

He called on his will, and the magic he had gathered, glad to be useful, surged to the surface of his skin. Camellia gasped, but made no sound of protest or pain as the magic flooded into her. Harry set it to carving out a magical core in her. That was what wizards had that separated them from Muggles—a reservoir to carry and hold the power. Most Muggles could be affected by spells, but trying to use a wand was impossible, because the wand simply had nothing to connect with in them. Harry used some of the magic to create a core. It was a strange process. With his eyes closed, he could see flashing purple veins and green ones, as if he were plunging into the midst of a jeweled tunnel. With his eyes open, he just saw Camellia’s face, anxious but not in pain.

The magic reached the bottom of its dive and spun out. Harry could swear he saw a spider-like creature for a moment, its legs and its mandibles working incredibly fast, creating a net of spun silk across the bottom of the new core. That insured the magic wouldn’t run away as fast as it gathered. Then the spider tightened its hold and began climbing back up the side of Camellia’s—stomach? Harry had no idea where the physical analogue of the magical core would be, in her—weaving as it went. Tighter and tighter grew the strands of the net.

The rest of the magic poured in.

Harry felt the growing sentience in it, inevitable when it was as tightly confined in so small a place as this was. The personality was rather different from any he’d encountered before. Of course, he had extremely limited experience with this kind of thing; the magic he’d encountered in Woodhouse and the magic he’d peeled off from himself to give to Elfrida Bulstrode were the only ones that truly counted. The magic he’d drained from Black artifacts to restore those children rendered Squibs by Voldemort’s attack hadn’t forged this intimate a connection between him and the person he gave it to.

This magic was cool, confident, and deeply protective. It would tend to bury its uncertainty in action, and right now it was looking forward to hurting its enemies. Harry wasn’t that dumb, so he realized a moment later that it was shaping itself after Camellia; it was her magic now, so it acted with and resembled her.

He sensed just when enough would be too much, when the magic would destroy Camellia instead of help her, and he pulled back, severing the connection with them by tugging his hand from her shoulder. Camellia stared at him with a dazed expression.

“You can help me,” said Harry softly. “I’ve given you the absorbere ability.”

Camellia swallowed and glanced up at the Unspeakable was on the hillside. The ones with the other weapons had fallen back by now, doubtless seeing they’d only exhaust themselves against Harry, and win no victories. The one with the ward-eater was advancing, holding it out. “How do I use it?”

Harry gave her an encouraging smile. “Imagine a mouth opening in front of you. That mouth is going to pull on the magic of the Unspeakable, and only the Unspeakable. You’ll be swallowing the magic.”

“But what controls it?” Camellia’s voice had got smaller. “I never—a few wizards have told me that magic feels like exercising an extra set of muscles. I don’t know which direction to move in.”

“In this case, it mostly depends on what you want to happen,” said Harry. “Free will. I know you have a strong one. The magic should do as you like.”

Camellia nodded tentatively, and then focused on the wizard in front of her. A moment later, the Unspeakable staggered. Harry shook his head. The absorbere ability felt like a buzzing along his skin, the irritated tickling of ants’ legs.
“What are you going to do?” Camellia called, as Harry reached out.

“Pull at the ward-eater itself,” said Harry, focusing on the block of gray material. He thought it was rock, but it didn’t matter what it was. “From behind.”

He leaped, and Apparated up the hill. He heard someone shout, but the Unspeakable was engaged with Camellia and couldn’t turn in time.

Harry drank.

The magic that came flooding towards him was more alien than anything he’d felt so far. He caught a glimpse of a mind tight-wound with glittering, alien threads, with existence so long that the concept of quickness, of engaging with others rather than watching them, filled it with anger. It was angry that it had been forced to respond so quickly to this situation. It would have preferred to observe, as it always did, and make its changes so slowly that the humans could not see them.

It would have done all that, but now the moment had arrived when it needed to change or cease to exist, it thought, and so it had moved to change. It could disrupt the magic around it if it must, though it had been reluctant to show its ability forth. Its servants had always kept secret the fact that it was its immunity to magic, and not its magic itself, that was the most important facet of it.

Harry reeled a little as he was thrown back into his own head. The ward-eater was a piece of the Stone.

He didn’t think that he could drain it, now that he knew. The Stone’s immunity to magic included his absorbere ability.

But he could make it retreat from the battlefield, by making its servants useless to it. The Stone needed wizards, those who could understand magic in a way that Muggles simply couldn’t, and who belonged in the Ministry and the wizarding world in a way that Muggles weren’t considered to. He reached out again to the Unspeakables up the hill, tearing their magic apart and sending it sliding off into the air in splashes when he couldn’t swallow it.

The Stone, or the ward-eater, let out a wail of loss through the dragon-head. Harry was simply inflicting losses too heavy; Harry could feel that, through the tentative bond that connected them now. Few served the Stone in comparison to the overall numbers of the wizarding population, and it had already lost too many of them pursuing this one target, tempting though he was with all the magic he possessed.

The Stone called. Harry felt it pulling on bonds joining the Unspeakables, not unlike those bonds that linked the packmind. The Unspeakables Apparated if they still could, or grabbed the arms of those comrades who could and went along. Harry felt the urge to do so himself, before he shook his head and severed the bond that bound them.

He could feel the Stone snarl in the moment before he did so. It knew that he knew it, and it was wary now. Harry could almost feel thoughts that, in something human, he would have called We might need to have peace after all.

And then they were gone, and Harry stood blinking on the hill, and the karkadann ran around in nothingness screaming in frustration, and Camellia was staggering up the hill, laughing and sobbing.

“That was—thank you,” she said, and then collapsed on his neck and started crying.

Harry held her as much as he could; he was missing a hand and stood a few inches shorter than she was. He stroked her back, and murmured in her ear, “I know I didn’t warn you. If it hurt, I’ll take it back.”

Camellia withdrew at once, shaking her head, her eyes too bright, but not only with tears. “No,” she whispered. “I—I understand why they screamed, now, the ones you took this from. There’s no way that I could give this up.”

Harry nodded, then held out his hand and whistled for the karkadann. She came trotting to him, kicking hard enough that clods of dirt and grass flew out of the ground. When she crashed to a halt beside him, she gave him a look so expressive that Harry had to chuckle. Two battles now, and she hadn’t been able to kill anyone.

He patted her side, standing on his toes, and she obligingly knelt so that he could look at the wound on her back. To his relief, it was already scabbing. Karkadanns did have magic that would let them heal faster than most, he supposed; the violence they did to each other and to other animals of their homelands demanded it. He touched her shoulder once more, and she bounced back to her feet with another snort and a final kick before she started grazing on the grass where the Unspeakables had stood.
“It’s going to make trouble, isn’t it?” Camellia asked hesitantly. “I mean, making me a witch, but giving me that gift, too?”

“I expect it is,” said Harry, turning around. “But I’ve won more than I’ve lost. I know what the Unspeakables are doing, now, and how their Stone thinks. And now that they’ve attacked a second time, when the Ministry’s already announced a changed attitude towards werewolves, either the Ministry is going to have to admit to hypocrisy or distance itself from the Department of Mysteries.”

“Which do you think is more likely?” Camellia asked, as they moved back towards the ground.

Harry grinned at her. He felt wild and light and reckless, his emotions blowing through him like wind. He felt like a karkadann. “I have no idea.”

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Chapter Thirty-Five: Fathers and Heirs

Indigena crouched over her Lord and closed her eyes, her hands vibrating with the convulsions of his body. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, and was not sure who she was apologizing to: her Lord, or herself, or whatever was causing this and shaking her Lord like a terrier with a rag.

The convulsions had begun not long after Indigena felt Harry’s magic rising in the west. Her Lord had screamed, the sound echoing in the confined space of the tunnel. Indigena had crawled to him and tried to ask him what was wrong, but he had been unable to answer, only crying out again in a great voice. Indigena had done what she could to keep him from swallowing his tongue, from vague memories that that was what one did in the middle of a seizure, and she had tried to cast binding spells, but they broke. She almost considered that a hopeful sign—her Lord might be recovering his magic—but she could not tell, and after that there was only screaming and thrashing.

She murmured reassurances and stroked his face. The skin felt cold and scaly under her fingers, and the scent of earth was strong around her. But then, they were underground. Indigena shook her head. She had almost lost her sense of smell, or at least lost her ability to tell the difference between magic and ordinary soil.

She murmured to him again, and then Voldemort’s back arched, and he uttered a thin whistling sound too horrible for a scream. Indigena shuddered, her eyes fastened to his face, wondering what in the world was happening, and what in the world she could do about it.

Then something moved in the upper corner of their tunnel.

Indigena looked up. The flicker of movement repeated itself, and for a moment she caught a glimpse of bright colors, fever-bright, splintering on themselves like a rainbow in a pool of water broken by a careless step.

Then the movement faded, and didn’t repeat, but at least her Lord slumped down again and took a deep breath into his lungs.

Indigena shook her head and smoothed her hands down his sides. He was too thin, his ribs standing out against his pale skin like dry sticks. She knew that he could not die; he had told her as much. But the thought of suffering what he did just in order to remain alive made her feel a deep pity for him.

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Rufus looked up with a faint frown as the owl came winging in through the window. He recognized her at once, of course; there couldn’t be many even among snowy owls who had the obvious intelligence in their golden eyes that Harry’s Hedwig did. She landed on his desk and held out her talon to him with a demanding air.

Rufus took the letter from her leg. It was in an envelope, and the seal was one he hadn’t seen before: a circle of stars backed by a crescent moon and a rising sun. Of course, it had to be the seal of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow; that would fit, and who else would be using Harry’s owl to send their letters?

He opened the letter.

October 10th, 1996

Dear Minister Scrimgeour:
Several things have happened at Woodhouse in the last hour, and you deserve to know all of them. First, the Unspeakables attacked us again. I believe there were twenty of them this time, and they managed to slide around the wards that I’d constructed using various weapons of their own.

The most important of those weapons was a piece of the Stone. It ate the wards and managed to deflect my own magic-eating abilities. When my mind brushed against it—I believe a temporary connection was initiated because I tried to drink magic directly from it and could not—I learned why.

The Stone is immune to magic, Minister. I am almost sure that you do not have as much control over it as you think you do.

It saw that it was losing its servants to me, and while the Stone may not care enough for its Unspeakables to avoid sacrificing them, it cared enough that it knew simply throwing them at me would cause it to lose. It retreated, and took the Unspeakables with it, by pulling on bonds in their minds. If you do not see now that the Department of Mysteries is a danger to the Ministry as a whole, with its highest loyalties to itself and not the ideals of justice and law, I am not sure what proof will convince you. I am glad that you have managed to repeal the anti-werewolf laws, but I am not sure what will take their places.

Please make sure there are laws specifically forbidding experimentation on werewolves and their magic, even by the Department of Mysteries. We have questioned an Unspeakable prisoner we captured in the attack yesterday, and he said that that is the reason they wanted werewolves caught alive and imprisoned in Tullianum: they remove them into the Department and use them. They are trying to figure out a way to impose controllable transformations—controllable by themselves, of course—on others, and to do it in such a way that the newly-transformed wizards are immune to silver and can change at times other than the full moon. Their research would almost surely enable them to control Animagi, as well, if it’s completed.

They wanted to use me as a source of fuel, since I am Lord-level and yet not Declared. Apparently, Declaration carries protections against such a thing.

Also, you deserve to know what happened in the battle. Once I discovered the Stone could resist my ability to eat magic, I knew I needed help. Next to me in battle at that moment was a Muggle werewolf, one member of a pack I lead. I managed to give her a magical core and the ability to eat magic as well, passing it on from the power I’d swallowed. She helped me to drive away the Unspeakable holding the piece of the Stone. This proves, of course, that the conclusions of the Grand Unified Theory are much likelier to be close to reality than the pureblood prejudice favored for so many generations.

I hope that you can use your information usefully, Minister.

Sincerely,
Harry.

Rufus felt the world crash down around his ears.

He was almost sure that Harry did not see all the implications, if Muggles were able to have magic. There would be no justification for keeping their worlds apart anymore. The most important part of themselves, the part in which most wizards invested their identities, would be common after all, contagious as a disease. The Muggleborns had embraced the Grand Unified Theory; Rufus could not think of anyone who would embrace this. Even some Squibs would balk if they found out they could become wizards, but Muggles could, too.

And there was, of course, the question of whether people would join Harry for personal gain or loyalty, and what they would do if he was able to make them stronger than they already were. With the absorbere ability, they could become more powerful on their own. They could use that gift in ways that Rufus thought Harry never would. The wizarding world might, as a worst-case scenario, rip itself apart in an orgy of draining, and then a few strong wizards would emerge at the top. It would make the Ministry’s careful work and the long cultivation of laws that could both accommodate average wizards and leave some loopholes for the Lord-levels useless.

And making a werewolf that strong! What was Harry thinking? What if she decided to take vengeance for the persecution of her people in the last few months?

And where would the magic that Harry intended to give others come from? It must be drained. He could get it from objects, but he had come to the point where he would swallow his enemies’ magic without hesitation. Would becoming Harry’s enemy merit an automatic descent into Squibhood? What about becoming the enemy of one of his friends?

Rufus caught his plunging thoughts and tied them back with reins. They reared and stamped and snorted, but at least he wasn’t
losing his head over fear, which had been his first reaction. He could think and breathe again.

He must not lose his mind to fear. That was what the Wizengamot had done, and that was the reason Rufus had found it so easy to convince them to repeal the anti-werewolf laws. Fifteen of them already thought they had voted for him to complete the Ritual of Cincinnatus, and Griselda knew she had. Sixteen, plus the seventeenth of Rufus himself, made a third of the Elders, and that was enough to swing wavering neutral parties, or those who were so susceptible to threats that the strongest, closest one could change their minds. Thirteen others had come to them because of that; they were more afraid of Rufus and his power over the magic in the Ministry than they were of the werewolves.

Rufus had grimaced as he worked on them, but he already knew they were cowardly, weak-willed enough not to resist the implementation of a little fear. The Unspeakables and Loki the pack leader had made them dance like puppets. He couldn’t count on them to hold strong or listen to rational argument. He could only make use of them for what they were. And he had.

They were in seclusion until they finished considering the anti-werewolf laws. But the Minister could interrupt them.

*I will have to,* Rufus thought, as he gazed down at Harry’s letter.

He didn’t know if Harry realized it, but in one stroke, he had won his rebellion. They could not risk what would happen if Harry decided to take this particular weapon onto the battlefield. They could not risk wizards growing like toadstools. They could not risk the other countries who had agreed to the International Statute of Secrecy descending on them. The decision to reveal wizards to the Muggle world was not Britain’s alone.

Harry was a breaker of boundaries, an unweaver of webs. Rufus was not sure he would care about that. And even if he did, even if he probably would, there would be others, other *absorberes* he could make, who would not.

He stood, gripping the letter firmly in one hand, and made his way to Courtroom Ten. He planned to share all the information in the letter with the Elders, including the parts about the Department of Mysteries. Once they found out what the Unspeakables had wanted, Rufus thought he could count on a few more of them to swing to his side. Juniper, for one, would not like to find out that he had been used by wizards interested only in experimenting with werewolf magic. He felt lycanthropy was a curse, full stop, and should be left the hell alone. He even looked on efforts to develop Wolfsbane with stolid disapproval.

Rufus could see it now. He would propose an alliance of the baffled, outraged, and newly enlightened Ministry with Harry against the Unspeakables. They had not known. Now they did. And how much of the inflamed prejudice against werewolves could be tracked to that source? The Department of Mysteries was a convenient scapegoat. They would take the blame for the hatred and the fear that other people had actually felt. Rufus already knew what lies he would spin.

It was not pretty. It was no prettier than the Unbreakable Vows he had made his allies swear in Courtroom Ten, no prettier than the lies they had to tell to safeguard what had really happened there.

But if Rufus wanted to look pretty, he would have gone into war wizardry, not politics. Let his hands get dirty. At least it meant that others’ wouldn’t have to.

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Draco contained his outrage through the announcement Harry made of Camellia’s new powers, through the frenzied celebration by her pack, through Harry happily answering all the questions everyone else had about this, and through Thomas Rhangnara’s incessant chattering at Camellia.

“But what does it *feel* like?” Rhangnara pressed her.

Camellia, her cheeks flushed, a smile Draco thought was far too smug for some witch-come-lately on her face, simply shook her head. “You have magic yourself,” she said. “You must know what it feels like.”

“But not the *absorber* ability.” Rhangnara made a note on the scroll he was carrying nonetheless. “And what’s the difference between what you were like and the way you are now? I know some research wizards say that being a Muggle or a Squib is like being deaf, dumb, and blind, but we’ve never been Muggles or Squibs, so how do we know?” He looked at Camellia’s left ear, as if to see if it had changed shape.

“It is *not*,” said Camellia, sounding offended. They were sitting in the kitchen, with Camellia in the place of honor at the table’s head, draped by werewolves. Rhangnara sat next to her, earnestly scribbling down her every word. Harry lounged in a chair halfway down the table, smiling. Draco wanted to punch him. “My sight is a little clearer now and the world seems a bit more
Draco would have wagered every Knut he had left to him that she was lying. Being a wizard was much better than being a Squib or a Muggle. One only had to listen to the screams of those Harry drained of their magic to know that.

Rhangnara asked a few more questions, all of them as petty and useless as the first. Snape had left long since, stepping out of the room as if he would strike someone should he stay. Draco understood perfectly how he felt. The whole world had just gone merrily tumbling downhill, and no one else in the room acted as if they knew that.

Finally, finally, he managed to snag Harry and drag him aside, when everyone was involved in listening to the battle from Camellia’s perspective yet again. Draco cast a privacy ward around them.

Harry smiled at him. “Some tactics you wanted to share?”

It took Draco a moment to remember back to their conversation of this morning. He forced a smile. Harry picked up on his mood almost at once, and stood straight, his own grin vanishing. “What’s the matter?”

“Why her,” Draco said, the words the only ones that would emerge from his tight throat, “and not me?” He was imagining what could have been, if Harry had expanded his own magical core, or given him the absorbere gift. They would have been equals. His father would have had no trouble confirming him as magical heir. Draco would have a separate standing in the eyes of the wizards who followed Harry—not his lover, not the only one who could handle Harry when he was on the verge of explosion, but someone with unique and powerful gifts of his own.

Harry blinked. “Because you never asked,” he said.

Draco gave him a little shake. “I didn’t know it was possible.”

Harry shrugged. “Neither did I, until today. And then Camellia was the one beside me, not anyone else. If someone else had been, I would have tried the same desperate tactic.” He searched Draco’s face. “Do you really think I would have refused you that magic?” he asked softly. “Why?”

Thrown on the rocks like that, Draco couldn’t answer the question, couldn’t say why the gesture to Camellia—a result of chance, to hear Harry tell it—felt so much like a slap in the face and a rejection of most of what they’d shared. He ground his teeth for a moment, and then said, “Because if anyone is going to receive something that special from you, it should be me.”

“Of course, if you want it,” said Harry. “I think I could trust you not to misuse it. I do trust Camellia, because she’s loyal to me as alpha and has to know that if she abused the gift, I would take it away in an instant. And her magic is quite average otherwise; I had to use most of the power carving out her core and then making sure it wouldn’t drain as soon as I poured magic into it. And I wouldn’t trust Snape with this right now, nor Remus.” He tilted his head at Draco. “I trust that you wouldn’t drain Connor, or Parvati?”

Draco felt his hands shake. He hid it by cupping Harry’s chin and tilting his face up. “No,” he whispered. “Never. It would be a temptation, of course, but just having them know that I could would be enough to content me. I’d keep my drawing to objects and enemies, like you do.”

His mind was reeling, but it oriented now around the concept that he might possess this same gift himself. Yes, the wizarding world in general would be upset, but he could have it. He could finally cease to feel as if he were lesser than Harry in any way. Granted, his driving ambition for some time had not been to have magic equal to Harry’s, but the old longing wasn’t as buried as he’d thought.

“You were never lesser to me,” Harry murmured.

Draco started. “You used Legilimency?” he asked Harry, who was staring directly into his eyes.

Harry shook his head. “I didn’t have to. Your thoughts were screaming out your happiness.” He stroked Draco’s shoulder for a moment. “You do realize that, right? My magic is what makes me able to be vates and a war-leader, but it doesn’t separate us in any fundamental way. I’ve never felt that I was better than you because I’m more magically powerful, Draco, I swear it. It would be like—it would be like saying someone is better than someone else because they have more money or a bigger house. Magic’s just a tool, Draco, just what allows me to do what matters to me, like unbinding webs and protecting others. That’s all.”

Draco stared at him. Twice in several moments his world had broken into pieces, but this was a revelation about Harry, not about
how the wizarding world in general would react to Harry’s ability to make Muggles into wizards or witches.

*He really doesn’t think that his magic makes him any different than the rest of us. He really doesn’t.*

*No wonder he makes a terrible Lord. To be a good one, you have to have some sense of the gulf that kind of magic opens between you and everyone else. Voldemort has it. Dumbledore had it. But Harry just sees it like his having an extra limb, or a pair of wings, or a talent for music.*

Draco wondered if he should laugh or cry. He wondered if he should try to explain it to Harry. But he was almost sure the last project was doomed to failure. Harry had seen people bow to him and thank him with tears of gratitude in their eyes, and still he thought they were comfortable with the gestures or grateful for their freedom. Draco could tell him how most people would consider him, how they thought of most Lords, but Harry would only blink and make some connection with how that encouraged people to remain under webs.

*He doesn’t think himself above others. I doubt he ever will. He makes mistakes, but it comes from things like not knowing how the wizarding world will react to this, not because he thinks he has the right to make decisions that others don’t.*

Draco decided he wouldn’t explain. He just shook his head helplessly, and said, “Now I know it, Harry.” He held out his hand, and added, with a tone of wistfulness in his voice he couldn’t mask, “Now, can you give me the ability to eat magic, please?”

“You sound like you’re asking for a sweet,” said Harry in some amusement, but he reached out to clasp Draco’s hand. “I’m still carrying some of the extra magic from the battle,” he said. “The *absorbere* ability wants to digest it, but I don’t need to be any stronger than I already am. And if I need to, I can drain some of the Black objects that I brought along.”

Draco opened his mouth to object to this squandering of Harry’s inheritance, and then closed it again. Harry saw what use those objects could be, first, and he obviously thought that sitting around and decorating rooms was not enough of a use.

He closed his eyes as he felt magic begin to move up his arm like a lance of melodic acid.

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Indigena was dozing when her Lord erupted in screaming and thrashing again. She tried to catch his shoulders, but his head flew up and knocked her in the face instead. She heard the distinct crunch of her nose breaking, but the flowers and stems under her skin shifted to repair it quickly enough.

She was more concerned with Voldemort, whose convulsions brought his head dangerously close to cracking open on the hard earth wall of their retreat. She turned to the plants she had rooted in one corner of the tunnel and called for help, and they came, unfolding tendrils that erupted into soft pink flowers as they reached her. Indigena was sure that Voldemort would be horrified if he awakened and saw himself cradled on swift-roses, but at the moment she didn’t really care. The petals would help pillow his head, and that was all she wanted.

As the flowers pressed themselves into position, Indigena smiled in spite of herself, in spite of her worry and fear. They obeyed her because they loved her. She did not have to carry tendrils beneath her skin or spend every waking moment with them to have a special bond with them now. Indigena thought everyone should have such love in their lives. It might teach someone like her Lord to care about more than the conquering of the next enemy.

Her attention switched back as a long cut opened on Voldemort’s chest. Indigena shook her head, and lowered her right arm so that some of the aloe-like plant that grew under her fingers might heal it. The cut began to scab over as soon as she touched it, which was a common thing with magic-inflicted wounds.

*Who could be magically powerful enough to reach through my barriers and hurt him from this distance, though?*

The only answers that came to mind were Harry and Falco. Indigena thought she would recognize the smell of Falco’s magic, and if Harry knew where her Lord was, surely he would be here already.

She gently shifted Voldemort’s hands to the side as more cuts appeared on his shoulders. The hands were clasped around a golden cup with badgers for handles and would not let go. That didn’t matter. What mattered was that she be able to reach and tend the wounds, wherever they appeared.

A loud hiss made her look up. For a moment, she thought it was a snake, not unreasonably drawn to her Lord, but she could see nothing. She could feel a presence, however, stirring around her Lord like a wind, prowling and snarling. Its temperament was
It paid no attention to her. One more pace, one more whirl, and then it shot through a hole in the dirt roof. Indigena shrugged, waited to see if it would affect what was happening to her Lord at all, and then returned to tending him.

Not long after the strange presence had left, however, her Lord ceased to convulse. Indigena sighed in relief and reached for Odi et Amo again, keeping a careful eye on Voldemort. No more wounds appeared, and his hands were creeping like spiders along the sides of the cup again, usually a good sign. He stroked the cup and murmured to it when he was in one of his midway-moods. On the very best days, he could talk with her and tell her of his plans, but Indigena would take this over screaming and thrashing, or the deep silence that sometimes afflicted him, when she had to lean over him to hear his breath.

She stroked his shoulder absently as she read the book. The scaly, snake-like skin had ceased to feel strange to her when she was transformed so thoroughly. Now it simply felt like dry dirt against her fingers—bereft of nourishment, but not unpleasant.

She would never leave him. The debt was a constricting chain, but it meant nothing without the honor behind it, the honor that her nephew hadn’t had. She would stay with the Dark Lord and make up the Yaxley pride the best way she knew how.

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Harry opened his eyes slowly. He winced when pain resounded through his body like a leaping child yelling for sweets.

“What do you feel now?” an eager voice asked from the side. Harry managed to turn his head a little, and saw Thomas sitting in the chair next to his bed, leaning forward. The scroll he’d written on while questioning Camellia dangled from his hands, and he was asking questions so fast that Harry doubted he’d notice when it slipped to the floor. “Do you think that you could say why that didn’t work? Would you say the transfer of magic to another feels more like giving birth, or more like handing over a gift? Could you do it to someone whose wand was broken? What about someone born magical and then drained? Could you—”

“Enough, Rhangnara.”

That was Snape’s voice, so tense and quiet and cold that even Thomas blinked and shut his mouth, though more in surprise than fear, Harry thought. He managed to roll his head over and look up at Snape, eyes watering. He couldn’t tell if that was from the light or the pain.

“Sir,” he said, trying to sit up. There were still instincts in his head that protested the thought of being flat on his back in front of Snape. Snape murmured something, however, and an invisible band formed above Harry, gripping his chest and holding him down. He frowned at Snape, and considered shouting, but with Thomas there, he didn’t like to.

“You should not move far or fast,” said Snape, as if that were self-evident. “When you tried to transfer your absorbere gift to Draco, something happened. You both began screaming in pain—“

“Is Draco all right?” Harry attempted to sit up again. He had assumed that Snape would have said something at once if Draco was hurt, but perhaps he wouldn’t, not if he wanted Harry to remain in bed.

Snape tightened the invisible band with nothing so much as a flicker on his face. “Draco is well,” he said. “Asleep, after watching by your bed until I made him rest. He experienced a short trance of pain, and then recovered from it.” He leaned towards Harry. “You, however, went into convulsions.”

_That would explain the muscle aches_, Harry had to concede. “Well, I’m not now,” he said. “Let me up.”

He released some anger into his voice, as a sop to Snape. His guardian went on speaking as if he hadn’t heard him. “And then powerful magic surrounded you and spread away from you in a web.”

Snape held out a Pensieve towards him—his own, Harry saw after a moment. “I have preserved the memory here.”

“I want to see it again, too,” said Thomas, and pushed his head forward and into the silvery liquid before anyone could stop him. Harry rolled his eyes and pushed his head in beside Thomas’s.

He winced to see Draco flailing and rolling on the floor, and it took him a moment to tear his eyes away and see what Snape had been talking about. A web, glittering as if made of dew and light, did extend away from his shoulders, spreading out into the air in
a regular pattern.

And it led straight from him to Camellia, unless one counted a single white thread that trailed forlornly away from his back into the air.

Harry watched as Camellia also began to shake, with a sick feeling in his stomach. *I acted too quickly again. I didn’t consider the consequences. I can’t believe that I keep doing this.*

The white web contracted, rippling, as dark magic started to pass along it and through it. Harry squinted, and thought he could see the ripples as black serpents, sidewarding around the strands of the web until they reached Camellia. Then they bit her, and she *screamed.* It took Harry another moment to recognize the noise. It was the same one that wizards gave when they became Muggles.

The snakes turned around and rolled back to him holding something white in their mouths. They spat it like venom at the flailing Harry in the image, and his back arched so hard that Harry wondered if he hadn’t cracked his spine. Then two of the snakes climbed along the white thread that extended from his back, fading as they went further and further. By the time they reached the outer wall, they had vanished entirely.

Camellia gave a strangled sob. Thomas-in-the-memory knelt down next to her, talking softly. Camellia shook her head, and Thomas assumed a sorrowful expression and put his hand on her shoulder. The memory ended then, as Snape turned towards Harry and scooped him up into his arms with ruthless precision.

Harry pulled his head out of the Pensieve, and shook it. “Camellia lost her magic,” he whispered.

“Yes,” Thomas confirmed, patting him on the shoulder. “She’ll be all right, though. It was a shock, but lycanthrope physiology really does give then an amazing amount of strength, you know. She’s sleeping right now, but we talked, and she says that she thinks she’ll recover. Did you know that the werewolf curse might have started because people wanted to be *stronger*? There’s some interesting research coming out of *America,* of all places, that suggests—”

“Rhangnara,” said Snape, in that protective snarl again, and Thomas blinked and focused on Harry.

“Right,” he said. “I think you’re a unique occurrence, Harry. You could only create the magical core and transfer the *absorbere* gift in the first place because you’re half a magical heir.”

Harry blinked, and said intelligently, “What?”

“You’re Voldemort’s magical heir,” said Thomas, genuinely not noticing Snape’s reaction to the name, Harry thought. “But the transfer of gifts and power isn’t complete. It *began* that night that he attacked you, but it didn’t end, the way it should have. Most transfers between magical ancestor and heir, well, complete themselves. Either the magical ancestor dies and the gifts achieve full strength in the heir, or the ancestor makes the choice to pass along the gifts before their death. But that usually leaves him or her without magic, and they die anyway.” Harry nodded, thinking of Elfrida’s choice to send her power on to Marian despite the fact that it would mean her death, because her daughter’s best chance to be a magical heir was right after birth. “The transfer between you and Voldemort was interrupted as it was made, because the reflected Killing Curse hit him and his spirit vanished, taking the gifts with him.” Thomas spread his hands. “It stretches out between you like a tunnel. Down that tunnel comes magic. I think it can wash back and forth between you. Didn’t you say once that his *absorbere* ability changed after the resurrection ritual?”

Snape hissed, and turned on Harry. “You *told* him that?” he demanded.

Harry ignored him. He had told Thomas that shortly after Thomas came to the valley, during the time when Snape couldn’t seem to care whether he found another guardian or not. What Harry did during that time was his own lookout. “Yes, it did,” he said. “He had it before the night when he came and attacked my brother and me, but not as strongly. He could drain someone, but it left him weak for days afterwards. When he resurrected, his ability had improved. And our dream connection changed, too,” he added. “I used to be able to act in the visions. Then, I wasn’t able to do so.”

Thomas nodded excitedly. “The situation is unusual, but not impossible,” he said. “After all, the transfer happened in the first place. The prophecy saw to that. Because the prophecy is taking so long to be fulfilled, I think that helps. The tunnel between you depends on the connection between your souls, and it depends on the prophecy. You amplified the magic and practiced with it during a time when he was still bodiless and powerless to use it. Then, when he came back to life, he could draw on that greater experience, and become a more powerful *absorbere.*”

“But when I gave it to Camellia—“ Harry said.
“I don’t think you could have done that at all if Voldemort wasn’t incapacitated right now,” said Thomas. “He doesn’t have the ability to use the *absorbere* gift, so it goes back to drifting in the tunnel between you. You use it when you draw on it, but you could also give part of it to someone else.”

“Then why did it leave her at all?” Harry could hear Snape’s teeth grinding. He ignored him. He wasn’t responsible to Snape, and Thomas was the only one in Woodhouse who understood this transfer of magic and could help him right now. “We should have been able to share it.”

“Because you tried to give it to Draco, as well,” said Thomas quietly. “The gift resented being stretched so far. It snapped back together, and took itself away from Camellia as it did so—along with the magic that you’d transferred to her. I think she may still have her core, and so she’s a Squib, technically, instead of a Muggle, but she has no magic.”

“Did the magic go back to Voldemort?” Harry asked. The one thing he would not be able to forgive himself for out of this was if he had accidentally strengthened his enemy.

“I don’t think so,” said Thomas. “The magic’s greatest desire is to be used, and he could not use it right now. I think it retreated into the tunnel between the two of you. It’s very strange, though,” he added, with a slight frown. “The tunnel still counts as confinement for the magic, and it remains trapped, unable to return to the magical ancestor or bind fully to the magical heir. I would have expected it to grow intelligence, as magic so often does when confined, and to be fairly upset about this.”

Harry froze. “I think it may have,” he said.

Thomas just frowned at him, but Snape understood, since Harry had told him about this at the Sanctuary. “The bird,” he said.

“What?” Thomas asked.

“There’s a bird that’s appeared from time to time,” said Harry, wondering why he couldn’t have seen this before. The bird’s crimson eyes had even been the color of Voldemort’s, at least before he lost them. “It’s made of pure magic, and only I can see it. It comes through all the wards in Hogwarts and Woodhouse and the Sanctuary. It talked of being bound to me and resenting it, and being bound to ‘him’ and resenting it. It regularly scratches me.” He hesitated, then drew up his pyjama top and showed the bird’s claw-marks on his chest, the most recent wounds, to Thomas.

Thomas leaned forward and stared at the wounds in fascination. “I’ve never heard of magic doing that,” he murmured. “I can see it wanting to kill you, or kill Voldemort, so that the tunnel would end and it could go to one of you or the other. But perhaps that’s impossible, given that Voldemort cannot die and you’re bound to him by the prophecy unfulfilled. It’s doing the best it can. I still don’t know what to make of the scratches, though.”

“How do you think I could still give magic to Camellia?” Harry asked. “If I tried not to pass on the *absorbere* ability?” He ignored Snape’s scowl.

Thomas shook his head. “It would be shaky,” he said. “The magic might grow bored and resentful and decide to take itself away at any moment. From the way you describe it, it hates you. It would do something like that just to spite you, I think, and that could overcome its longing to be used.”

Harry nodded, mind still half on the bird. He knew he had felt the viciousness it carried before. Now, he knew where. In the graveyard on the Midsummer day he’d lost his hand, when Voldemort’s magic had returned to him as he’d returned to his body. It had unfolded great wings made of blades and cried aloud, and Harry had felt how evil it was, how much hatred it had. For everything.

*It’s shared between us. It’s confined. That would only make it more vicious.*

And he was heir to that bladed magic, and it didn’t like him. Harry suppressed a shudder.

“This is so much to absorb,” Thomas was murmuring. “There are a few places it links into the Grand Unified Theory, but in others there are gaps.” He leaned forward and fixed Harry with an earnest stare. “Would you mind if I studied you, Harry, and the connection between you and Voldemort? Perhaps waited for the bird to appear again? Perhaps——“

“You are not studying my son.”

Snape said nothing more than that. He just stood at the end of Harry’s bed like a rock wall, and Thomas shut his mouth again.
This time, though, he gave a faint smile and climbed to his feet.

“I understand,” he said. “I suppose I wouldn’t want someone studying Rose, either, and deciding to prod at her magic and mine and tell me how it worked.” His tone said that he was dubious about that and how much he wouldn’t like it, though. He bowed to Harry. “I hope that you rest well and recover, Harry.”

He turned and departed before Harry could speak again. When he could, he snapped the invisible bond that held him down by sheer force of will and sat up, glaring at Snape. “What right did you have to do that?” he asked in a hiss. “If studying this bond can help me defeat Voldemort, then I say we should try it.”

“You are my son.” Snape didn’t move. “You deserve more than to become an experiment for a research wizard.”

“Thomas didn’t mean any harm—”

“I am sure Rhangnara did not.” Snape sneered. “But that kind of attitude will do you no good either, Harry. He would push you to exhaustion, or into danger. Has it occurred to you that there has been danger already, from your misguided gesture of good will? This could influence the bond between you and Voldemort, strengthening him or drawing his attention.”

“Thomas didn’t think it would.” Harry wished he could swing his feet to the floor. He was shaky with pain and remembered pain, though, and he wouldn’t be as tall as Snape anyway. He tilted his head back, and tried to look as if he were unconscious of his shortness compared to Snape. “He said that the magic wouldn’t go back to Voldemort, because he couldn’t use it.”

“Has it occurred to you that he may not be right, given that this is entirely new?” Snape’s voice had a familiar sound to it, as if he’d been suppressing generations of fury. “His guesses are at best guesses.”

“Has it occurred to you,” said Harry, his voice as low and hard as he could make it, “that I still don’t trust you in the duties of guardian?”

“Name me one who will perform them more faithfully,” said Snape. “I will step aside for him at once. Or her.”

“That’s not the point!” Harry resisted the urge to grind his teeth together, but just barely. “I became used to not having a guardian in the past few months. I admit that you helped me with the Occlumency pools, and that was a mistake I made. Giving magic to Camellia might be another. But I don’t need someone hovering over me so protectively that we miss valuable opportunities to learn new information!”

“When the information is conditional on your life and your magic,” said Snape, moving no muscle except the ones in his jaw, “then I consider it part of my business, Harry.”

“Why?” Harry wished words could set the bedroom on fire by themselves. He had to restrain his magic from joining in and trying to grant his wish.

“Because I care for you,” said Snape. “And because whether or not you are my ward, you are my son.” He reached out and smoothed Harry’s hair back from his brow, baring the lightning bolt scar. “This is not all you are,” he said. “I will not allow it to become all you are.”

Harry dropped his eyes in defeat. He wanted to argue, but he didn’t know how to do it without damaging the fragile bond between him and Snape even further. And he did want a parent, a guardian.

He just didn’t know if it could be Snape, given what he had done in the past few months, given what he might do again if he didn’t continue to work on his healing with Joseph.

Wait.

Harry lifted his head. Normally, he disdained making bargains like this anymore, but he and Snape had fallen back several steps. And trying to pretend everything was all right wasn’t going to make it so.

“Can I ask you something?” he said. Snape nodded, and Harry continued, “Have you spoken to Joseph since you’ve been here?”

Snape’s lips thinned, which Harry thought was as good as an admission. He nodded, his eyes not waverering from his guardian’s face. “Then please do that. That way, I’ll know that you’re taking time for your own healing, and not just mine, and that you are serious about this. I know that I’m your son to you, sir, but during these last few months, I started seeing myself as your
“No one asked you to fill that role,” Snape said harshly.

Harry blinked. “Of course not. But it was the only kind of bond with you I could have.”

Snape glared at him, wordless. Harry pressed on. “I did get used to having a parent, sir. I want one again.” I think. Harry thought of parents rather as he did of comrades in battle; they were pleasant and sometimes necessary to have, but depending too much on them could cripple him in those moments when he would need to move alone. “But I can’t trust you until I’m sure that you’re not using me as a distraction from your own problems. And if you’re not healing any further, you might fall apart at any moment, and take me with you. I’ve already explained why that can’t happen.” He held Snape’s eyes. “Please, sir. Continue your talks with Joseph. In return, I’ll try to be as good a son as I can.”

Snape thought about that. Harry waited. He could almost see the protests forming in Snape’s mind, and dying one by one. Yes, they had reached a stage of their relationship where they shouldn’t need bargains like this, but their relationship was no longer the same as it had been four months ago. That meant they needed this.

Or, at least, they needed the willingness to work on this from both sides.

After a few moments, Snape inclined his head. Harry sighed out. “Thank you, sir. Now, I’ll go find Draco—”

“He is still asleep,” Snape said. “I have set an alarm to let me know when he wakes. And you, Harry, took more damage than you know in your convulsions. You need to rest.”

Harry gave him a tolerant glance, and swung his legs over the side of the bed. “It’s not that bad, sir—”

He staggered. Snape lifted him with Mobilicorpus and settled him back into bed before Harry could object. Then he took his glasses.

“Sir,” said Harry, with sternness that failed somewhat as the warmth of the pillows and blankets soaked into his consciousness. His legs already felt as if they were made of stone. He yawned. “You cast a sleeping spell,” he accused Snape, his words coming out slurred.

“Merely one to make the bed more comfortable,” Snape murmured. “It is your own exhaustion doing the work, Harry.”

Harry mumbled something incoherent. Fog crept over his awareness, and despite a few thoughts of checking on Draco and Camellia, his breathing evened out. His mind staged a last, pitched battle against the darkness before sleep managed to overcome him entirely.

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Snape stood gazing down at his son for a few moments. Harry breathed with his mouth open, his face curled as if to shelter under his hand. His left wrist still lay, a scarred stump, higher on the pillow. Snape shook his head.

If he considered getting his own hand back one tenth as important as this rebellion, he would have a second one already.

“Watching him, you look the picture of the peaceful father.”

Snape stiffened. He had not heard the door open, nor Joseph slip into the room. He did not turn. “He has just made me a bargain,” he said. “That I will try to be the best father I can to him, and he will be the best son he can to me. But that means I must talk to you.” He turned with a grimace to the Seer.

The man simply nodded, with one final glance at Harry. “He may benefit from talking with me, as well,” he said.

Snape concealed his triumph. “He has shamefully neglected his own healing since we returned,” he said. “He believes that because he overcame the guilt he carried in the Midsummer battle, for example, he has nothing more to learn from someone like you.”

Joseph nodded again. “I can See that,” he said. “And as for you, Snape—forgive me, this is only something I have noticed through watching the two of you interact, and hearing your stories of him. Has he ever called you Severus?” He hesitated a moment, as if afraid the next step would be a step too far, and then finished, “Or Father?”
Snape toyed with the idea of hexing the Seer, but he had asked for this kind of thing when he agreed to Harry’s bargain. Seers were made to walk into fire, it seemed. “No,” he said. “He calls me Professor, or Professor Snape, or sir. I have never invited a closer term of address. He has never offered one.”

Joseph nodded. “Please come with me,” he said. “We don’t want to disturb him, of course, and it seems that we have much to talk about.”

Snape said nothing as he followed the Seer out, but he looked back at Harry before he shut the door. Harry was his son.

He could not help feeling a slight smugness as he followed Joseph, for all the danger the day had promised. Two good things had come out of it. The first was that Camellia the werewolf had acquired, and then lost, her magic. She knew true pain now, and she might learn some genuine humility out of it.

The second was that, while Harry’s ability to create stronger wizards was sadly temporary, the Minister did not need to know that.

“We really must see if we can cure you of smirking like that,” Joseph murmured.

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Rufus looked out over the congregation of wizards and witches in front of him. Only some of them were reporters. Others were Ministry employees, and some had appeared the moment the Minister had announced he would hold a press conference. They were almost certainly curious to see what a dictator looked like, Rufus knew. If no one charmed rotten fruit to fly at him, he would be surprised.

But then, he hadn’t assumed the Ritual of Cincinnatus would make him popular.

He stepped up to the stage, with Frederick and Hope close beside him, and Percy further back, under a ward. Griselda Marchbanks was with him, and the hanarz, but most of the spectators only gave her odd glances and turned away. They would assume that the goblin was a personal attendant, Rufus knew, at best.

They were about to be rudely disabused.

He looked up into the flash of cameras, waited until he thought he had their attention, and began.

“As many of you know, I am currently in control of all magic in the Ministry,” he said. And here came a wormy apple, right on cue, levitating at his face. Rufus flicked it lazily out of the way with his wand, hoping it had at least confirmed for whoever sent it that no, he did not control all magic outside the Ministry. They could stop murmuring about him hiding behind his walls, now. “I performed the Ritual of Cincinnatus with the help of sixteen Wizengamot members, including Elder Marchbanks.” Griselda gave a little bow.

“What many of you do not know is why.

“Our society has struggled under a dark miasma of fear in the past few months. At first, we blamed it on the werewolf attacks. Then, it came to my attention that there had been attacks on Harry vates in the Ministry itself.” Rufus ignored the gasps that arose, and the shouted questions about whether the Vox Populi had been right. “I pondered, but I had good information saying that the attack was not real, or at least misunderstood. I ignored it.

“And matters grew worse and worse. The fear grew stronger. Laws were passed making it impossible for werewolves to live among wizards. A jailbreak into Tullianum took place. Harry vates went into rebellion. Ministry scandals broke. Our world shook itself to the foundations, and still I did not know what to do.

“Blame me for being so pathetic and weak. Blame me for waiting so long to do what needed to be done. In times of war, the British wizarding world looks first to its Minister, and I have failed you.

“I took up the reins on the same day that important information came to me. First, the werewolf packs were betrayed by dreams—dreams that inflamed the hatred of wizards who may have mildly disliked them, and then gave away the location of their safe houses.” Rufus heard the shouts cease, and a peach that had been rising above someone’s head dropped back with a splat. He concealed a grim smile. So, the Liberator was right. “And then, I learned that the hatred of werewolves in the Ministry, the impulse to create laws against them, came from a specific place: one of our own Departments, the Department of Mysteries.”

Everyone in the crowd looked up as owls abruptly lifted from behind the stage, soaring into the cloudy sky. They aimed in all
directions, and scattered rapidly, their wings beating hard enough to cause a rain of feathers to fall.

"Those are owls bearing sealed letters containing this same information to a hundred people of my own choosing," said Rufus calmly. "Those people include various foreign Ministers of Magic. If the Department of Mysteries chooses to try and Obliviate the lot of us, they will not succeed in stifling the truth."

He saw a few people Apparate away. Rufus shrugged. They were outside the Ministry; not much he could do to stop them. And if they were frightened of the Unspeakables, then he could hardly blame them.

“They wanted werewolves to experiment on,” he said. “And they wanted to use the discoveries from that magic to control people.” He paused and swept the crowd with a sharp gaze. ‘All that hatred, all those laws, all that killing done, merely to insure that some werewolves came alive to Tullianum and their devices.

“They were the ones who attacked Harry vates. They are the ones who have spent lives, including the lives of people not connected at all with them, to insure that he is captured or taken, and brought nothing but death.” He took a deep breath, and told his first deliberate lie of the speech. Well, he’d had a lot of practice, since he was also guarding the Ritual of Cincinnatus.

“They were the ones who sent the dreams.”

He saw faces grow tight, and some of the looming fear in the crowd change to anger. Rufus nodded slightly. He would not say that Falco Parkinson had sent the dreams, although that was the truth, and he would certainly pass that truth along to Harry. He would not betray the Liberator that way; her family might be able to figure out from this announcement that she had helped him. And Falco would be less cautious if he did not realize that Rufus knew he existed, and that someone was spying on him and passing information along.

And besides, it made the Department of Mysteries into a perfect scapegoat. Rufus doubted that they would contradict him. To do so, they would have to break their own stated code of secrecy and silence. He expected an emissary from the Department to approach him instead, and offer a quiet peace agreement.

“We have lived in fear of shadows, and the full moon, too long,” Rufus concluded. “We will do so no longer. We will make sure that all our people know the difference between honest concern and open terror, and this is the end of terror’s reign.” He lifted one of the pieces of parchment in front of him. “Along with the repeal of the anti-werewolf laws, the Wizengamot is now considering what peace terms should be offered to Harry vates.”

“And when will your reign of terror be done, Minister?” someone bold called out.

“When it’s done,” said Rufus, and allowed himself a full, tooth-bared smile this time. “The Ministers in the past who did this? The Ritual of Cincinnatus killed ’em if they tried to retain power beyond the point they needed it.”

More people blinked at him.

“As well,” said Rufus casually, nodding to the hanarz, “matters have changed between southern goblins and wizards. Madam Marchbanks and her partner, the hanarz, will be delighted to speak to you about that.”

He stepped back, to make it clear that although he lent his authority to what Griselda and the hanarz had to say, this had not been his idea, and he was not dominating their decisions.

He had done what he could, he thought. The Wizengamot had indeed seen the implications of Harry’s ability to make other wizards absorberes. They had agreed without hesitation to ask for peace, and to make the werewolf laws much less restrictive. They had hemmed and hawed on Harry’s other requests.

It would take work, Rufus knew. But arguments were much better than killing.

He saw a movement off to the side, and looked down. Aurora Whitestag was approaching the stage. She gazed up at him and smiled diffidently.

“Minister,” she said. “I was wondering if we might talk?”

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Chapter Thirty-Six: Not Every Problem Is His To Solve

Connor winced as the door slammed. Then he rolled on his back and stared at the ceiling. He and the ceiling were fast becoming old friends.

He had tried, again, to explain to Parvati that there was little chance of Harry coming back and hurting them. She seemed to consider that he’d won his battle. Connor didn’t see how. The *Daily Prophet* kept reporting on the progress of the arguments between Harry and the Ministry, as they tried to hammer out acceptable laws to apply to the werewolves, and debated about beginning to address the other terms that Harry had wanted, including representatives sent to the northern goblins and centaurs. Until that was finished, Connor knew Harry wouldn’t think he’d “won.”

Parvati had still argued that it was winning, and that Harry would come back all puffed up with pride and expecting the Light pureblood families to do as he bade them, since he’d not only taken their leader away but proven that everything they’d ever done in relation to the centaurs, goblins, and other species was wrong.

Connor couldn’t help it; he’d laughed at the thought of Harry ever being proud, and Parvati had stormed out.

“So do you think she’ll ever come ‘round?” he asked Ron, without looking at him.

Ron uttered a loud grunt. Connor rolled over. Ron was bent over his Defense Against the Dark Arts textbook, studying hard enough that the back of his neck had turned red. Only Connor didn’t think that was from the studying at all.

“If you’re angry at me about Ginny running off to Harry, you know, you should say so and get it over with,” he told Ron, then waited.

As expected, Ron slammed down his book and whirled around. “All right,” he snarled. “She hasn’t responded to one bloody Howler that Mum sent her. Not one! Does that mean she’s happy for what she did? Not sorry for it? That she’s not thinking about what’s going to happen when she comes home? Mum won’t let her out of her sight. And she’s blaming me for encouraging her somehow!” Ron’s face twisted up. “How could I have? We were both in the dueling club last year, we both fought, but Hogwarts needed us!”

“So your mum’s wrong,” Connor concluded.

Ron glared at him. “Don’t you say that!”

“But you didn’t think Ginny was wrong to fight last year,” said Connor, as reasonably as he could. “Why do you think Ginny was wrong to run off and fight this year?”

“Because she didn’t take me with her!”

Well. That was unexpected. Connor lay in silence for a moment, blinking, and Ron leaped to his feet, so swiftly he almost hit his head on the canopy of his bed—he was growing, Connor thought, getting near as tall as his brother Charlie—and grabbed his book, stuffing it into his trunk. A moment later, he’d grabbed his broom, too, and looked at Connor. “Let’s go practice,” he said.

Connor was about to agree, since the Slytherin-Gryffindor Quidditch match wasn’t far away, when an owl he recognized came fluttering through the window of the tower room. He grinned and shook his head. “Sorry, Ron, got a letter from my friend,” he said, and undid the letter tied to the owl’s leg.

Ron swore under his breath and slammed the door shut behind him in unconscious imitation of Parvati. Connor tore the letter open, stroking the owl’s feathers. She was beautiful, a dusky gray owl with black markings on her legs and around her eyes. Connor didn’t know her breed, and neither did anyone whom he’d asked, but that didn’t matter. She was affectionate, too, ducking her head and nipping gently at his fingers with her beak when he petted her.

The letter was sloppy, as always. Mark wasn’t the best writer.

*Hi Connor!*

*Everyone’s all excited here. I don’t think most of us know what to do with ourselves while Harry plots and plans. I mean, he must know what he’s doing, right? But it’s taking so bloody long! But no one else really wants to criticize Harry to his face, except George. And, well, George is all right and all, and I’m sure he misses his family, but they wouldn’t want to take him back anyway, he’s a werewolf. Try telling him that, though.*
But for the most part, it’s brilliant here still, it’s just all the waiting that I can’t stand. And it’s a little overwhelming being around your brother, sometimes. Imagine a waterfall that walks around and sometimes grows a little louder than it needs to be and sheds rainbows in one color. That’s what his magic feels like to me.

Still no definite answer on when we’ll all be coming back. Harry’s determined to have the Minister’s word before he moves. I can’t blame him for that. I want a law that says that we’ll never be hunted again, but Merlin knows if we’ll get that. The Ministry, bunch of bloody puffed-up fools, doesn’t want to commit to anything, and Harry actually tore up the latest version of the laws they sent him because it was too restrictive.

Stupid idiots!

Anyway, I sent you something I was playing with and thought you might like. I carve sometimes when I have nothing better to do, and right now there’s a lot of ‘nothing better’ to do. I know you said you were a Seeker, and I’ve seen pictures of you in the paper as a Seeker, too, so I hope you like it!

Best wishes,
Mark.

Connor shook the envelope, and a wooden Snitch fell out. The wings were just carved into the sides, and wouldn’t actually beat, but Connor thought it could be enchanted to fly quite easily. He tapped it with his wand, and it rose and hovered back and forth, though the wings still didn’t beat. Connor grabbed for it, and smiled.

Mark was a young werewolf who’d started to write to him a few days after everyone went to the valley. His first letter had been belligerent, insisting that he wanted to know things about Harry from his brother, because he didn’t trust Harry not to lead them into a trap. Connor had snapped back, wondering if he would have to tell his brother about a traitor in the valley.

But Mark’s second letter had been much gentler and more conciliatory, and Connor had eventually realized that what he needed was a friend, someone to talk to about events in Woodhouse. He was much younger than the other werewolves; apparently he’d just left Hogwarts two years ago, had drifted from place to place, and finally had been sent to the Ministry by his exasperated parents. Then he’d become part of the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts, and then he’d become a werewolf. His life was hard enough to stir some sympathy in Connor, and he wrote like an—like an ordinary person, the way Connor supposed he himself was in the wake of his revelation of Harry as the Boy-Who-Lived, the way Parvati had been when he liked her. It was nice to have an ordinary friend to talk to, even if Mark didn’t tell him all that much that Connor couldn’t learn from Harry himself.

And the Snitch made a fine gift.

Connor gathered up parchment and ink to write back, sprawling on his bed while the wooden Snitch darted around his head. Absently, he snatched it out of the air, and then winced. Those stiff little wings hurt.

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Peter leaned forward, eyes traveling over the tables while he ate. Next to him, Henrietta Bulstrode made an anxious little noise in her throat. Peter glanced at her, and she caught his eye and jerked her head at the Hufflepuff table. He followed her line of sight.

Two seventh-year students were arguing in low, heated voices. One of them abruptly shook her head, and turned back to her meal. The other watched her with his face set in stone. Then he began eating, too. Peter raised his eyebrows.

“What?” he asked Henrietta. The students could have been arguing over Quidditch, exam marks, or, considering that they were male and female, a dating arrangement gone sour. Neither was in his NEWT Defense Against the Dark Arts, so he didn’t know them.

“The boy has a Dark Mark,” said Henrietta, as if this happened every day.

Peter stiffened. Henrietta pinched his arm, the left one, just above the Mark. Peter shook himself and remembered the lessons he’d learned during his months in the Death Eaters—hell, the lessons he’d learned in his seventh year, when he’d had to conceal disgust and anger to keep his friends. He picked up his fork and ate several peas. By the time he was done with that, he had remembered how to look calm again. “How can you know?” he murmured, his voice just a breath of air.

“Spell,” said Henrietta, and tapped her wand, which rode in her belt, close against her left hip. “It flashes me a vision of a dark
green skull with a snake in its mouth whenever someone with a Dark Mark gets close enough. I know about yours, but now that Snape is gone, you should be the only one here who has one. And today that student passed me in the hall, and the skull flashed in front of me.”

“He’s not in your NEWT Transfiguration, either?” Peter asked, though he knew the answer as he did. If he were, then Henrietta would have sensed his Mark long before now.

“No,” said Henrietta. “I think his name is Leo, but that’s all I know about him. He wouldn’t have wanted to make an impression on many of his professors, I think.” She gave a thin smile and stroked her wand. “And now we know why.”

“If we try to corner him, he’ll run,” said Peter. He knew that much, from experience with some Marked Slytherins in his sixth year. Evan Rosier had very nearly killed someone else before he’d fled school grounds, simply because someone caught a glimpse of the Mark under his robe and stopped to ask him about his new tattoo.

“I know that,” Henrietta said, in a slightly scornful voice, as if asking him what in the world he was doing, thinking she didn’t know that. “Watch.” She waved her wand and intoned an incantation that, to Peter, sounded singsong. He saw one of the forks next to Henrietta twitch and grow legs, and then it became an enormous ant, which slipped under the head table before anyone else could see it.

Peter could only make the ant out by squinting as it scuttled its way over to the Hufflepuff table; Henrietta had darkened it when she Transfigured it, so that the silver wouldn’t flash and reveal its position. There could be no doubt when it reached the boy with the Dark Mark, though. He leaped to his feet, screaming and waving his arms as though he’d been stung, pulling attention from all over the Great Hall.

“Mr. Harkness!” Professor Sprout was on her feet, no doubt appalled that one of her students was causing such a disturbance in public. “What is the meaning of this?”

“There was a huge bug!” Leo cried back, and Peter wondered if his high-pitched voice was honest fear or good acting. Then he winced. He hated that he had to wonder things like that. “It—“ He pointed under the table, but Peter would have given good Galleons on the chance that Henrietta’s little toy had already hidden itself in a shadowy corner. Leo’s face fell. “Well, there was one right here,” he concluded, rather lamely.

“That is no reason to disrupt dinner,” said Professor Sprout sternly. Pomona was generally cheerful, Peter thought as he watched her, but then, most of the students in her class paid strict attention, so as not to get eaten by dangerous plants. And she did expect better behavior of her House than this. “You will sit down at once.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Leo, sounding thoroughly abashed, and started to.

Henrietta had murmured another spell, however, one that Peter recognized as a cutting curse that did not produce a visible line of light. As Leo sat down, his left robe sleeve sagged, slit down the line of the seam.

And because everyone was looking at him, everyone saw the Mark.

The screams were immediate, and the girl sitting next to him was one of the first to crowd away, the expression of horror on her face so genuine that Peter didn’t think their argument had been about the Mark after all. Leo froze for a moment, and then leaped to his feet and drew his wand, obviously intending to fight his way out of the Hall.

Wards lashed out of the wall, blue lines that bound his arms to his sides and squeezed on his wrist until he dropped his wand with a squall of pain. Then Minerva’s voice spoke, so cold that most of the screams stopped at once, and Leo turned bulging, miserable eyes on her.

“Mr. Harkness,” she said. “I will deal with you now.” She left the head table with a sweep of her robes and a curl of color along the edges of them—a result of the wards that foamed around the Hogwarts Headmistress and hissed with her indignation. The wards gripping Leo turned and pulled him straight into the stones, bearing him to the Headmistress’s office by the shortest route. The last sound he made before he vanished was a miserable, strangled cry.

“I suppose I should go, too, and inform her of what I know,” said Henrietta casually, standing. “Which isn’t much.” She cocked her head at Peter. “You’ll stay here?”

“Yes,” said Peter faintly, and moved to join his other colleagues in calming the frightened students while Henrietta strode through them like they weren’t there and vanished out the Hall’s doors.
Peter shook his head as he walked towards the Gryffindor table to check on his students. Previously, he had divided the entirety of the school into three rough groups, based on their reactions to the Ministry and Harry’s negotiations: scornful, the ones who were impatient for this all to be over with and thought nothing would change; frightened, those who thought this would mean things would change fundamentally and were wary of sharing a school with a fellow student so powerful; and supportive, those who understood something about why Harry was doing what he had done and embraced it.

Now, it seemed as though he needed to add potential Death Eaters to the list.

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Minerva arrived in her office to find Leo sitting in a chair, his eyes wide and his hands flexing as if he could grip the wards and rip them apart like ropes. He stopped trying to tear them when he saw her, and instead only lowered his head so that his chin rested on his chest, avoiding her eyes.

Minerva opened her mouth, ready to say something, and then decided that it would be best to wait for Professor Sprout and Henrietta; she had noticed the other woman’s games at the head table, whether or not Henrietta thought she had. She had not been Transfiguration Professor for nothing. She sat down and waited in the midst of a cold silence. Leo sometimes looked at her as if he would like to say something, but he always turned his head away again, as much as the wards would permit him.

Minerva considered him in the meanwhile. He had been a student in her classes for five years, and she had known him, slightly. He worked quietly, and the only time she remembered him losing points for Hufflepuff was in his first year, when he had a hard time not talking to his friends in class. He was a halfblood, or so she thought; he had said something to her once about his mother being a witch, and how he had thought the spells in Hogwarts would be easier than what she’d taught him at home. He was slight, with brown hair and brown eyes and an altogether unremarkable appearance. It seemed that he’d continued that trend of ordinariness, and turned it into a virtue for his Death Eater status.

Soon enough, Pomona spoke the password for the gargoyle. Henrietta arrived just behind her, according to the wards, and both of them rode the staircase upwards. Minerva composed herself, and put memories of the child Leo had been away. What mattered now was that he was a young man, and he had made this decision, and they would deal with him as an adult.

Pomona arrived and immediately turned and stared at Leo. “Mr. Harkness,” she said, and then no more. She simply shook her head. Minerva was glad to see that. Last year, Filius had defended one of his students who attacked Harry, and who had turned out to be a Death Eater. Pomona might have done the same if there were no conclusive proof, but not with the Mark glaring black on his arm.

“The extent of his involvement in the Death Eaters is what we are here to determine,” said Minerva calmly. “Be seated, Pomona, Hilda.” She remembered to speak Henrietta’s disguise-name just in time.

Pomona took a seat with such rapidity that she almost tripped over her robes; she couldn’t seem to look away from her student. Henrietta sat down primly, sweeping her skirts around her. Minerva could see why she had chosen this disguise. It was almost as far as one could get from the dangerous woman Henrietta Bulstrode was known for being, who would want robes that did not hinder her movement.

“Mr. Harkness,” said Minerva then, facing him, “you are accused of being a Death Eater. Do you deny the accusation?”

Leo was silent for long moments, as if trying to decide how much he ought to tell. Then he said, “I never—I’ve never met the Dark Lord or anything like that. I just have the Mark.”

“And why is that?” Considering that she wanted to shout, Minerva thought she did well in keeping her voice just cold enough to crack stone.

“My mother—my mother supported the Death Eaters in the First War,” said Leo, and jerked his head nervously. “She spent a year in Azkaban, but she was released, finally. She never really gave up on him, though.” He threaded his fingers together and clenched them. The wards that held him would let him do that much. “She talked to me about the Dark Lord. A lot. And sometimes she thought he would come again, and she could do more than she had. But she didn’t know what to do about it, until she heard of his resurrection.”

The words were spilling out now, and Minerva quietly told the wards in her office to record what Leo said. It might be that they would need it for testimony later, if Pensieve memories did not prove to be enough.
“Then she spoke to one of the Death Eater recruiters when he came. Azkaban broke her. She—she couldn’t really do anything to help the war. But she could ask me to take the Mark. I did, this summer, when I turned seventeen. I just—I just wanted to please her, that’s all.” Leo’s lips and eyelids were both trembling. “I’ve never killed anyone. I swear. My mum’s not even Marked. She just supported the Dark Lord and lent money to him. And I don’t know if I even believe what he does.” He stared miserably at the Mark on his arm, as if it should have the answers.

Pomona closed her eyes. Henrietta, cool as Midwinter, said, “He is lying.”

Leo’s eyes flashed open, and he stared at her. Minerva frowned. “In what way?”

“Only the Dark Lord can give the Dark Mark,” said Henrietta. “And it must happen in an initiation. If he didn’t meet the Dark Lord, then he would not bear the Mark. That is the truth of it.”

“I didn’t meet him!” Leo’s voice was shrill with fear now. “I swear, I didn’t, I didn’t. The recruiter was the one who gave me the Mark. He pointed the wand at me and intoned Morsmordre, and there it was. It wasn’t an initiation. I didn’t kill anyone. I swear.”

“Extend your arm,” said Minerva, and he nearly snapped the wards in doing so. She bent forward and stared at the Mark on his arm, frowning. It was true that it looked exactly as it should look, black snake and skull entwined, and it radiated magic that rang as Dark to her senses.

On the other hand, she had wards on the grounds that should have prevented someone with the Dark Mark and hostile intent from entering the school at all. And if Leo hadn’t killed someone, it was not a true initiation. That much, the Order of the Phoenix had known since the First War. All Death Eater initiations involved a murder, though the exact method of killing and the age of the victim would vary widely.

“Keep your arm extended, Mr. Harkness,” she said, and pointed her own wand at the Mark. “Abi in malam rem!”

Leo gasped as the magic broke over his flesh, gripping his skin and twisting it. Minerva flinched a bit as she listened to his howls, but didn’t let it show on her face. It was a painful Transfiguration, but it was also nearly as good a test as Veritaserum would be. The spell banished an unwanted change back to the person who had first cast the spell. If Leo had wanted to bear the Dark Mark—another trait of Death Eaters; the Mark could only come to one who was willing—the brand would stay in place, and Minerva would arrange with Horace for Veritaserum.

But the Mark shrank and writhed and paled, and then it gathered itself into a hive of black bees that flew, angrily buzzing, at the wall and vanished. Leo stared down at his arm. A faint, white scar in the shape of the snake and skull still showed. Minerva nodded. He had been partially willing, then. And since Henrietta had seen fit to reveal the Mark in front of the Great Hall, they would have to insist that Leo leave Hogwarts for at least a little while. But he was supremely unlikely to be executed or imprisoned, now, and he would be able to return to Hogwarts next year, if no earlier, to finish his NEWTS.

“Thank you,” Leo whispered. “Thank you.”

Minerva nodded to him again. “You are welcome, Mr. Harkness. However, I believe that it would be best if you stayed away from home for right now? What would your mother do to you when she noticed this Mark gone?”

Leo closed his eyes.

“I have friends who can find him a place to stay,” said Pomona, her face bright with relief at not having to expel one of her students. She stood and held out her arm. “Come along, Mr. Harkness.”

Minerva didn’t relax the wards. “Just one moment, Pomona.” She turned back to Leo. “I want your binding oath that you will never truly take the Mark, and that you will not take up arms against Hogwarts,” she said.

Leo gave the oath gladly, swearing it in the name of Merlin and his magic, and then Minerva let Pomona lead him away. She was already speaking gently to him as they went. The gentle tone would hide sharp questions, Minerva knew. If the boy was hiding anything else, Pomona would have it out of him before he left school.

That left her alone with Henrietta, who frowned slightly. “So that Mark was a false one?”

“It was,” Minerva confirmed. “A Transfiguration. The recruiter, whoever he was, doubtless did it nonverbally, and used Morsmordre to cover that. But it was not an initiation.” She frowned at Henrietta. “I wish you had come to me privately with this, instead of confronting him before the Great Hall. He might not have had to leave school.”
“And he might have been lying,” said Henrietta, without batting an eye. “There was no way to tell, and I take no chances where Harry’s safety is concerned.”

Minerva told herself this was a natural consequence of hiring someone like Henrietta Bulstrode as a professor, and dismissed her. Then she sat back behind her desk and closed her eyes.

So we have someone giving false Dark Marks to those who might succumb to familial pressure to bear them. And why? To keep the Ministry occupied? To ruin the reputations of ordinary wizards and witches? But most of those who would be most damaged by being exposed as Death Eaters are so opposed to Voldemort that they would never agree to carry the Dark Mark in the first place.

So involved was she in her thoughts that she did not notice the gargoyle beginning to move until it already had. Then she opened her eyes and looked sharply through the wards. A student was on her way up the staircase, a student with long blonde hair and large glasses whom Minerva recognized a few moments later.

Miss Lovegood. And what does she want? There was the possibility that she might have information on Leo, as, last year, she had been able to tell Minerva which of the Ravenclaw students had cast the Entrail-Expelling Curse at Harry. Therefore, Minerva waited until the door to her office opened and Luna stepped inside.

Luna’s face was intent, and she moved across the office with a silence and purpose that Minerva found herself curiously reluctant to interrupt. She reached the middle, just before Minerva’s desk, and turned around, hands extended and pointing towards the bookshelves. Minerva glanced from side to side, but could see no books rising from their settings in what might be response to a nonverbal spell or accidental magic. She returned to looking at Luna, a bit bemused, but willing to wait. Since learning the girl heard impressions from objects, she was much more tolerant of her foibles, and had instructed the other professors to be the same way.

Luna opened her mouth and moved her lips in round shapes, as if tasting bubbles. Then she gave a little hop forward and held out her arms in front of her. Her fingers poked and prodded at an invisible wall for a long moment before she abruptly opened her eyes and smiled.

“It’s gone,” she said. “It really is.”

“Miss Lovegood?” Minerva kept her voice from sounding irritated, but she was not sure puzzled was that much better. It would have done her incredible harm with any number of sixth-year Gryffindor students. But Luna seemed too far gone in her own concerns to notice if the Headmistress sounded confused, and answered seriously.

“There was an object in your office that hated the whole world, Headmistress,” she said. “I felt it when I visited you last year to tell you what the chairs said about Gilbert Rovenan. It was so angry. It hated, and it wanted to tear and rend and destroy.” She faced Minerva with a dazzling beam. “But it’s gone.”

“It is,” said Minerva flatly. She was not sure what most disturbed her: that she could have had something like that in her office, no doubt a dangerous enchanted object of some kind, or that it could have moved.

“Yes.” Luna smiled at the bookcases. “When you reorganized your office, you must have got rid of it. You got rid of a lot, I think. These shelves are new.” She stepped forward and ran one hand across the wood. “And happy with it,” she added. “New objects like being in places full of old ones. They can talk and share stories that they might never get to hear, otherwise.”

Minerva prevented herself, with difficulty, from deterring into a discussion of what stories her bookshelves might have heard. The thought of the walls, floors, and doors watching her every move of their own accord, without wards, was disconcerting. “Do you know what it was, Miss Lovegood?”

“I never knew,” said Luna, her voice already back to its content, dreamy self. “It felt like a Wrackspurt, and I know that Wrackspurts come into people’s heads at night and cause evil dreams, or change their actions. But it wasn’t a Wrackspurt, because then it would have come into someone’s head, not into an object. They can’t control objects.” She gave a little frown. “Headmistress, could you tell people to stop splashing water on the stones in the courtyard? Several of them spent centuries at the bottom of an ocean, and they don’t like the wet. Rain and snow is bad enough. I’ve tried talking to the people who splash across them dripping from Quidditch practice, but they don’t want to listen to me.”

Minerva felt the same helplessness that had confronted Luna’s professors for so long, before they began learning how to listen. She restrained it, and said only, “I’m afraid that you must take that up with Madam Hooch, Miss Lovegood. Perhaps she would be
willing to tell the Quidditch teams that they must dry thoroughly before they come in from the practice field. And, of course, there are the students trekking back and forth from Professor Sprout’s greenhouses to consider, and the Care of Magical Creatures classes."

“I didn’t think about them,” said Luna, brightening. “I’ll talk to the professors, Madam. Thank you.” She turned and wandered out of the office.

Minerva gave her walls another searching glance. It was true she had moved most of Albus’s artifacts out of the office after last year, but she thought she would have known if she had something that powerfully enchanted, and Dark, in here.

She thought.

_What could it have been? And where could it have gone?_ The worse thought was definitely that the thing possessed the power of moving itself about.

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Hawthorn opened her eyes with a start. She’d had trouble sleeping, of late. If she wasn’t having nightmares of Tullianum Prison, she was having nightmares of the Thorn Bitch’s plants tearing Pansy apart in front of her.

She sat up and called _Lumos_ to her wand, which sent flickering shadows around the room—but that was better than the absolute darkness she had tried to sleep in. Once, she had only been able to sleep without light. Lately, it gave her foul dreams.

She stood, scratching her left arm, and walked across her narrow room to stare out the window. She could see the moon from here. It was very nearly full.

She would have to transform, again. Her skin crawled with the thought.

She had become _used_ to being a werewolf, but she would never love it, the way that so many members of the packs did. She would never want anything more than to be a pureblood witch again. Well, and she wanted her husband and daughter, but she knew that was impossible.

The cure might not be.

Hawthorn watched the moon, and remembered what Harry had said of the potion he thought might help cure lycanthropy, and how each werewolf would have to prepare his or her own dose, and how even then it was difficult and stood a sixty percent chance of killing the werewolf.

The thought came sneaking into her head, for the first time. Before, she had only allowed herself to consider brewing processes, and spells that might let her transfer her magic into a liquid.

_I would be willing to take the risk._

She had said she was going to live, after Harry came back and after they swore to the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, but she hadn’t, had she? A month and a half of blissful life, and then she had been cast into the cells.

Those three days without the sun, at the mercy of the moon, had changed something fundamental in her, Hawthorn knew, something she was still recovering from. She would bear what she had to bear, and she would survive, because suicide was for weaklings and cowards. But she did not want to live as she had been, a beast who could be hunted and hated. The new werewolf laws might make her more acceptable, but she would still smell the fear and disgust around normal wizards and witches, now that they knew what she was.

She could take no pleasure in it, as someone like Camellia could. Camellia had been bitten before she was a year old; she had never known anything else, at least not that she could remember. Hawthorn had spent decades of her life as a normal witch. A little more than three years of being a werewolf was not enough to make her a Camellia.

She closed her eyes. _I want to change once more—become a normal witch, with no lycanthropy._

_Once, and no more._

She would begin working on the werewolf cure for herself, tomorrow.
Adalrico sighed and bent to bandage his heel again. The Fisher King Curse that Augustus Starrise had gifted him with before he died needed to be regularly tended to and cleaned and bandaged. The wound would not kill him, and it would not become infected, and it would not close. It simply existed, impairing his walking and his life, if he allowed the smell to build.

He had become very good at spells that would conceal foul scents since Augustus died, even from werewolves. There was that to be said for the state of things.

But when one was awake in the middle of the night, troubled by evil dreams of one’s own past, learning to conceal foul scents seemed small compensation. Adalrico scratched his left shoulder and yawned, then lay down again next to Elfrida, trying not to wake her. Marian slept in a cot in a corner of the room, and Millicent was in the room next door. Too easy to stir someone to alertness, if he did not watch out.

And then, of course, he couldn’t sleep. He lay awake and stared over his wife’s shoulder instead, watching the reflections of the moonlight on the wall.

This was not the war he had envisioned when he had joined Harry, he thought. He had thought he would have a chance to fight those who were trying to stifle all independence and change in the wizarding world, whether those wizards were Light or Dark. Part of him had rejoiced at going to war again, after so many years of peace. He had served an unworthy master the last time, but this time there had come one worthy of a Bulstrode. When Harry had built the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, and then cast his defiance in the Minister’s face, Adalrico had been ecstatic. Surely, now, he would have a chance to fight.

And he had not. Other than their jailbreak in the Ministry, the fights had ended before he could enter them, and he had not had the time to cast a single spell.

Elfrida stirred and murmured against him. Adalrico comfortingly rubbed her shoulder, still watching the light and shadows on the wall.

He wanted to fight. He wanted to prove to the wizarding world that the Bulstrodes had pride still. Their motto was *Duramus*, We endure, but he also wanted to triumph. The best way he could do that was in battle, and there was so little chance of that, as long as Harry operated by tact and diplomacy and argument. His daughter was a different case, but Millicent had proven that she was an adult woman to him this summer, no longer standing in his shadow. He could not point to her as an example of his honor; she had her own.

*And whose fault is that?*

Adalrico took a long breath, wrinkled his nose at the smell that always lingered after he had changed his bandages, and closed his eyes. It was his own fault, his own fault entirely. This was not the war he had envisioned. That did not make it the wrong war. It meant he had something to contribute, if he could look beyond the end of his nose. He had known some tact; he had managed to survive in the vipers’ nest that was the Death Eaters, after all. Perhaps he should be thinking about drawing on that experience to serve Harry, instead of expecting Harry’s experience to change so he could show off to advantage.

He was an adult, and a wizard, and he had lived through much, including the first rise and the first fall of the Dark Lord. Now was only another change to ride.

It was not long after that before his breathing slowed and deepened to match his wife’s, and he fell back into a sleep that, this time, was plagued by no evil dreams.

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**Chapter Thirty-Seven: Homo Homini Lupus**

Rufus signed his name to the document with a flourish, then sat back and looked over it. He felt sure Harry would agree to this set of laws. They did everything that he had asked for, and they were more than he might have expected to win over two years of asking.

They insisted that werewolves had the same rights as wizards—the right to exist without being hunted, the right to fair trials if they were accused of crimes, the right to hold wands and paying jobs and property, the right to custody of their children, and the right to exist without collars and without papers and without experimentation. They included provisions for distribution of
Wolfsbane to werewolves who agreed to register themselves as lycanthropes; otherwise, due to the fact that people existed who would buy Wolfsbane just to keep it out of the hands of werewolves, they would have to make their own arrangements. Since Harry had mentioned in his last letter that he thought there was a possibility that a werewolf cure might emerge someday, after months of dedicated work, Rufus had added a promise that the funds originally used to establish the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts would go to studying the cure instead.

In a few weeks, the new Goblin Board would begin sending its representatives out to negotiate with the northern goblins. Most of the representatives were human, but there were some southern goblins, at the hanarz’s insistence. Rufus hoped they would be able to begin by the sixteenth of November.

And there were some wizards in training with the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures to contact the centaurs. Rufus was privately uncertain how effective that would be; unless Harry led every party himself, there remained a certain element of terror in venturing into the Forbidden Forest. But it was the good faith effort that Harry had asked for.

The bigger projects—in particular, reaching out to magical species all around the world, and potentially eliminating the boundaries between wizards and Muggles—would have to wait. Rufus didn’t think they would be able to accomplish them anyway, given how protective other wizarding communities tended to be of their own territory, but Harry had surprised him before. If he could succeed, then Rufus had no problems lending his voice and praise to Harry’s efforts.

And so, it was done.

All except for one thing, of course.

Rufus turned his head expectantly towards the door just as the knock sounded. The hardest thing to give up when the Ritual of Cincinnatus left him, he thought, would be the wards. He had adapted to using them almost as a second pair of eyes. He had caught two Aurors beating a prisoner that way the other day—they obviously hadn’t realized the Minister controlled wards in Tullianum, as well—and several more employees in minor infractions that he could come in and personally inquire about. The temporary Head of the Auror Office, a young man named Bingley, was scrambling hard to keep up with everything, but Rufus had done better on his own than he expected.

And now he knew that an Unspeakable was coming to see him.

“Come in,” he called.

The young man who walked in had his hood down, giving Rufus his first glimpse of an Unspeakable’s face. He was handsome enough, a wizard with black hair and brown eyes and vaguely familiar features; Rufus thought he might have known this one’s brother or father in Auror training once. He sat down facing Rufus and inclined his head in a shallow nod, before speaking in that same inflectionless voice they all had.

“Minister. The Stone has offered this peace treaty.” He held out a parchment that Rufus knew wasn’t enchanted with harmful spells. He had specifically forbidden the members of the Department of Mysteries to use any magic in their own domain. This had been written entirely by hand; they hadn’t even been able to Accio the parchment or the quill to themselves.

Rufus scanned it carefully. Every term was just as he’d asked for, though, even in the language that he asked for. The Department of Mysteries agreed to stop their experiments on werewolves, to serve the good of the Ministry first and foremost instead of their own good, not to war with Harry, and to avoid pressuring the members of the Wizengamot as they had done in the recent past with Amelia Bones and others. They also agreed to reduce their spy wards throughout the Ministry to wards on Tullianum and on the eighth floor, the Atrium, only; those wards would help defend the Department.

Rufus wondered if he could really trust the Department of Mysteries. But then, he had ruined their cover of secrecy rather spectacularly. In the past few weeks, his people had called loudly and more loudly for an investigation into the Department itself, to split it open and expose its secrets to the air. Rufus had known that trying to force the Unspeakables to open their doors would be walking into a death trap, especially given the Stone’s immunity to magic. But he could and would use the stalemate to reach an agreement, and now it seemed that he had.

“You know that by signing this, it commits you?” he asked, and held out the parchment towards the Unspeakable. “And if we see you disobeying anything on this list, or even suspect that you have, I will simply disband the Department and declare all Unspeakables outlaws.”

The man gave him a thin smile, but his voice remained the same inflectionless wonder as before. “We do, Minister. I have the Stone’s full permission to sign this, I assure you. And we do find it much easier to work within the Ministry than outside it.” He
picked up the quill on Rufus’s desk.

Rufus shuddered. He could feel the ripple and twitch in the air, the sliding power of another mind in the room with him. He lifted his head with an effort, and met the Unspeakable’s eyes, and realized the Stone was looking out at him from them.

“I am here,” said the voice. It was deep now, and no longer without inflection, though the words stopped and started at odd points, and Rufus would not have said that he could identify the emotion that inhabited them. “I have approved this.”

The Unspeakable bent and signed The Stone. The words blazed across the parchment to Rufus’s eyes, letters of red and gold, and then the great presence departed, and he was left sitting at his desk, stunned and shaken. The young man rose to his feet, bowed, and then turned and left as well.

*It is just as well that we never tried to go to war with that thing. This is inadequate as a punishment for all they have done, but it is the best we can do.*

Rufus gathered up the signed documents and turned around to hand them to Percy for copying. One set would go to the *Daily Prophet*, which tracked all the negotiations, and one to Harry. If he approved them, then the debacle would be done and the rebellion could conclude.

Rufus rather hoped Harry would approve them, and not just because he was tired of the arguing. There was something rather poetic about a rebellion that began with September’s full moon and ended with October’s.

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“What are you worried about, Harry?”

Harry started. He had come into the room where Joseph was waiting for him to begin one of their talks, but his thoughts had been elsewhere, and he had believed he was alone. “I’m not worried about anything new,” he said, and sat down. “I think we were talking about my hand last time, sir.”

“Call me Joseph,” said the Seer, sitting back and cocking his head. “And, forgive me, Harry, but most people who observe you for a long period of time will note the way your forehead furrows and you bite your lip when you’re worried about something. And you were doing it just now.”

Harry sighed. *I have to learn to control my facial features. Another set of lessons, I suppose.* “The full moon is coming,” he said. “The third one since Loki made his vow of vengeance. That means that he’s going to attack and kill the third hunter who killed his mate, Gudrun.”

“And you are worrying about finding this hunter and sparing his life?” Joseph asked.

Harry scowled. Joseph had a gentle and patient tone that made him want to hit things. It was even worse than Vera’s. Vera, he hadn’t met under the best circumstances, and so he was willing to forgive her almost anything once he accepted the idea that she’d spied on his soul without his consent. But Joseph was supposed to be Snape’s Seer, and Harry had agreed to talk to him only under duress. “Yes, of course I am,” he said shortly. “It was partly Kieran’s death that made me start this rebellion in the first place, and a wish to find some other way for wizards and werewolves to live together that didn’t depend upon oaths of vengeance. But I don’t even know where the third hunter is, just that his family has taken him into hiding somewhere in France. And I’m sure Loki has already crossed the Channel by now.”

“Have you warned his family about the consequences of standing in his way?” Joseph asked.

“I sent owls. I never received a reply.”

“Then you have done all you can,” said Joseph firmly. “But this is a new subject for us, and one I would like to discuss. Kieran’s death.”

Harry shook his head and stood, turning towards the door.

“Harry.”

“I agreed to talk to you because I wanted to be a better son to Professor Snape,” Harry said quietly, staring straight ahead. “And because I recognize my own healing is an important goal.” *Just one that takes up so much damn time, time I can’t afford right*
now. It had ended up taking Draco and Snape together to insist that he talk to Joseph at all. He would have been willing to make another journey to the Sanctuary, but in the future, not right now. These arguments with Joseph took away from valuable time when he could have been talking over future plans with the packs, reviewing the latest laws the Minister’d sent him, peeking in on Hawthorn as she worked with the lycanthropy cure, soothing the karkadann, conversing with the northern goblins and the centaurs, envisioning his Animagus form, studying the final curse on his hand, or simply resting with Draco. “Not because I thought that I needed to heal from every single thing that had ever happened to me.”

“Kieran’s death had some part in the beginning of the rebellion, you said,” said Joseph. “Obviously, it’s recent, and it’s important to you. I would like to know why.”

Harry let his breath out. He could get angry, of course he could, but it was unproductive to get angry at Joseph. He simply looked at Harry, or Snape for that matter, with wise and patient eyes, and it worked as well as hitting a brick wall—more likely to break something in the one doing the hitting than move the recipient anywhere.

“It’s a horrible story,” he said. “I promised to protect Kieran, and I couldn’t. He died. I failed.” He swallowed several times, and for a moment saw Loki again, shimmering pale as he smashed through the door. He saw Kieran’s blood flying, heard the flesh parting under Loki’s nails and teeth. He remembered the feeling of spinning down and down as he had knelt there, the momentary impulse to kill himself and be done with it. If everything he put his hand to failed anyway, the world could more than spare him, it would be better off without him.

And he had hauled himself back from that, because he had known that the world would not really be better off without him, and he had transformed that despair into determination to see wizards and werewolves adopt some better way of living side by side. If he could have saved Kieran, he might not ever have found that stubbornness. He would still have done something when he heard Hawthorn was arrested, but it might not have been rebelling.

It’s past, and I rescued what scraps of worth I could from that, and made use of them. Harry deliberately slowed his breathing. I don’t need to talk about it the way Joseph imagines I need to talk about it. Snape gains value from reliving his memories because he denied they happened for so long, or he rewrote them in his mind and made them into something else. I haven’t done that. I remember all my failures very well, thank you.

“I think there is more to it than that,” said Joseph.

Harry blinked, and returned to the room, and remembered the last words he’d spoken to Joseph. He shook his head and gave him a grim smile. “Nothing important.”

“Really.” Joseph leaned forward. “I have seen how fervently you defend all those around you, Harry. I do not like to imagine what would happen if someone under your protection died. It must have been a horrible evening for you.”

“I told you it was a horrible story,” said Harry, with a slight shrug.

“Have you spoken with anyone about this at all?” Joseph pressed. “Draco, one of your adult allies, Severus?”

“No,” said Harry. “I don’t see the need to. I took all the lessons I could from it, and that’s the end.”

“What were the lessons?”

“That I needed to do something more than make empty promises,” snapped Harry, and winced as he saw a current of wind pick up from the corner of his eye, rattling the delicate parchment maps that Joseph had hung on the walls, and which seemed to be his main form of decoration. “I’m sorry, but I don’t think I’ll ever be ready or willing to talk about this;” he added, and then stepped out and shut the door behind him.

The bird was waiting for him in the hall. It didn’t try to claw him this time. It simply clung to the wall of the corridor, not very far away given how narrow most rooms in Woodhouse were, and stared at him. The claws on its wings opened and flexed shut in peculiar ways. Its red eyes were more piercing when it wasn’t laughing at him, Harry thought, not less.

“I don’t know what you want,” he whispered to it. “I have tried to kill Voldemort before. It didn’t work. Twice, the Killing Curse didn’t work.”

The bird flew over and hovered in front of him. Harry braced himself for another meaningless image. The bird had taken to showing him those over the past weeks. One was a dark burrow with a golden cup inside it, and one a dark house that looked vaguely familiar, but was surrounded by trees in full leaf that Harry was sure he had never seen, and one was a view of Hogwarts,
and one was a cramped, narrow desk in an unpleasantly Muggle-looking place.

Harry had tried asking questions about the images. He had tried drawing them and showing them to others, but Snape and Draco and Thomas couldn’t tell him what they meant either. He had tried willing himself to Apparate to them, but other than Hogwarts, where he didn’t want to go until his rebellion was officially finished and he could be readmitted as a student, they were too indistinct to permit that. He didn’t know what to do with them.

But this time, the bird didn’t show him a meaningless image, but one full of meaning. In fact, it was a fat leather-bound book with a title printed on the spine in letters of silver. Harry raised an eyebrow. The title was *Of Lords and Their Powers*, and he had brought the book with him from the Black libraries.

That image faded, and a number appeared, also glittering silver against a dark background. 453.

Harry shook his head—he still didn’t understand why the bird couldn’t simply speak and tell him what it wanted him to know instead of sending him images and book pages to look up—but he went to his bedroom and opened his trunk. Draco was lounging on the bed and looked up with a welcoming smile, but he stilled as the blankets near his feet shifted. Harry knew that would be the only indication Draco would have of the presence of the bird, which had followed him.

Harry opened *Of Lords and Their Powers*, and flipped to page 453. It began in the middle of a paragraph, which he skimmed without interest—something about the consequences of Lords gaining the protection of Light or Dark after Declaring, which he already knew. The bird had to know he would never Declare, even if it wanted him to do so.

There was a paragraph under that, though, which read:

> There is one final requirement to being considered a true Lord, which I almost hesitate to mention. On the surface, it seems simple and obvious, and not only most Lords but most wizards would not be who they are without it. But at the same time, there have been some powerful wizards who abruptly lost their magic, and this was the only reason they could offer: magic loves to be used. Magic loves to be made much of, and noticed, and appreciated. Though the personalities it develops when under confinement vary, one may say the major component of them all is vanity. These few powerful Lords or almost-Lords who lost their magic did it through treating it like a shoe or a robe, only something useful, and never showing any wonder or delight or appreciation. Of course, most wizards, for whom their magic is their being, need never worry about this.

Harry lowered the book and stared at the bird. It stalked in a circle, lashing its tail, and stared back.

“I don’t know what that has to do with the images you showed me,” Harry whispered.

The bird lifted and flew at him, landing on his shoulder and giving him a sharp nip on the earlobe with its toothed beak. Then it flew at the wall, vanishing on the way. Harry grimaced and touched his ear, which dripped blood.

“Here.” Draco was already beside him with a cloth, which Harry took gratefully to mop at the wound. “What was that all about? I notice it didn’t scratch you this time, but biting isn’t much better.”

“It wanted me to read this.” Harry tapped the paragraph; he had the book hovering in the air in front of him, cradled by his Levitation Charm. “I think I understand why. What I don’t understand is how that has any connection with the burrow and the house and Hogwarts and the desk it showed me.”

Draco bent down and read the paragraph, one hand on the book and one on Harry’s left shoulder. Both tightened as he continued reading. Then he lifted his head and said, “I thought of this when you offered to share the *absorbere* gift with me, Harry, and now that I’ve noticed it, I can’t stop noticing it. You don’t appreciate your magic enough. There are times you rejoice in it, but how rare are those times? Even for magic that can’t hurt anyone? For example, I don’t think I’ve ever heard you sing like a phoenix unless you’re trying to heal someone or express sorrow.”

Harry felt his face flush. “And you think that’s connected to why the magic won’t let me give any of it back to Camellia?”

He had tried again and again since Snape deemed him healthy enough to get out of bed after the failed attempt at giving the *absorbere* gift to Draco. Camellia had a magical core now, just as a Squib did; Harry ought to have been able to fill it as he had the magical cores of the children turned Squibs by the Midsummer attack. He should have been able to drink magic from Black artifacts and pass it along.

His magic wouldn’t let him. Every time he opened his *absorbere* gift, the bird appeared, settling heavy and claw-prickly onto his shoulder, and watched. As long as he only drank magic, it didn’t mind. But the moment he turned that towards some goal like
feeding Camellia or pouring it into the lycanthropy cure or, Merlin forbid, trying to weave a magical core for another Muggle werewolf, the bird attacked him. Harry winced, and touched his hand, still holding the cloth, to his face in remembrance. When he’d tried to create a magical core for Rose, the bird had slashed his face, and come extremely near to taking his eye. Only a spell Snape had learned from Madam Pomfrey had let Harry not have a second scar on his face.

Harry had put all that down to the vicious streak of temper the bird seemed to have developed trapped between him and Voldemort. He had assumed its fit over his giving both Camellia and Draco extra power would pass, and he would be able to use the absorbere gift for more than just digesting magic again. But now he had to wonder. Was the magic doing that because it was angry that he didn’t appreciate it enough?

“Yes,” said Draco, and again Harry had to struggle, as with Joseph, to remember the last thing he’d said to him. “I think that’s exactly it, Harry. Maybe the magic would have been content to let you do this forever if Voldemort hadn’t used that ritual to resurrect himself, because Thomas says the connection between you wasn’t really a tunnel until then. But now it’s aware, and it wants you to do certain things with it.” He tilted Harry’s chin up until he met his eyes. “Can you blame it?” he whispered. “When you know that the goblins and the house elves labored unacknowledged for centuries, and how unfair that was?”

Harry winced. “I just—Draco, I dislike using my magic for things that don’t help other people.”

“Why not?”

“Self-indulgence,” said Harry flatly. “It’s self-indulgence, and I can’t afford that.”

“In this case, I think it’s indulgence of your magic, and nothing else.” Draco ran a soothing hand down his back. Harry had noticed him picking up a habit of that since he arrived at Woodhouse. More disturbing was his own new habit to relax into the stroking and arch his back towards it. “Think about it, Harry. You respect the free wills of more people and magical creatures than I would ever be able to. Respecting the free will of your magic shouldn’t be hard.”

“It’s not that,” said Harry. “I’m not afraid of the effects on my magic, Draco. I’m afraid of the effects on myself.”

Draco laughed. “You think you’ll become a Lord just through allowing yourself to delight in your abilities more?” He bent over and kissed Harry. “I promise,” he whispered, when he drew back enough to be able to speak, “I won’t let that happen. Trust me?”

“Of course.” The response was automatic, but it made Harry blink when he realized what he’d agreed to. Draco laughed again as he sighed.

“Can’t hurt to go out and create pretty lights tomorrow,” he said. “Or sing, Harry. I think more people would like to hear you sing than have.”

“All right, all right,” said Harry.

He heard a flap, and turned around. The bird clung to the wall, watching him with what Harry could have sworn was approval, before it turned and vanished through the wood again.

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“This is embarrassing.”

Draco ignored Harry. He had been saying some variation of that for the last ten minutes, as they walked out of the main quadrangle of buildings at Woodhouse and across the valley to find some place that wouldn’t be too public for Harry, away from the sentries and the wizards practicing dueling under Adalrico Bulstrode and the karkadann, who had stopped grazing and pranced over to be petted when she saw Harry. Draco didn’t care if it was embarrassing. Harry had promised that he would do it, and that meant he would do it.

Draco couldn’t even describe what he’d felt since Harry’s debacle with trying to give Camellia the absorbere gift. At least, he didn’t think he could have described it to anyone else. He could speak the words in his own head, and they didn’t sound silly or too sappy there, the way they would have if they were spoken aloud.

He felt lighter, as if he had been carrying a burden and finally been invited to lay it down. He felt more smug, more contented and surer of his place in Harry’s life. He felt as if he stood a chance of being respected by other people out of Harry’s shadow, whether or not he ever had magic to equal his, whether or not he managed to achieve deeds as heroic as his.
Harry had never thought of him as lesser. He had never believed that because Draco didn’t have the same amount of magic, he was inferior in any way.

This changed things so much that Draco felt as if he stood on a mountaintop in the sight of the sun again, as before he made his decision to go to Harry instead of obey his father, but this time he could actually enjoy the view instead of being afraid of what others were thinking as they looked at him. Why *should* he be afraid of what others were thinking as they looked at him? He was better than they were, and he knew it. He was judged as he deserved in the eyes of everyone who mattered to him.

And that wouldn’t change once he encouraged Harry to give his magic the freedom and *joy* it wanted. It would only improve. Harry might actually be able to relax, as he rarely did except when he was moving fast, on a broom or a karkadann. And that would lead to his being more relaxed with Draco, and giving Draco more of what he wanted, including more sex.

Draco did not see any way in which his life wouldn’t improve, based on what would happen this morning.

At last he thought they were far away enough from everyone for Harry to be not immediately embarrassed. He turned around with a coaxing smile and held out his hand to Harry. Harry looked at it suspiciously, as if Draco might somehow charm him into piping away like a songbird at the merest touch.

“Why don’t you hold my hand while you sing?” Draco asked. “Touching me seems to calm you.”

“I wouldn’t call last night calm,” Harry muttered, but he did as Draco asked. And then he stood there. And stood there. Draco watched him. It was a day nearly as bright as spring, though the chill in the air and the polished blue shell of the sky necessarily spoke of autumn. Harry shifted from foot to foot.

“Go ahead and sing,” Draco said at last.

Harry closed his eyes, and a deep flush crept up his face. Then he drew his breath in and sang.

Draco found himself smiling immediately, and didn’t try to stop it. At least Harry was making an honest attempt. This wasn’t the mourning dirge he’d sung when Fawkes died, nor yet the music he’d used to heal the burned people lying in their own minds at Gollrish Y Thie. It wasn’t even a battle song to improve morale. It was a chorus of gladness that gathered its legs beneath it and leaped straight up.

Draco heard the deep, contented purring that Harry’s magic had given when he and Harry finally bedded each other after Harry woke from his Occlumency pools, and trails of blue and purple light, in deep, jeweled colors, unwound from his shoulders and looped around them both as Draco watched. The song went on flying, and the magic chased after it, creating fan patterns of flame. The flame was cold, though, and not at all the high, solemn joy a phoenix’s fire might evoke. Instead, it formed pictures of gravelly stalking birds—peacocks, herons, storks—only to the next moment turn them into falling showers of stars, like fireworks, and race madly about in a mixture of light and wind.

Harry’s voice rose. Draco didn’t know if he was getting lost in the song, or gaining more confidence. That was primarily because he couldn’t look away from the light show in front of him. The light and the wind had now formed an owl-like pattern, white and golden-eyed in imitation of Hedwig, and were rotating it in circles—upright, to the left, upside-down, and to the right. Draco wondered what the motive was, then scolded himself. The motive was to have fun, of course.

He laughed, but he didn’t think the magic was making him laugh, as the phoenix song after Midwinter had made him feel sorrow. His hand tightened on Harry’s, and when the snowy owl dissolved into more brilliant chaos, he was able to sneak a sideways look at Harry’s face.

Harry had his eyes open and was watching the displays his magic made with a half-dazed expression. He shook his head once or twice, but didn’t stop singing. The magic giggled to itself and zipped up and down, then out to the sides, forming the pattern of a crossroads.

In moments, the crossroads pattern firmed into a golden one. Draco watched as each end began to glow with a ball of light, which shimmered and added colors until he had trouble looking directly at any of them. By now, everyone in Woodhouse might be staring, but Harry didn’t seem inclined to end this, either the song or the light show.

The balls raced down each arm of the crossroads, rumbling all the way like boulders dropped into narrow tunnels. When the four of them met in the center, they collided with a blaze Draco instinctively closed his eyes against, and which still flared like sunrise through his eyelids. A last, great chord of music went up, and Draco couldn’t have said whether it came from the magic or Harry’s throat.
Then the song dropped triumphantly back to earth, and was over.

Draco slowly opened his eyes and blinked away the afterimages. Then he looked at Harry—

Whose face was shining with wonder, who was touching his own throat as if he didn’t know what to do with it, and whose magic filled his eyes and his body as if he were made of glass.

Draco took a swift step forward, seized Harry’s head, and gave him a kiss that was half bite. No one could have blamed him for that, he was convinced. Hell, holding back on kissing Harry was probably a crime in most civilized countries.

Harry started to kiss back, and then became aware of their audience, the people pressing across the grass to stare at them. His cheeks flushed again, but he returned their stares and gave Draco a kiss only a bit less chaste than it would have been otherwise. Draco wished Harry had thought to Apparate them to their bedroom. Instead, Harry stepped away and nodded to those watching.

“What was that for?” Evergreen, the werewolf, asked. Draco gave him a sidelong glance. He thought Evergreen watched Harry too much. “What’s the danger?”

“No danger,” said Harry, even as his cheeks turned Weasley red. “I just wanted to have fun.”

Draco smiled. Harry had had fun, whatever mortification he might feel now, and from the deep, contented rumbling Draco could hear if he listened, it seemed that his magic agreed.

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Harry stretched his arms above his head and threw his shoulders back. They had finally brewed enough Wolfsbane for each werewolf in Woodhouse to take for all three nights they would transform, a little before the full moon actually rose on the first night. The packs had already taken their Wolfsbane for tonight, of course, but Harry had been unsure if they would finish the brewing before tomorrow.

He glanced over at Snape, who was capping the vials of potion and putting them carefully in a large cabinet fastened to the wall of the room they’d taken over as their Potions lab (it had been the room where Harry worked on the werewolf cure, first). Harry narrowed his eyes. Snape’s hands had the slightest shake to them, not something anyone would have noticed unless they knew him.

“Sir?” he asked. And there was the slightest pause before Snape answered, again something most people would not have noticed—but a pause that he might have used to conceal how badly Harry’s question startled him.

“Yes, Harry?” he said, in a neutral tone.

“I’m going to spend part of the evening in the valley with the packs,” Harry said. “But you’ll have important brewing to do in your own rooms, of course.”

Silence. Harry went on watching his guardian’s turned back. He wondered if Snape had not thought he would offer him an out, or had simply committed himself to accompanying Harry outside, despite his own fear and hatred.

“Important brewing must not be neglected,” Snape said softly.

Harry nearly sagged with relief. He could not have forced Snape to stay behind, and would never have tried, but the thought of what could have happened if Snape had been persistent…

“Of course it must not be, sir,” he said, and moved towards the door.

“Harry?”

He paused again. He’d rarely heard Snape’s voice sound so uncertain. He looked over his shoulder, but Snape still had his back turned. “Yes, Professor?”

“Why have you never sought permission to call me by my first name?” Snape was now trying to mask desperate curiosity as idle curiosity. Harry could not imagine why the answer would be so important to him, but he told the truth with all appropriate gravity.
“It seemed too informal, sir. Our first years, of course, we were professor and student—“

“That almost never prevented me from addressing you as Harry, instead of Mr. Potter.”

Harry blinked. “Yes, sir, but I assumed that you wanted to distinguish me from my brother. And our father,” he added, thinking of the black hatred that had burned between Snape and James even after Snape officially became his guardian.

“Yes,” Snape all but breathed the words. “And after I became your guardian, Harry?”

“It would have been inappropriate.” Harry cocked his head, wondering what Snape wanted from him. “You were there to defend me and protect me and restrict me when it was necessary. I did tell you that I wasn’t a child, sir, and you accepted that. So our relationship was as two adults most of the time. I admit there were days I behaved like a child, or a sulky adolescent, and you had to become the parent.” He smiled, and tried to add the smile to his tone, but since Snape still didn’t turn around, Harry wasn’t sure what effect that had on him. “But since then, you’ve never invited a closer acquaintance. I assumed it wasn’t allowable, sir, either for me or for yourself. You’re an intensely private person, I know, which is one of the reasons that talking to Joseph is so hard for you.”

Snape turned around then. “I consider myself your father, Harry. You know that, from the bargain we made.”

Harry nodded.

“And yet.”

Harry sighed. “I didn’t know you wanted anything different, sir. And you know I’ve always been more comfortable with formality.”

Snape spoke as if he were jumping off a cliff. “I would—appreciate it if you would call me Severus, Harry. For various reasons. I spent years hating the name and training myself not to think it. Severus was a weakling, and the man I became was not. But I am, I hope, eventually recovering the name from the memories I told Joseph about. Besides, you called your abusers by their first names. I would like at least that same level of intimacy.”

“I assumed you wouldn’t want equal standing with them in any way, sir,” said Harry, his voice as careful as he could make it. “This kind of standing? I do,” Snape leaned forward, face intent. “You are my son, Harry, in ways that you were never theirs—not least of all because they never tried to claim you that way.” A sneer entered his voice. Harry could see the effort it took him to force it back down. “I would not consider your treatment of me the same if you called me Severus,” he finished at last, softly. “I would consider that you afforded me the same courtesy and friendliness that you show to Mrs. Malfoy and Mrs. Parkinson, in addressing them by their first names.”

“Even that’s new,” Harry warned him. “And I stumble plenty of times.”

Snape laughed, a sound half-genuine and half not. “And you believe that I am one to blast anyone for stumbling at this point, Harry?”

Harry nodded, slowly. He was still absolutely sure that this would end up cracked on the floor like an egg soon, but he could try. “Good night, s—Severus.” The name felt odd on his tongue.

“Good night, Harry.”

Then, he could finally leave and shut the door. Harry shook himself as he walked quickly up the narrow corridors and towards the exit from the wooden house into Woodhouse itself.

He could have understood it better if this had been something Joseph recommended Snape do, to help him recover. He would have understood if Snape really had wanted to be considered at least equal to James and Lily in importance in Harry’s mind.

But instinct told Harry that the most important reason was simply that Snape had wanted this, and wanted this from him.

It’s so strange to think about Snape needing anything from anybody, he thought, as he pushed open the door. It’s so strange to think about anybody wanting that from me, specifically, not just any child they’ve adopted. And Draco. I thought he wanted his pleasure most of all. And he wants my pleasure, too. And even my magic! It wants my delight in using it, not just use.
It was so strange. Harry felt as if he’d entered a new country, one that the Sanctuary hadn’t prepared him for but which everyone else knew from early on in life. He was going to stumble so often. He just knew it. How in the world was he supposed to offer people things that came from him, and not common decency and compassion? How would he tread the line between doing something natural and good, and self-indulgence?

_I don’t know. I only know I have to try._

He put the thoughts away as he stepped out into Woodhouse. At least, he thought, here were werewolves who wanted nothing of him. A good thing, too, since Harry’s own hope that matters would be resolved before the full moon had not come to pass. When they looked over the Minister’s latest set of laws for the werewolves, Hawthorn had pointed out that there was no provision to punish the Aurors and others who had attacked werewolves while the hunting was still legal. There wasn’t even a blunt statement that the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts was going to be disbanded, only that the funds would be used for something else and that no more hunting would be allowed. Harry had written Scrimgeour that morning explaining the problem. He hadn’t heard anything back yet.

He tried to put the troubles in the back of his mind as he saw the valley.

Harry was very glad that Snape had stayed inside now. The moon had already risen. Woodhouse was packed with werewolves, the members of more than a dozen packs as well as those who had become werewolves because of Loki, nudging each other with their noses and sniffing and licking, or sitting on their haunches and staring at the moon.

Harry saw a flash of silver, and a moment later made out the wolf who must be Peregrine: a black bitch with an overwhelming presence, made more dramatic still by the silver-white markings along her shoulders and spine. She stood looking at the moon herself, then threw back her head and howled.

The wolves on either side of her, the remnants of her pack, responded instantly, and then other voices joined them, and others. Harry closed his eyes and listened. He could not call it a dirge, or a song of triumph. It didn’t sound human enough for that. It was hunting music, but fiercer and freer and more savage than that heard from any human horn. This was what the packs must have sounded like when direwolves still ran the world, Harry thought, half-dreaming, shaggy beasts older than any werewolf, and hunting prey they had never seen.

When he opened his eyes, the howling had stopped and Peregrine was guiding the others on a run around the rim of the valley, beginning with the entrance near the pine woods and continuing on past the hills and the houses. Harry found it hard to see them, given that the only light was that of the full moon, but that didn’t matter. The moonlight was just right for seeing them, he thought, the flashes of silver on Peregrine’s shoulders leading the way and the fawn and white and brindled and gray and sometimes black coats pouring after her. Sometimes a gleam marked a mouth of bared teeth or a pair of amber eyes catching the moon just right. Soon Harry stood near the side of the widening ring, and no matter how fast he turned, he couldn’t keep up with them all.

He saw no werewolf as pale as Loki, and for that he was grateful. He tried not to think about what Loki was probably doing in France at the moment, and failed.

Twice the wolves made a circuit of the valley, and then gradually they slowed, panting heavily and turning the game into more individual ones, snatchting at and playing with each other. Harry couldn’t tell if they were splitting up by packs or not, since he found it hard to recognize most of them in wolf form. He did notice Remus tussling with Camellia, who bit him sharply on the nose and loped off to stand by herself. She still hadn’t recovered completely from the loss of her magic.

Then a dirge arose.

Harry turned, the hair on the back of his neck rising. A pale fawn bitch stood by herself, head tilted back and voice rising and falling in an ululating wail. Harry wouldn’t have felt so bad if he didn’t know who it was. _Hawthorn._

Slowly, though his skin prickled all over with sweat and shock, he moved towards her. The other werewolves made no move to follow him. Harry wondered if that was because Hawthorn was part of no pack.

He whispered her name, halting near her. She stopped her howl and stared at him with sorrowful amber eyes.

He whispered her name several more times, but of course she couldn’t speak in this form, and she wouldn’t consent to nuzzle his hand or take comfort from him. She moved away and lay down, curling her tail around her nose. Harry heard the other werewolves turn back to their games. He sat down next to her, talking softly.
“I do think the werewolf cure can be perfected,” he said. “Perhaps some research into the origins of the curse would help. Thomas said it might have originated in America, of all places, and I wonder—”

He paused, his earlier thought about direwolves catching up to him. Direwolves had lived in America, hadn’t they? And he didn’t know if they had looked like werewolves, but there might still be some connection between that shape and the fact that werewolves looked so different from normal wolves.

He stood, intending to take his insight to Thomas and ask if it might help, but just then Hawthorn howled mightily and jumped to her feet, speeding past him. Harry whirled. Running to meet Hawthorn was a distinctive golden werewolf—Delilah Gloryflower, the war witch and another of Fenrir Greyback’s victims. Her coat was apparently not supposed to mimic her blonde hair that closely, but someone had forgotten to tell that to her magic.

And close behind her was her aunt, Laura Gloryflower. She must have Apparated Delilah with her, Harry thought. Since they’d approached without hostile intent, Woodhouse had let them in.

He went to greet her, wondering what was wrong. Delilah and Hawthorn were nudging each other and making low whimpering sounds in their throats that he didn’t like, but it might only be the relief of packmates reunited.

Laura’s face told him it was not, though.

“Gloriana Griffinsnest found out that Claudia was a werewolf,” she said quietly. Harry nodded; Claudia was the third member of Delilah’s and Hawthorn’s little pack. He wondered if Gloriana had imprisoned Claudia, and what they would have to do to get her back.

“She killed her,” Laura said.

Harry froze. Then he whispered, “What?”

“You heard me,” said Laura, vicious in a way that Harry had never seen her. Her face had a halo of fur around it, and fangs were growing in her mouth. Of course, she was *puellaris*, able to turn into a lioness to defend her children, and Delilah was her niece. “Gloriana killed Claudia. She is dead.” She stopped, as if she wanted to say no more, but then pushed ahead. “And she believes that she will have no trouble from the Ministry—I heard her say this the other day—because many of the pureblood witches and wizards cannot believe they value the lives of werewolves as much as those of ordinary witches and wizards.”

Harry felt as if the world were spinning around him, and he felt weirdly calm.

He met Laura’s eyes. He saw her take a step back at whatever she recognized in his face.

“I suggest that we make the Ministry step up, and prove that they do,” Harry said.

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Chapter Thirty-Eight: On the Eve of Revolution

“But there is nothing we can do,” said Draco in a calm, reasonable voice. “You have to understand that, Harry. Since you disagreed with the latest set of werewolf laws that Scrimgeour sent, then what Mrs. Griffinsnest did is still not illegal.”

“It’s not legal, either,” said Harry, not looking up from the letter he was writing. “The Ministry repealed the werewolf hunting season, remember? So right now, one could argue that it’s not legal or illegal to kill werewolves.”

“That’s strange,” said Draco.

Harry nodded. “I agree. But that doesn’t mean I have to simply say that it’s strange, and sit back to hope the Ministry punishes Gloriana. I want to make it clear to Scrimgeour that this is going to require more action.”

“And if he can’t do that?” Draco asked. “If he finds his hands bound? He’s given you so much already, Harry. The Wizengamot must be nearing the end of its patience with him, and with you.”

Harry whirled around. Draco’s face went pale as he looked at him. Harry guessed that his magic had altered the look of his face or his eyes; it would explain Laura’s reaction, too. Harry held Draco’s gaze and murmured, “I know what I’m going to do if Scrimgeour doesn’t respond. I have countermeasures in place. But it would be useless to upset all the Ministry’s delicate work if
Scrimgeour is going to arrest Gloriana anyway. I’m writing to him.” He nodded at his letter. “And if he doesn’t do anything, then it’s revolution, and not rebellion, he wins.”

“For one werewolf?” Draco asked.

“Yes.” Laura had told him how it had been. She usually spent the full moon nights with Delilah. When Delilah had begun to howl and paw at the ground, then grabbed her arm and tried to pull her out the door, Laura had Apparated first to the Griffinsnest home, thinking that something might have happened to her niece’s packmate. She had found Gloriana drawing silver knives out of Claudia. It was not murder, to hear her describe it, but butchery.

Claudia was someone Harry hadn’t managed to protect, either. He should have insisted that she come to Woodhouse, even though the reason she had remained still in the first place was to prevent the mad lycanthrope-haters in her family from finding out she was a werewolf. And she had been his ally, not a werewolf hunter who had appealed to him for protection when he couldn’t run anymore.

She had depended on him, looked to him—if not as alpha, as defender. She had helped him in the original attack on Woodhouse a year ago. She had come to Hawthorn when Hawthorn so badly needed her comfort after the Midsummer battle. Harry had sent her Wolfsbane.

And now she was dead, and the rage in him was screaming like a trapped and cornered thing, the way he thought Claudia might have screamed when she was cut apart. Or would she have gone to her death with more dignity than that? Even when Fenrir Greyback’s bite had ripped off her right ear and left her with a huge scar across her face, Claudia had been mostly silent, Laura said, and tended not to complain about her loss.

That Gloriana had also helped him with information about accepted werewolves made no never mind. She had turned on her own relative, her own blood. She had done it when she had to know that Claudia would be reluctant to fight back; she had Wolfsbane, so she wasn’t a savage monster, and even if she only wounded Gloriana, she would still infect her with lycanthropy. What Gloriana had done was so far from justice that it only added to the building scream in Harry’s head.

He attached the letter to Hedwig’s leg. The snowy owl was awake, of course, since it was night, and she had fluttered over to his shoulder at once when he entered the bedroom, as if she knew this would be important. She looked at him now, and Harry stared back into her golden eyes. He wondered if Claudia’s eyes had shone like that before she died, if she had tried a desperate gaze to make Gloriana understand.

“Minister Scrimgeour, girl,” he whispered.

Hedwig rose like a white shadow and drifted through the window. Harry took a deep breath and laid his head down on the desk for a moment. Draco’s hand brushed his shoulder once, hesitantly, as though questioning whether he wanted to be touched, and then withdrew.

“And what are you going to do if this doesn’t work?” Draco asked softly.

“That’s my contingency plan,” said Harry, and grabbed another piece of parchment. He could feel his mind crystallizing, his memory pulling up the Daily Prophet articles he’d read over the last few weeks, and even before that, during August and September. A list of names unscrolled past his eyes. The names at the forefront of that list weren’t Light pureblood wizards, but most of their allies were.

Like Gloriana Griffinsnest. And Laura had said that many of the pureblood witches and wizards believed that the Ministry did not value werewolves’ lives as much as theirs. That meant they might have heard Gloriana bragging about her werewolf kills, or expressing attitudes that would mean she intended to murder any werewolf who appeared in her vicinity, family member or not. They could know damning evidence. They could cast her into the Ministry’s jaws.

If they had some reason to do so.

Harry would give them a reason to do so. The Light pureblood wizards had largely fallen from grace after the accusations of child abuse on the part of their leader came out, and the few Light pureblood wizards in Harry’s inner circle were not enough to convince them they had similar standing with his Dark allies. He knew they had lost influence at the Ministry, if only because Lucius and other Dark wizards had regained theirs.

And now his break with Lucius was going to help him, help him most wonderfully.
Fear of werewolves might have begun this killing, but it would not end it—not if Harry had anything to say about it. He would not simply intimidate people into accepting equal rights for werewolves. He had seen how shaky a basis for any kind of lasting conviction terror was, how it could turn around and bite those who had begun it. He would use the much safer pillars of self-interest and ambition to build his house on.

Fling a rope to the Light pureblood wizards, promise to try to use his political influence to help them regain theirs, and they would be more willing to support things like rights for werewolves and the Goblin Board. Those were the broader goals.

And also smaller ones, a personal gift for a personal gift. The personal gift Harry wanted was Gloriana Griffinsnest, and enough evidence to try her fairly.

The personal gift the Light pureblood wizards wanted was some form of control over him.

He could give that to them.

His letter began, Dear Aurora Whitestag.

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Rufus put Harry’s letter down slowly, feeling sick. Hedwig had flown straight to his office to find him. He had stayed at the Ministry that night, falling asleep over some paperwork, but he had no doubt the snowy owl would have flown to his house if she had to.

A murder. A murder that could break or make the Ministry’s stance on this, that could provide a rallying point for their enemies or a rallying point for their own side. And Rufus knew what the Wizengamot, especially the Elders who were chafing under his control, would do once they heard of this. He might control all the magic in the Ministry, but he did not control their minds or their free wills. And they would run like mad to the first person who claimed that what Gloriana Griffinsnest did was not wrong, because that would mean they could start working to say that the new laws were unjustified and werewolves should be restricted once more.

Rufus had thought he had climbed safely on wings of power above the sea of chaos. He should have known that it would reach up and drown him sooner or later.

He knew there was no way he could agree to Harry’s request. The laws bound him. Werewolf hunting was illegal now, but provisions to try anyone who killed a werewolf as they would for any other murder were not yet legal. And Mrs. Griffinsnest would surely argue that, as well as arguing that she had no idea the dead werewolf might not attack her; she had been living in her house for months, after all, disguised as a human, and could have had some nefarious plan. If she wanted to be honest, why not admit her lycanthropy?

What would Harry’s response to that be? In his letter, he only spoke of a contingency plan. Rufus didn’t know what it was. All-out war? Leaning on his Dark allies until the Ministry crumbled and did what he wanted? Refusing reconciliation until a trial date was set?

Rufus simply didn’t know.

“Sir?”

Rufus looked up. Percy had stayed with him, and been awakened by Hedwig’s fluttering arrival. Now, though, he stood by the hearth, staring into it.

“Someone’s trying to establish a Floo connection, sir,” he said. “Should I let them through?”

Rufus sat up. He didn’t think it could be Harry, because Harry wouldn’t have sent a letter if he intended to firecall, but he would bet Galleons to Knuts that it was related. “Do so,” he said, with a nod, and Percy tapped the hearth with his wand and then stepped back out of the way. Rufus hoped vaguely that he looked presentable. Falling asleep over one’s desk was a marvelous way to get ink smeared on one’s cheek, but not much else.

The face that appeared in the flames was one of the last he expected. “Mrs. Whitestag,” he said, and tried to keep his voice simply cold, without any of the massive irritation that arose the moment he saw her. This was the last time of night that he wanted to talk about the bloody monitoring board, which she had tried to insert into their conversation after his speech the other day. “Can I do something for you?”
“Minister,” said Whitestag simply, and smiled at him. She held up a piece of parchment. Rufus squinted, but couldn’t make out what was written on it through the green-tinged flames. “I came to say that we have heard of your recent difficulties, and you need not worry. We can give you all the evidence that you need to convict Gloriana Griffinsnest of wrongful, premeditated murder.”

Rufus stopped breathing, literally. Percy had to pound him on the back. He let out a great whoop of air, wished Whitestag hadn’t been watching, and leaned forward to stare. “And why would you be willing to do that, ma’am?” His mind was racing. He knew Whitestag was undeclared, without allegiance to either Light or Dark, though she had been working with the Light purebloods, the ones with the most reason to want Harry bound and controlled. And some Light purebloods had supported the anti-werewolf laws as well, because most of the officials in the Ministry supporting them were of the Light, and because they seemed to believe they had to achieve power any way they could against the Dark and its creatures. He knew of no reason that they would agree to turn their backs on Mrs. Griffinsnest, a woman who had only done what most of them talked about and wished they had the courage to do.

“But,” said Whitestag, with another shake of the parchment she held, “Harry vates has seen sense. He has acknowledged that, for all that he named his organization the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, he has had very little to do with the Light of late. He invites more Light wizards to come to his side. He says that he understands how it would look like he was wild and uncontrolled, or at best in the control of the Dark, since so many of the Dozen Who Died were children of Light pureblood families. He says that he has broken with Lucius Malfoy.” She paused and looked at him inquiringly.

Rufus half-closed his eyes, thinking of Lucius’s pale face in Courtroom Ten. It would pale further when he heard of this, Rufus was certain. Lucius had disowned his son and refused to support Harry’s rebellion, unless lifting Rufus to dictator of the Ministry could be counted as supporting it, but Rufus had been sure he meant to regain his place at Harry’s side eventually. If Harry was publicly announcing a break with him, Rufus did not see how that could happen.

“That is true,” he had to say. “Lucius Malfoy disowned his son Draco, Harry’s courting partner in a joining ritual.” He could not say much more than that, because the Unbreakable Vow he’d sworn in Courtroom Ten would not let him betray Lucius, but Whitestag didn’t seem to need more than that. She only paused and looked at him invitingly.

“And Harry has accepted the monitoring board,” she went on, her voice swelling with triumph.

“He cannot,” said Rufus, before he thought. “He is vates. How could he accept a set of such close restrictions on his movements?”

“Oh, we don’t mean to be restrictions,” said Whitestag instantly. “That was my intention when I began to circulate the idea of the board, Minister, and I admit, and had not studied the situation more closely. But I have read what a vates is, Minister, and I will say now that what I originally intended would be impossible. Harry must be free to consult his own conscience and do what it says. We simply mean to be a set of voices for the Light, as his closest allies are already a set of voices for the Dark. He carries the shadows with him. We will be the sun.” She smiled. “We mean to swear the oaths for the Alliance of Sun and Shadow. There are a few who won’t agree, I know, but most who supported the monitoring board will.”

Because they listen to you, Rufus thought. Whitestag was their leader, the one who had hammered them into a united force and could get them to do what she said with a flick of her eyebrow or a lift of her finger. It rather reminded Rufus of a werewolf pack. Whitestag led not because she was the most magically powerful, as Dumbledore had led the Order of the Phoenix, but because she was the cleverest and had a charisma none of the others could match. And she was the reasonable face, where for so long Philip Willoughby had been the face of the grieving parent. Her interviews in the Daily Prophet had always come across as rational, the words of a woman able to adapt to changes and accept new information as she found it.

Rufus had simply not realized that was true, that Whitestag would happily compromise and accept some lesser version of what she had wanted in the beginning for the sake of having something at all.

She’s not a fanatic, she’s a politician, and I was wrong to underestimate her.

“So you believe that Harry has agreed to this of his own free will?” he questioned heavily.

Whitestag laughed. “I would like to see who could impersonate the vates and get away with it, or make an offer in his name that was not sincere! Yes, Minister, I do. He wants Gloriana Griffinsnest brought to justice. Who would not? She murdered an ally of his.”

“But with the state of the laws, that may not be possible,” Rufus warned her.
Whitestag smiled. “Minister, think for a moment about the allegiance of those who will most heartily protest a fair trial—well, those who would have, this morning.”

Rufus thought. Erasmus, Juniper, Gregorian, Kildain—

All of the Light.

Whitestag closed her left eye in a slow wink as she saw him catch on. “This isn’t just a bargain to support werewolves or give us our monitoring board, Minister,” she said quietly. “This is a bargain to bring the Light back to power, to equal standing with the Dark. It unites the major lines of force in the Ministry, the reasonable Light purebloods, the reasonable Dark purebloods, and Harry vates. The fanatics will be left out in the cold. Juniper, for instance, might not vote for this, because he hates werewolves. But that doesn’t matter. The central elements are coming together, and we can save justice, equal rights for werewolves, and the reputation of the Light, so badly scratched and scarred and stained by the actions of Albus Dumbledore. We can save your term in office, Minister.”

“You are undeclared,” said Rufus. “I fail to see why this makes you so happy, Mrs. Whitestag.”

“I can rejoice for my allies, can I not?” Whitestag’s large dark eyes were guileless as they met his. “And I have what I want,” she ended, in a softer tone. “So, Minister. Summon the Wizengamot. Tell them of this outrage. Tell them of the compromise we are establishing. Encourage them to pass the new laws now. Harry has said that he will agree to the last set of terms that you sent him, because he trusts the Ministry to do the right thing and punish a murder committed after werewolf killing was made illegal.”

“It was not—” said Rufus, and stopped.

“Exactly,” said Whitestag. “The Wizengamot was meeting in the middle of the night. This is urgent, sir, so urgent. Who can say at what hour the laws passed, before or after the murder was committed? In truth, sir, the Wizengamot had already agreed to offer this set of terms to Harry; the Daily Prophet will record that, given that you sent a copy of the documents to them. What rendered that offer useless was Harry’s refusal. And he has changed his mind now.”

Rufus breathed through his teeth. He could refuse, after all. He could say this was immoral, trying Gloriana Griffinsnest for something that had not been illegal when she did it. He could refuse to summon the Wizengamot.

But murdering a werewolf was not legal, either, and had not been since the edict about the hunting season was repealed more than two weeks ago. And neither was murder moral. And hadn’t he plunged into dark waters already, with the Ritual of Cincinnatus and the lies that protected it? If he needed a clear conscience, he should have persuaded sixteen Wizengamot members to vote for him, not taken the first sixteen people who showed up and guarded what they did with lies and secrets and Obliviates.

How could he say that this, with one more lie, was worse?

Rufus bowed his head. “You are certain,” he asked, one more time, “that Harry made this decision of his own free will?”

“Let me read you the last paragraph of his letter.” Whitestag held the parchment up. “I know that there are some who will question my sincerity on this point, or argue that I am acting out of vengeance and misguided rage. To them I say: I am vates. I knew before I began to walk this path that there are thorns among the roses, and that stepping on the free wills of others would cost me. I have stepped on the free wills of others before this, because I know it was not the Minister’s will that I break into Tullianum, nor all the werewolves’ will to be forced into coming to Woodhouse as the best alternative to dying. A rebel cannot help but defy the common will. I am trying to correct that now. I will not give up what I have fought so long and so hard for, but I can try to reach out and respect the free wills of people I considered enemies, if they agree not to be enemies any longer, and I can take on oaths. If I swear an oath, I do so by my own free will. If I wear a collar, I choose to put that collar on my neck myself.”

Rufus could think of times when Harry had done that, including his oath to defend the werewolves and his attempt to work with Rufus on the matter of the Unspeakables, instead of breaking into open rebellion at the first sign of trouble. He had put off revolution as long as he could. And now he was offering to pursue that revolution through legal means as much as possible.

Rufus might question Harry’s motives for this, but it was true that it was absolutely Harry’s choice to agree to the monitoring board, if that was what he really wanted.

You can have a mildly clean conscience—and even then, you would be letting a murderer escape and Harry do Merlin knows what next, which might result in more deaths—or you can accept one more lie and make it truth.
“I am going to summon the Wizengamot,” he said.

Whitestag smiled at him, and gave a little bow. “This has been a night for seeing sense,” she said. “Until we meet again, Minister.”

The flames flared and died. Rufus rose and walked towards the door of his office, hearing Percy’s light footsteps at his back.

“Sir?”

Rufus turned around and looked at Percy, almost hoping for some condemnation. Percy would have the right. He had been part of the Ritual of Cincinnatus, and if he thought things had gone too far and it was costing too much to do what they wanted to do, then Rufus needed to hear it.

But Percy’s face shone with admiration instead. “Sir,” he said, and then stopped, and then said, “Sir. You’re upholding the spirit of the law, not the letter. I find that much better than the other way around.”

Rufus gave a jerky little nod, then opened his office door. The dozing Aurors on either side of the door, Rags and Hope, stood up straight and turned to look at him.

“We’re going to Courtroom Ten,” said Rufus, and began walking fast enough that they hurried to keep up with him. He felt Percy’s stare on his back, and knew it did not judge. He would have to be the judge of himself.

There is no right answer, is there? I would feel just as many qualms if I turned Whitestag down and insisted on not trying Griffinsnest.

I suppose this is something Harry and I have in common: trying as best we can to do what’s right, with the wrong always mixed in with it. I suppose Harry’s known that since he killed those children. The ability to say “this is absolutely right” belongs to other people.

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Harry felt as if he had a bad case of sanity. The anger that had stalked whirling around his skull at first had left him as soon as he wrote the letter to Aurora Whitestag, or perhaps simply dived under the surface of his mind and started brooding on its time to reemerge. He had been able to see what would happen next as if the bird were showing him images.

And, sure enough, those things had happened. Or, at least, two of them, the ones concerning Draco and Snape, had.

Draco had read the letter to Whitestag over his shoulder. There had been no way that Harry could hide what he was doing from Draco, and he rather preferred not to try. Draco had kept quiet while Harry sent the letter off with a barn owl, but then he’d loosened his tongue.

“And you’re going to accept this monitoring board, Harry? Are you mad?”

“No,” said Harry. He leaned against the wall of their bedroom and watched Draco. He’d awakened him when he came in and started writing the letter, but he didn’t think that mattered. Neither of them could have gone to sleep at this point. Draco’s eyes were wide with anger and his face was pale, and Harry could feel his anger turning around and around in the depths of his mind. It really had just dived, and it had claws and fangs, and it wanted to come out. Harry shut the trapdoor on it and watched Draco.

“It’s part of what must be done. If the Light purebloods wanted something else of me, then I would give them something else. This is what they want. I’m lucky, in a way, that they want this so badly that they’re willing to fall in behind Aurora Whitestag.”

“She doesn’t lead anyone that important,” said Draco dismissively. “Just that group of parents who want justice for their ‘murdered’ children—“

“They were murdered,” Harry said, and heard the growl in his voice, and shut the trapdoor again. Pace, pace, pace, his anger went. “Whether you think Voldemort did it or I did, they were murdered.”

“Mercy-killed,” Draco said.

Harry shrugged. “Have you been reading the papers, Draco? Maybe it isn’t as noticeable, under the discussion of the new werewolf laws, but there’s always a reference somewhere, if only in a paragraph, to Aurora Whitestag and what she wants. I think she’s like your mum, in some ways—she’s got the political connections and the persuasive powers, even if she isn’t officially
Declared for Light herself. A lot of the Light purebloods will listen to her. Offer them a more balanced political Quidditch pitch along with the monitoring board, and they’ll take this.” I think. I hope. Harry did not like to imagine what his vates commitment and his oath to defend the werewolves might drive him to do if the Light purebloods did not accept this.

“So she might lead them,” said Draco. “But it’s still sacrificing part of your freedom to them.”

“Part of it,” said Harry. “They have to know that I’m not going to do exactly what they want; part of the bargain is their supporting werewolf rights, after all, so I’m not trading them everything for Gloriana Griffinsnest. I’m building a coalition, Draco. That means compromises on our side.”

“So far,” said Draco coldly, “I can’t see that anyone other than you compromises.”

“The werewolves have had to compromise enough,” said Harry. “And the goblins, and the centaurs. And I’m not going to let the Dark wizards who’ve been such faithful allies to me suffer, unless they make political moves totally unrelated to the Alliance and the Light wizards make opposite ones. There’s not much I can do about that, because that would be stepping on someone else’s free will, too.”

“So sacrifices are all right, as long as they come from you?” Draco’s voice was acid now.

“I choose to make them.” Harry looked steadily at him. “Did you think we could get through this without sacrifices? Even you made one. You made one of the greatest ones here, Draco, private and personal though it was. You gave up your father and his approval for me. Did you think that was the last?”

“You’ve given up too much already!” Draco’s voice rose. “I chose to give up that wanker’s approval, Harry, but you—“

“Are choosing this.”

Draco fell silent, but he was still visibly seething. Harry held his eyes in a gentle gaze and shrugged.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “This is the price they wanted. This is the price I chose to pay. Personally, I doubt they’ll push that much, because they have to have known there are few other circumstances in which I would agree to the monitoring board at all. We’ll meet in the middle and work out something that appeals to both sides.”

“Both sides of what?”

Harry looked up. Snape had come through the door, his narrow gaze going from Harry to Draco. Someone must have told him about Claudia’s murder, Harry thought. He wondered idly if Snape had emerged from his room when he heard the collective howls of the werewolves or Laura’s swearing, or if Laura had fetched him. Harry could see her doing that. She would think that he needed a parent right now.

“Harry sent a letter to Whitestag, sir,” said Draco, before Harry could say anything. “And other Light wizards. Offering them a coalition if they would help him bring down Gloriana Griffinsnest and support werewolf rights. And he accepted that monitoring board they wanted him to have.”

Snape turned and glared incredulously at Harry. Harry looked straight back. He was not as tall as Snape and never would be, but right now he didn’t have to be. The rage paced around its cell in his mind and snarled and snarled and snarled, and Harry knew he had to be strong enough to make decisions without its influence. He was so tempted to go to Gloriana Griffinsnest himself and rip her life away from her, and he knew he had to resist that temptation. That way lay stepping off his vates path.

“And you promised that you would try to act as a son to me,” Snape whispered.

Harry staggered. It honestly hadn’t occurred to him that Snape would take it that way. He wondered if Draco had thought about it, and if that was why he had included the mention of the monitoring board.

Stop it, he told himself then. Some paranoia is fine, but you can’t live if you distrust the people close to you that much.

“I did promise that, sir,” he said. “And I can assure you that I would never allow the monitoring board to have guardianship over me, nor to take me away from you. I would break all the agreements before that would happen. You’re too important to me.”

“I do not understand why you agreed to this in the first place,” said Snape. His voice was a little louder now. Good, Harry thought. He found the whisper hard to cope with. It reminded him of what his own father might have sounded like, if James was
ever that disappointed in something Harry had done, as opposed to something Harry had done to hurt him or Lily. “You must
know that they will press, finding places where they can take more from you, using your own psychology of sacrifice against
you.”

“I don’t think they will, sir,” said Harry. “And if they try, then I’ll push back, because I know it would be hurting you.”

“Not because it would be hurting you.”

Harry gave a short laugh. “You can’t have it both ways, sir. Who does this hurt more, me or you? Are you trying to make me feel guilty for being selfish, or are you saying that I should be more selfish?”

“I am saying that you should think about yourself before the wants of Light pureblood wizards,” said Snape, “allies or not.”

“A purely selfish life has been impossible for me since my mother trained me,” said Harry flatly, and shrugged. “If that training makes it easier for me to accept the inevitable political compromises, this is one time I’ll take that.”

Snape stood looking into his eyes. Harry looked back, and when Snape’s Legilimency reached out to him, with a tentativeness that showed he was free to reject it and hide behind his Occlumency shields, Harry let it in, and showed Snape the caged fury, the process he’d gone through while thinking of what would probably happen with the Ministry and what he thought was likely to happen with the Light pureblood wizards, what he would allow the monitoring board to do and what he would not allow it to do.

“It’s my choice if I bind myself,” he said quietly, shutting his shields at last. Letting Snape see that much was his decision. Letting him see more was not. “And no one can say that is wrong.”

Snape turned and simply left, shutting the door behind him. Harry doubted it was the last discussion they would have on the subject. Harry turned to Draco, who was staring at him with shadows behind his eyes.

“I did choose this,” Harry insisted. “I did.”

“It’s still a sacrifice,” Draco whispered.

Harry shook his head. “By that logic, so is everything.”

He turned restlessly away. Then he paused as he saw a barn owl skimming towards the window. He went over and held out his hand, and the owl alighted on his arm. It carried an envelope with the seal of a leaping stag on it, and when Harry broke it open and read the letter inside, he could feel a smile widening across his face.

“What is it?” Draco demanded, crowding towards him.

Harry held up the letter. “She agreed,” he said simply. “So did her allies. So did Scrimgeour.”

He could feel something like peace welling across his soul, soothing the caged fury in his mind at last. No, I won’t have everything I want, but I’ll have the justice and the freedom that my allies need and deserve. That is more than enough.

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Rufus surveyed the gathered members of the Wizengamot. Most of them were still yawning and bleary-eyed, but he met a few sharp gazes: Griselda Marchbanks, of course. Most of the people they had Obliviated and managed to persuade further to their side after that. Elder Juniper, damn him, frowning and folding his arms. Amelia Bones, but she was sharp-eyed the way a rabbit had to be, Rufus thought, watching out for its next predator closing the distance.

He began the way he had thought he would, telling them flatly about the murder of Claudia Griffinsnest, and then interweaving the promise of more political power for the Light with the promise of the rebellion ending, and the situation that made them look a laughingstock in the eyes of other wizarding governments finally resolved. Juniper’s face darkened into a scowl as he listened, but others sat up and leaned forward. Even Amelia finally wore an expression that was not terror for the first time since the Wizengamot had gathered after the Ritual of Cincinnatus.

“As part of the bargain, Harry vates has agreed to accept a monitoring board,” Rufus said. “I know that some of its members will be parents of the Dozen Who Died, but not all. There must be some Wizengamot Elders as well.” He glanced at Griselda.

“Madam Marchbanks, Mrs. Whitestag at one time told me that you had agreed to participate in this project.”
“I did.” Griselda’s voice was strong and confident, but Rufus could see the doubt in her eyes. She might have agreed to sit on the board when she thought it was the best solution to the debacle between the goblins’ vates and the rest of the wizarding world, but now that her friends were getting what they wanted, Rufus wondered if she regretted that decision.

“It will ease my conscience to know that you are part of this,” said Rufus. “I would not have endorsed it if Harry vates himself had not chosen it.” And even now I do not think it the best solution, he could have said, but he kept that part to himself. He scanned the rows of seats in the gallery. Even single member of the Wizengamot was there. That was good. No one could complain later they’d been left out of this, or didn’t know what it was about. “It is certainly true that, commitment to free will or not, Harry vates is still very young, and he may have made different decisions if he had had adult guidance and counsel from both Light and Dark wizards, not only Dark. He has the Gloryflowers on his side, and the Opallines, and the Starrise heir, but they are the only Light families who have truly agreed to the Alliance of Sun and Shadow. Harry is also sadly lacking in Muggleborn and halfblood support, though he is a halfblood himself and his Alliance claims to represent them both. But we have all kinds of wizards here, and perhaps we can make the decision now and insure that Harry receives the guidance he needs and his group becomes more representative. What do the rest of the Elders say? Should we lay our power behind this?” He paused, and when no one immediately said anything, added, “We shall put it to a vote. Elder Juniper.”

Juniper was quiet, thinking. Rufus could almost see him weighing the advantages of Light being able to fight Dark with the fact that it would involve voting for werewolf rights.

But Juniper had already dissented, simply refusing to vote, on the new laws the Wizengamot had passed. And perhaps he realized, or thought, that it wouldn’t really matter what he said; Gloriana Griffinsnest was still likely to be tried.

“I agree,” he said.

Rufus fought the temptation to close his eyes, and moved on from there. A few Elders abstained. Most accepted eagerly, almost all of them Light-devoted or Light-Declared. A few Elders voted against it, surprising Rufus; he had thought they would be content, as they had been supporters of the werewolf laws. Griselda, of course, supported it.

When that finished, with strong support for accepting Harry’s compromise, Rufus nodded sharply. “Thank you, sirs, madams. I will ask that if you wish to be considered for membership in the monitoring board, you contact Harry vates, Aurora Whitestag, or our own Madam Marchbanks; I had no hand in coming up with the idea, or urging Harry to accept it.” It was as much as he felt able to distance himself from this. “I will be available after this meeting in my office, however, should anyone wish to speak with me.”

He did have to talk with a few people on his way out, among them Elder Juniper. The other wizard was smiling in an odd way as he faced Rufus and made a little bow with his hands clasped behind his back.

“Well-danced,” he said.

“I am not sure I understand you, sir,” said Rufus stiffly. Juniper was only a few years older than he was, but with a lift of an eyebrow, he could make Rufus feel like a seventh-year Slytherin caught snogging his girlfriend in the rose garden. Albus Dumbledore had once had the same effect on him.

“You took steps that must be painful for you, and never missed a one.” Juniper’s gaze strayed to his bad leg. “I would never have imagined that someone with such a wound could cope so well.”

He bowed again, and wandered away. Rufus sighed, though under his breath, and wondered if his discomfort was going to be so visible to everyone.

He hoped not. He had received most of what he wanted, and that would have to be enough. If he thought Harry was making too many sacrifices, he would have to be patient, and watch, and interfere where he felt able to do so.

One of the Light Elders was tugging on his arm now, wanting to know something about the makeup of the monitoring board. Rufus turned to tell her to go talk to Griselda, and wondered what the morning would bring.

Intermission: Back Into the Storm of Ravens

Snape stepped into the throne room a half hour after Voldemort had called his other Death Eaters. All the muted conversation among them immediately stopped. Masked faces turned towards him, and then no one moved. Snape wondered, with an
amusement that was buried deep under the shields he had piled on his mind—shields woven of both Occlumency and the coldness that his mother had taught him as part of survival—whether they had expected him to run, as other Death Eaters did when they decided they did not belong to their Lord anymore.

But Snape would not run. How could he? No matter where he went, he bore a brand on his arm that would identify him at once. So he was made to kneel at the feet of the dark throne, by his own choice. What had changed were the amount of control he had over his mind, and the amount of foresight that he was using to predict his future, and the consequences of failure.

Those supposedly minor changes would give him more freedom than any of the kneeling fools now contemplated. Snape supposed he would feel a distant pity for them, too, if emotions were now part of his regular mental carriage.

“Severus.”

The Dark Lord was speaking to him. Well-trained reflex made Snape drop to one knee and bow his head. “My Lord,” he murmured.

“You know that you will be punished.” Voldemort’s voice was almost friendly. That didn’t fool Snape. He had heard this tone before, and the Dark Lord used it only when he was about to go into one of his deepest rages. “You did not come when I summoned you. You know that no excuses are sufficient for this.”

“Yes, my lord,” said Snape, and kept his head bowed. Inside, far behind his shields, he was laughing. Inside, he was free. His mind had become a haven full of ice scorpions, and all his weaknesses were frozen. Voldemort would never know how little it had cost him. Snape did not plan on telling him.

“Lucius. Bellatrix. Regulus.” Voldemort’s voice as he spoke the names was sharp, resonant, a voice Snape had not heard before. “You will stay. Others of my children, depart.”

The other Death Eaters did not have to be told twice. They all but ran from the room. Snape remained kneeling where he was, his eyes on the floor, and yet he knew what would be happening behind him, because he knew all of the three Voldemort had invited to remain so well.

Lucius would be taking off his mask, so as to display his perfectly composed face to his master; what mattered most to him was not the reality but the show. Bellatrix would be leaning forward, her black eyes liquid and intent as a hunting panther’s. She loved the torture of disgraced Death Eaters, and often complained that her Lord did not punish enough of them.

Regulus would be struggling against letting his face pale or his eyes fall, even as he pulled off his mask. Voldemort had chosen him because Snape and Regulus were close, and he knew that. So this was a test of Regulus’s loyalty as well as Snape’s own. If he made a single gesture in an attempt to restrain the Dark Lord, then he would be placed under torture as well.

Snape hoped that Regulus would hold firm, but he couldn’t do much about it if Regulus chose not to. What he could do was kneel with his eyes on the floor, and accept the torture that came with his supposed betrayal, and decide to survive it.

He knew that most of the disgraced Death Eaters died. Everyone knew that. But the fact was only one of many icy stones in his mind, such as the part that counted how soon he might reasonably slip away to Dumbledore with a report on the Dark Lord’s activities. It was not any more important than they were.

Voldemort spelled the door shut with wandless magic. Snape was unimpressed, in the haven of his deepest self. He could have done the same thing if he wished to, and was truly angry.

“Let us see what a little pain may teach you about loyalty, Severus,” Voldemort whispered, a sound hardly louder than Nagini’s scales on stone, pointing that long yew wand at him. “Obscurus.”

And his eyesight was gone. Snape gave a little flinch at that, because he knew it was expected. There was another way to see his mind, he thought, beyond shielded and the home of ice scorpions. It was a stage. He had all his emotions and reflexes on pulleys, like cardboard scenery that he could lift up or lower down as it was needed. Lucius would be jealous, did he only know how easy it was.

“Incarcerous.”

And his limbs were splayed out and held by ropes. Snape fell in an awkward position, and heard his wand tumble from his robe pocket. He also heard Regulus’s indrawn breath. He felt a touch of exasperation. Can he keep nothing to himself? I can play my
part perfectly, and he will still draw the Dark Lord down on him through his own clumsiness.

“Crucio.”

Voldemort usually began with milder pain curses and worked his way up. But then, disgraced Death Eaters usually came in cringing and gabbling excuses, or simply ran and had to be hunted down. Snape had strode in half an hour late as if he had every right to be there.

He had done it to test the Dark Lord, and he had done it to test himself. If he could not stand even one *Crucio* from the Dark Lord’s wand, then he could not stand his spying, which ran the constant risk of it. Having encountered the reality, he would comprehend the risk better. And he was eager to see what his own response would be to the torture. He regarded it as he would have a Potions experiment, to see what would happen when extreme pain was added to the base of one Severus Snape.

He screamed. Of course he screamed. The pain running up and down his sides was like ten thousand hot forks jabbing him, like acid that started in his chest and ate outwards, and his limbs were flopping like the limbs of an art burnt to death by aiming sunlight through glass. It hurt. The *Crucio* was a spell that Voldemort had perfected during his Dark Arts studies in other countries; he added a twist to it that enabled him to keep it up indefinitely, while most Dark wizards soon became exhausted by the effort to pour magical strength into the spell. Well, and they became distracted and disheartened by the screams, Snape thought. Most wizards still had a reaction to the sight of a fellow human being in such pain.

The Dark Lord did not have that problem.

He screamed, and he felt the first stab of true agony as some internal organ ruptured under the strain. He gasped as a rib broke and pierced his lung. He knew his lungs were filling were blood, and he rode the edge of death.

It filled him with exultation, cold as the breath of a winter night. If he died, he did it on his own terms. He was not the like the cowards who ran away or came back crying and hoping to be forgiven. Fear did not rule him. His mind was his own, and his mind was free.

He was unsure how long it lasted. He only knew that it was done, sudden as falling off a mountainside, and he heard the measured tread of his Lord’s steps coming towards him. The hem of the robe brushed over his face. Snape pursed his lips and managed a competent kiss to it.

Voldemort paused. Then Snape knew he was bending down, his face coming so close to Snape’s that he smelled the scent of stone and old, dead flesh.

“You kissed my robe, Severuss.” Voldemort’s voice grew into a hiss when he was surprised, which did not happen often.

“You are my master,” Snape whispered. It was difficult to talk. He heard the wheezy breath that indicated blood was bubbling in his lungs and his air was running out. Well, blood was bubbling in his lungs and his air was running out. His voice, if not his words, could reflect reality. “I would not—cry for mercy. You are my master.”

Voldemort was silent for long moments. “And if I tortured you again? If I brought you to the brink of death and then asked you to acknowledge me, Severus?”

“I would do so,” Snape said. He forced himself not to remember that he could be on the brink of death already, for all he knew. “I took your Mark of my own free will. I am yours.”

He heard the swish of robes as Voldemort moved away, and the *Finite Incantatem* that ended the binding on his limbs and restored his eyesight. He lay staring at the ceiling, while Voldemort instructed Lucius and Bellatrix to feed him healing potions and insure that he survived.

They picked him up and moved him, none too gently. Snape coughed blood, and cried aloud when one of his ruptured organs brushed another one. Bellatrix’s distrustful eyes glared down at him, so dark that he could see them even past the black spots dancing in front of his vision.

“You are lucky,” she whispered, with the sound of jealousy clear in her voice. “You do not deserve so much of the Lord’s good will.”

Snape closed his eyes. He knew that he might still die from the *Crucio*, which he estimated must have endured for at least fifteen minutes. He knew Regulus’s absence might mean that Voldemort was keeping him behind to torture him. He knew that he was
probably far from sane at the moment, at least in some eyes.

He did not care.

He was free.

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Chapter Thirty-Nine: The Day of the Phoenix

Harry watched patiently as the sun arose. He had not slept, and it felt as if grainy weariness were clawing at his eyes. But he could wait to rest until he performed certain important tasks. And he wanted one of those tasks to be symbolic.

So he waited as the sun arose. And beside him and behind him were Snape, Draco, Laura, Delilah, and Narcissa. Hawthorn had stalked away from him when she heard of Harry’s proposed bargain, and most others were still asleep. Delilah had only changed back to human a few moments ago, when the moon sank beneath the surface of the earth and the balance of power shifted from night to day, but she was here nonetheless. Harry was glad. He hoped that her support would help others angry over his terms for settling the rebellion, in particular the other werewolves.

Snape’s hands were tight on his shoulders. Harry knew he hadn’t given up his concerns about the monitoring board, though he might have held whatever fit he intended to hold in private. There were shoals ahead for them, too, tricky places to be negotiated.

Harry knew all of it. It didn’t bother him. Now, watching the first rays of gold crawl up the sky, he was truly calm. His pacing rage had curled up and gone to sleep, like a werewolf with Wolfsbane locked into a room for the night. He was doing the only thing he could, and seeking the only path forward.

But, of course, it would help if he could make it look like the right thing as well.

So he waited as the sun arose, and when he could finally see the edge of it over the curve of Woodhouse’s hills and pine forest, he began to sing.

This song was different from all the others. Harry didn’t want to cause just one emotion with it, either sorrow or joy. He lifted his voice as a tribute to the fallen in the past, and he did it so that he might link those fallen to the future and salute them by giving a clearer image of what their deaths had won. He sang what was gone, and he sang what would come. He could imagine, if he closed his eyes and thought about it, Fawkes rising in a circle above him, every turn to the left marking an acknowledgment of death and mistakes made and griefs unchanged, and every turn to the right marking an acknowledgment of life and mistakes that could be prevented and things that could yet alter.

Harry had given up the chance to punish other killers of werewolves when he agreed to this bargain; he knew that. If he was going to emphasize that Gloriana’s crime was a crime because it had occurred after the new laws were passed, then he would have to say that the other crimes were not crimes because they had happened when the hunting season was legal. He had taken what he thought he might be able to have—justice for the one murder that had happened close enough to the rebellion’s end to merit a trial in the eyes of the public. That was what had made Hawthorn stalk away from him. She did not like to be told that she could not seek vengeance against the Aurors who had hurt her because to do so would unleash a string of attacks, illegal duels, and blood feuds.

Harry hoped she would forgive him. He hoped they would all forgive him. He poured all that into his song, and waited until it filled Woodhouse like an overflowing bowl of music. Then he let his magic go, too, and poured that into his voice.

Phoenixes had been associated with the sun for as long as they existed. Some legends said they had borne their ashes to the sun itself when they came back from the dead. That was not true, and Harry knew it, but some of the other legends about phoenixes had proven to be true of him, who only had the voice and the fire and not the body. So he imagined his voice growing louder and louder, and mingling with the sun’s rays as they spread all over Britain.

He sang, and he wanted everyone magical to hear him doing so.

His vision flattened as he sang, and then it rose and spread. He might have been on dragonback, looking down on the British Isles from a grand height. They appeared as painted images below him, with gaping holes full of light and movement that let glimpses of moving figures through. He saw Augureys in Ireland pause and lift their heads, beaks gaping, at the sound of the song. He saw a unicorn begin a pass through a Muggle town, breaking the boundaries between magic and mundane and spilling the melody into their lives. Harry had never known the look of almost painful wonder that the Muggle men and women wore for the moment he
saw them. He decided that must be what it was like to live in a world without magic and then suddenly glimpse it.

He saw people flooding in to work at the Ministry stop moving, and close their eyes. He saw McGonagall open the front doors of Hogwarts, and come out into the aftermath of a thunderstorm, tilting her head to the sky. Connor was trying to make gestures to tell everyone else that this was his brother, since he didn’t want to actually speak and interrupt the song, and Luna was smiling.

Pharos Starrise clasped his hands behind his back, leaned against the wall of his ancestral home, and fought the longing to relax and weep. Harry had been instrumental in the death of his uncle, and still sheltered his mother’s murderer, and he would not forget that.

A man grooming a Granian in the west of Scotland paused and squinted at the sun. He had heard that the boy vates had a phoenix’s voice, too, but that didn’t matter to his cause. He had no idea why the chords and warbles he was hearing now should matter, but he knew that they did, somehow.

Lucius Malfoy was very pale, and his face only grew paler as he listened.

Harry’s voice hovered and lingered over the Isle of Man, and Calibrid Opalline braced her hands on the table in front of her and bowed her head, relaxing from the burden of caring for her family for one moment. Paton stroked the head of his youngest grandchild and listened with distant eyes. A few of the burned children Harry had woken from their fear-induced trances after Acies had come laughed and stretched out their hands in recognition of the voice that had freed them.

The Hebridean Black dragons in the sanctuary on their islands came awake all at once, bellowing and shouting, even the ones in the thick of the sleep that followed when they’d eaten well. Their handlers, of the MacFusty clan, ran about trying to calm them.

Dark head after dark head turned in the direction of the phoenix song, and fire flared and danced across the stone and across the sea.

Harry reached after a pitch of determination and stubbornness that carried him, and all those listening to him, to a pinnacle of change, where they could shine in the sun. He held them there, lingering, on a single, stretched note.

And then he let his voice dissipate, fading into the sunlight and the air and the slowly thinning colors of dawn, and freed them.

Opening his eyes, he nodded to the people gathered around him. “Let’s make the plans that we need to make,” he said quietly. “The first thing I need to do is contact Scrimgeour about the time we’ll be arriving.”

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Hawthorn had changed back while she was in the middle of clawing her bedding apart. She collapsed on the floor, her hand clenched on the sheet, and breathed, hearing the thud of her heart and the rasp of her lungs as if they belonged to someone else.

Her packmate was dead. The hole she had felt when Fergus died was there again, but deeper and more pervasive this time, as if one of her limbs had vanished when Claudia did. Hawthorn had known her longer. She had taken comfort with Claudia when Pansy died. Several mornings she had awakened to Claudia wrapped around her, her breathing soft and steady in her ears. And if she rarely spoke words of sympathy, she had her eyes to talk for her. Hawthorn sometimes found herself wishing she had known Claudia before the attack, but it would have been unlikely they would ever meet; Claudia was the daughter of a Light family, and engaged in doing private research on the nature of Light and Dark, and inventing or modifying new spells. However she came to know her, Hawthorn was grateful.

And now she was gone, and the only thing Harry could think of or talk of was a trial to make sure that Gloriana, her murderer, went behind bars in Tullianum.

It was not enough. She could suffer the same treatment that Hawthorn had when she was captive in Tullianum, and it would never be enough. How could it be enough when that woman had made part of Hawthorn’s self vanish?

Even Delilah did not quite understand, perhaps because her powerful family had protected her and she had not gone to Tullianum with Hawthorn. Apparently, Aurors had approached the Gloryflower property, but Laura had changed in front of them and roared at them, and they had rapidly found excuses to be elsewhere. She did not understand that Hawthorn had looked on their little pack as one of the few worthwhile things to come out of the last few years, and now that Claudia was gone, the loss diminished everything that had come before. She felt the same loss, but she looked at it through a different lens.

Hawthorn knew she could mourn Claudia’s death by more useless gestures—ripping the bedsheets apart as she had done while still a wolf grieving for the death of her packmate, or trying to get vengeance on Gloriana Griffinsnest, when that would only see
her exiled from the Alliance and perhaps dead. Or she could curl up and lower her head like a good little dog and tell Harry that she understood, that why should she ask for vengeance when she could have justice?

Or she could do what it was actually in her to do.

Take this rage. Hide it deep. Grow the hatred the way she would grow a flower that she wanted no one else stealing the seeds of: place it in a corner of her garden and tend it alone, hidden from all eyes.

The hatred, and the determination that came with it, would give her a cure for her lycanthropy in the end, Hawthorn thought, and perhaps even one that did not stand such a high chance of killing her. And they would give her the patience to wait and watch, and take her revenge in so hidden a way that not even Harry could argue against it, nor would have any idea that she had done it.

Hawthorn had killed only one fellow Death Eater for something she had done, which was try to get the Dark Lord interested in using Hawthorn’s husband. She had done it by waiting, and watching, and then, in the end, arranging matters so that it was Lucius who actually killed the woman, thinking it all his own idea. She could do the same thing now. The sword would cut down her enemy, but no one would be aware whose hand had held the hilt.

She rose and pushed her hair back into shape, then grasped her wand and changed her tattered clothes for new. She conjured water that she poured into a basin on the end of her table and slowly bathed her face, while peering into a similarly conjured mirror to make sure that she looked normal.

She was a pureblood witch, not a mindless beast. She was always going to remember that, no matter how many times the world exasperated her and tried to make her forget it.

When the knock came on the door, she could open it and smile at Harry’s anxious face. He tried to explain, to apologize—as if anything could apologize for Gloriana Griffinsnest not dying in pain—but Hawthorn got there first, pitching her voice calm and sweet and low.

“It was something I should have realized on my own, Harry, given the oaths of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow.” She smiled at him, and he studied her face carefully back, looking for guile. Hawthorn would give him none. He had been a good leader. He had even understood why she used blood curses on Indigena Yaxley in the midst of battle. It was not his fault that he did not understand this, that their stances on vengeance must part forever. And, in fact, in the best scenario, he would never have to know. Hawthorn would simply complete her vengeance with no one the wiser and leave Harry happy and content with her. “I am calm now. And I agree that this compromise is the best one we can look forward to.”

“Do you want to go with us when we leave Woodhouse?” Harry asked. “The Minister has asked us to meet him in front of the Ministry at noon. The time of brightest Light, you know.” He gave a faint smile as if he were embarrassed about the symbolism of that, at least. He should be, Hawthorn thought. “Only a small delegation is going, of course. New laws or no new laws, most of the pack leaders are still bitter or fearful, and many of them had their homes destroyed in the attacks, so they have nowhere to go but Woodhouse right now.”

_I know_, Hawthorn wanted to say. _I was at one of those attacks. And your efforts to ease their pain, while commendable, are simply too late and not enough, Harry._

What she said was, “Yes, I should like to go. Is the Minister going to show Gloriana Griffinsnest in front of the wizarding world, and explain her arrest?”

Harry nodded.

“I should like to go,” Hawthorn repeated softly, scratching her left shoulder.

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Indigena leaned against the wall of the burrow, pressing her ear to the earth and listening in rapturous silence until the last of Harry’s song died away. Then she sighed, and the tendrils of the swift-roses and other plants gathered around her withered in agreement. The song had been like sunlight, and they were sorry to see it go.

She checked on her Lord, but he still lay in the coma he had worn since that strange attack of convulsions, his hands clasped tightly around the golden cup, his breath rasping in and out of his lungs. No more strange cuts had appeared on his body. Indigena was grateful for that. She’d examined the cuts, and the only things she thought they resembled were the talon marks of a raptor, a hawk or an eagle. She did not know how to prevent them from appearing, nor what spell might have been used to cause them.
She did add finding out to her other load of research. She had enough to read about, Merlin knew, but she could not simply ignore a spell or piece of magic that was likely to prove dangerous to her Lord.

Indigena dragged *Odi et Amo* towards her again, and blew dust and dirt off the cover. Her grandmother would be furious to see Indigena treating a valuable book this way. She had been the one to teach Indigena about gardening and the love of green and growing things, but she had always insisted on both of them washing their hands before they came into the library. “Weeding isn’t reading,” she’d said, and Indigena still believed that.

As it was, she had little choice.

Currently, she was rereading Chapter Eleven, in hopes that it would provide some clues as to why her Lord’s latest plan wasn’t going well. Indigena was trying, but she wasn’t as strong as he was, and with only the one candidate to practice on—well, two if one stretched it, but it was the difference between a healthy plant in a pot and a few seeds that had gone through fire and flood and might or might not sprout—she dared not step too clumsily and lose control altogether.

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Harry glanced over the group of people going with him. Draco, of course. Snape would not be left behind. Narcissa was coming with them, and Harry was glad of that. He had the feeling she was genuinely calm, not merely pretending to be calm the way that Hawthorn was. She would add to their group by her presence, her composure, and her quiet refusal to let anything undignified happen while she was around.

Harry was less sure about taking Delilah and Hawthorn, but both deserved to be present when Claudia’s murderer was delivered to justice. Besides, he thought that Delilah would be all right with Laura to restrain her. And the Gloryflowers were necessary to counter the perception that every single one of Harry’s allies, even the ones he brought along in such an important moment as this, was Dark.

Adalric was coming, and Millicent; Elfrida would stay with Marian in Woodhouse. Harry, after careful consideration, had chosen Camellia and Trumpetflower as representatives from his own pack. Remus had almost sat up and begged when Harry announced the need for candidates, and had sunk back into his chair with a stricken expression on his face when Harry refused him. But he had also given Harry a sharp glance that said he might be arriving at the beginnings of comprehension. Harry was glad for him, if that was so. He missed Remus sometimes.

Peregrine would come to witness and speak for the packs driven out of their homes in London by the hunting, though Harry had persuaded her two guardian wolves to stay behind. There was simply too great a chance that they would bite if someone even looked to be threatening Peregrine, and on a day of the full moon, that was inexcusable. Helcas would come for the goblins, and Bone for the centaurs. Harry did wish there was a way to take the karkadann, but he couldn’t imagine Apparating her.

He himself took Helcas’s arm, while Draco took his mother’s, and looked around as the others matched up into people who could Apparate and those who couldn’t, holding tight to their partners. “Everyone knows the general area in front of the Ministry that we want to aim for?” he asked. “The alley that holds the telephone box?”

Nods came back at him from around the circle, and Harry smiled. “Good. Let’s do this.”

He closed his eyes and shut all the confused, crowding thoughts out of his mind with Occlumency. He breathed, deeply and easily, and made himself think of the gains he was going to win by going ahead with this plan. Some of them were things he should have done long since, like including more Light wizards in the Alliance of Sun and Shadow. Aurora had made the point in her letter to him that there should be more Sun among the Shadows. Though Harry disagreed politely with her about that interpretation of the Alliance’s name, it was a useful impression for this meeting, along with the Minister’s suggestion to meet at noon.

He put away the considerations of whether what he had done was right. He was surrounded by his own doubts and doubters. Other people would talk to him and take him to task if he became too complacent. He did not think that he ever need feel uneasy about resting on his laurels, because he wouldn’t get a chance to rest, and to some people, these wouldn’t be laurels.

They Apparated, and landed with stone beneath their feet. Harry heard Helcas give a deep sniff beside him, and opened his eyes to see a look of bliss on the goblin’s face.

“What is it?” he asked in curiosity.
“This city smells of stone and metal.” Helcas looked approvingly towards the visible parts of Muggle London, smothered half in sunlight and half in fog. “I have long wondered how many of my southern kin lived here, where they could not hear the sound of the sea nor feel the wetness soaking their shoulders. Now I see that London may have its compensations.”

Harry nodded, and glanced about to see that everyone had arrived safely, though Bone was checking his hooves and tail-tip to make sure nothing had been Splinched. Then he turned and looked down at the alley, at the welcoming committee the Minister had set up for them.

It was more elaborate than Harry would have guessed, or perhaps people were simply more eager to see the end of the rebellion than he had assumed. Around the telephone box blazed a ring of light, a leaping fountain of it that rose and then cascaded back down, never quite touching the stones. Harry recognized it as a variation of the spell that could create a private dueling circle for two combatants. At the head of the ring, under a banner floating in the air that said WELCOME BACK VATES, stood the Minister, with several members of the Wizengamot behind him. Harry was happy to see Griselda Marchbanks and some southern goblins among them. Outside the ring of light gathered others, trying to press forward. The light rejected them, though, bending inward a small distance and then firming again to push them back.

The moment Harry met Scrimgeour’s eyes, the ring of light expanded to include him and his companions. Harry paused a moment to let everyone arrange themselves as they’d agreed on—Draco at his right shoulder, Snape at his left, and the others spreading out in a tail like a comet’s behind that. Harry frowned as he heard hooves clopping, and hoped the others remembered his directive that Bone and Helcas should not be left to the last row.

Then they advanced.

Scrimgeour stood with his head up, watching them come. Harry hadn’t seen him in a month, and was struck by how much he had changed. His eyes had shadows behind them, as if he had crossed battlefields. His stance no longer carried the unconscious pride it had before, of a man who knew his place in the world and what to do with it. Now he looked like someone who’d tap-danced on a peat bog and learned to keep his steps even in spite of that. He stood with his whole body balanced around the scroll he held—the scroll with the final, promised terms of the rebellion settlement, Harry guessed. His hair had paled further. If it had any color now but white, Harry couldn’t see it.

He had to honor Scrimgeour. The man had made some dangerous, difficult, and ethically prickly decisions of his own, of which the Ritual of Cincinnatus was only the most prominent one. And there were more difficulties with meeting with Harry like this, giving him the amount of respect that he might to a visiting Minister of Magic. Some people would sneer at Scrimgeour, and see him as bowing down to the intimidation of a sixteen-year-old boy. Aurora was confident they could save Scrimgeour’s position in office along with the Alliance, the rights of werewolves, and the political power of the Light. Harry was not so sure.

He halted about twenty feet away from the Minister, far enough that he could see curses coming in time to deflect them, and bowed. The crowd outside the circle of light yulled, but their voices were dimmed to murmurs by the ring. Harry wondered if they were shouting mostly scorn or encouragement, and which it would be better to hope for.

“Minister,” he said. “Thank you for inviting us here. You have the agreement that we came to sign?”

“I do,” said Scrimgeour, and tossed the scroll into the air. Harry’s surprise lasted only until he saw the strands of light reaching out from the sides of the ring, catching the parchment and unrolling it from its golden ribbon. It opened quickly, and then a melodious, uninflected voice spoke from it, reciting the terms aloud. Despite its beauty, and the necessity of having all of this read aloud so that the audience would know what it said, Harry shivered. The voice without a trace of emotion or tone reminded him just a little too much of the Unspeakables’ voices the first time he had heard them.

“All rights reserved. © 1997 Harry Potter Publishing Rights. This set of terms was offered to Harry vates, leader of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, have come to an agreement. The Ministry promises to offer werewolves the same rights as witches and wizards. This set of terms was offered to Harry vates on October 24th, 1996, and accepted by him later the next day. Thus, the murder of Claudia Griffinsnest by Gloriana Griffinsnest that night was unjust and illegal, and will be recorded as such by the Wizengamot.”

A large puff of colored smoke rose off to one side; Harry suspected it was more to draw attention than anything else, since there was no reason the Aurors holding Gloriana couldn’t simply have Apparated into the ring of light. He turned to see them, and tried to restrain a snarl of vicious satisfaction. Gloriana was shackled, and held in such a position that it was impossible for her to walk with her head held haughtily high and pretend to no discomposure. In fact, she lost her calm the moment her eyes fell on Harry.

“You did this!” she almost screamed at him, straining at the chains to reach him. Harry saw the fetters were silver, and had to duck his head to hide a smile. “You were the one who made sure I was arrested!”
“By my acceptance of the Minister’s terms of an alliance, yes, I did,” said Harry quietly. He was aware that the voice had stopped reading the scroll, but he didn’t much care. If the audience wanted to hear the exchange between him and Gloriana, they would hear it. “You committed a murder. Of your blood relative.” He could let contempt and disgust drip from his voice now, and if everyone not in his alliance thought that came mostly from the fact that Gloriana and Claudia had been related, and not because he hated the idea of the murder in the first place, they were free to think that. “I merely requested the Ministry to follow through on its promise.”

Gloriana strained against her chains again. “And what about the other hunters and attackers during the hunting season?” she shrieked. “Are you going to accuse them, too?”

Looking into her distended features, Harry could see how intently she must have thought she was going to get away with this. It was the only explanation for such deluded behavior now. That added to his sense of satisfaction about sending her to trial. “No,” he said, though that drove a dagger into a different part of himself. “What they did was legal by the laws of the time. We cannot arrest them for that, though I stand by my conviction that what they did was unethical if not illegal. But the laws did apply when you murdered Claudia, ma’am. I hope that you enjoy your trial.”

His fury was awake and pacing in his chest again. He was strong enough to rip Gloriana apart, if he wanted.

He held himself back. He watched in silence as the Aurors escorted Gloriana to the telephone box, and led her down. Then he turned to Scrimgeour. The Minister was watching him intently, but he relaxed when Harry looked at him, and waved at the scroll. The toneless voice began to speak again.

“The terms are the same as those sent to the Daily Prophet. Werewolves will no longer be hunted. They will be tried fairly. They may hold paying jobs, wands, and custody of their children and property legally theirs. They need not wear collars, nor carry identification papers, and any imprisonment in Tullianum on charges of being a werewolf alone is strictly forbidden, as is experimentation by the Unspeakables in the Department of Mysteries. The Ministry regrets that such atrocities were necessary to make it see its duty towards its werewolf citizens.”

Harry could hear Peregrine and Camellia muttering together behind his back, but he didn’t turn to face them. They were probably saying that the atrocities were regretted even more by those werewolf citizens who had had to live through them. And, well, that was true, but Harry could not reach back and change the past. He had to keep his eyes on the future.

“In addition, those funds that once went towards the Department for the Control and Suppression of Deadly Beasts will be directed towards brewing Wolfsbane for all registered werewolves and making sure that a cure for lycanthropy is researched,” the voice continued implacably. “The Ministry also agrees to set up a Goblin Board to address communication with the northern goblins, and to have southern goblins among its representatives. Other Ministry employees will venture into the Forbidden Forest to treat with the centaurs, and discuss registration for Being status and interaction with humans.”

Scrimgeour paused the voice from the scroll and turned to Harry. Harry inclined his head. “I accept that,” he said.

The Minister nodded, and the voice began once more.

“In return, Harry vates agrees to lay down his rebellion. He will return to the wizarding world and acknowledge the legal authority of the Ministry of Magic once more. He also agrees to accept more Light wizards into his Alliance of Sun and Shadow, as long as they will swear the oaths involved, and he accepts a monitoring board to watch over him and guide his behavior. Two prominent members of this monitoring board, Aurora Whitestag and Griselda Marchbanks, will help him to choose the other members.”

Movement stirred behind Scrimgeour’s shoulders, and the two women broke apart from the rest and came out to stand on either side of the Minister. Aurora Whitestag looked as if someone had set the world on fire for her. Madam Marchbanks’s expression was more guarded. Harry could not blame her. He nodded to both of them as to two equal comrades and turned back to the scroll.

“The Ministry recognizes that the monitoring board does not claim to have official guardianship of Harry vates, but they can and will advise in him matters to do with his vates task and his destruction of the Dark Lord You-Know-Who, with the details to be hammered out in private conference. Members may include Light and Dark wizards, and wizards of any blood status, as well as magical creatures. The only requirement is that they meet the approval of all three people selecting the members, and that they swear the oaths of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow.

“Finally, all charges against Harry vates, including trespass on and damage to Ministry property, and harboring fugitives, are dropped.
“Witnessed this day, October 26th, 1996, by supporters of both Minister Rufus Scrimgeour and Harry vates, and the wider wizarding community. Signed—“

The scroll’s voice broke off abruptly. Scrimgeour held out his hand, and the parchment came skimming over to him. He produced a quill and ceremoniously signed his name at the foot of the page, then held it out to Harry.

Harry could feel the tension of the people behind him as he took the scroll, but he couldn’t see any magical bindings or compulsion spells on the parchment, other than the expected one: after he signed it, he would be expected to abide by the terms. And he could do that. He let it float in the air as he accepted the quill from Scrimgeour and signed his name. After Harry, he hesitated only an instant before using vates, wrinkling his nose as he did so. Doing this felt too much like claiming it as a title, but he had no last name—and probably never would, if he had anything to say about it—and it was how the scroll had referred to him.

“Signed by Minister Rufus Scrimgeour and Harry vates,” the voice said, though now Harry thought it had a hint of triumph in it, and then the parchment rolled itself back up and the golden ribbon tied it. Rufus drew out his wand and tapped the scroll, and a second copy came into being. He held it out solemnly to Harry.

Harry was just opening his mouth to say something significantly splendid when he heard the warble of phoenix song from above his left wrist. He blushed as Scrimgeour smiled, and then took the scroll and murmured quickly, “I’m sorry, but I don’t think that I can speak—“

“Harry.” It was Paton Opalline, his voice tight and urgent in a way that Harry had never heard it before. “The dragon is gone.”

Harry blinked. “What?”

“Acies,” said Paton. “The British Red-Gold. Calibrid just went to look in on her, and she’s gone. We didn’t feel her fly away or break any of the spells keeping her asleep. We don’t know when she left, or where she is.”

Harry closed his eyes for a moment. He had a very good guess as to what might have awakened Acies, come to think of it. He remembered the Hebridean Black dragons holding up their heads and bellowing when his phoenix song spread across the Isles. Dragons were called the Singers, and Acies had changed in the wake of siren song and the frenzied music of Light and Dark on Midsummer Day. And it might follow, it might, that she would follow the lure of the Phoenix song to him.

Harry had to go to a battlefield where he could fight her.

“Thank you, Mr. Opalline,” he said now. “I will—“

And then he heard the sound of tearing sailcloth, and knew it for the sound of immense wings. He swung around amid screams, and lifted his eyes to the sky.

Coils of red-gold filled the western horizon as the dragon came storming straight towards him. Her jaws were already open, as if to breathe fire, and Harry imagined the destruction such flames could wreak in Muggle London—what it would mean for unshielded Muggles, or unshielded wizards, to face a dragon—and he remembered the Death Eaters melting. Acies was already swinging her head from side to side, as if she couldn’t see him and was thinking about another target.

Harry stepped forward, and began to sing.

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Chapter Forty: Wings Vaster Than The Earth

Harry wasn’t entirely sure what he was doing as he sent his voice spiraling upward, other than trying to draw Acies’s attention—or the attention of the dragon that had once been Acies. He must remember to make that distinction, he thought. She had said once that she wanted him to remember her when there was nothing human left in her, and this was the case now. She did not remember him. Essentially, Acies had died on that tower above the Hogwarts battlefield on Midsummer Day.

But his song had awakened her, and dragons were called the Singers. He sent his voice arching upward, reaching, hoping.

She barreled down towards him, and what came out of her mouth in answer was not song but flame.
Harry had been thinking it might be. He’d had his magic hovering around him, and now he raised it and whipped it forward, intoning *Protego* in his head and imagining a protective shield surrounding all those people gathered in the alley. It helped that it was a physically confined space, and that he didn’t have to try to shield many people spread out over a wide area.

The fire, that piercing beam of concentrated white light, hit the shield and splattered against it. Harry could feel the dragon’s devouring magic working against his own, a mindless beast, striving to eat the shield, and then fall through it and eat the people beyond. Harry breathed sharply, letting the breaths come between breaks in his singing, which he still hoped might calm her, and sent his strength reeling into the shield in slaps at the same time. Already, the effort was pulling at his magical core. Either he was more exhausted than he’d thought or the dragon’s magic was more powerful than he’d thought. He believed it was the latter.

And he knew he didn’t have long before the fire either ate through or some idiot drew his wand and cast a curse in his panic—which would weaken the shield, coming from behind as it did. The only blessing right now was that the dragon was close enough that her flame was a narrow lance, which only spread out as it neared the target; otherwise, it would have consumed the buildings all along the alley in flame. And as it trembled around the Shield Charm, sliding further and further in sheets of white sun-heat, Harry knew it wouldn’t be long before that happened.

He could think of only one thing he could do, and it would be tricky.

But then, Harry thought as he sang, if there was one thing someone might name him by this point in his life, it was an expert in tricky situations.

He threw most of his strength into the shield, recklessly draining his magical core, long enough to insure that those behind it would be safe for at least another few moments. Then he looked up at the dragon, gave himself only a moment to judge distance and speed and height—he’d played Quidditch, he knew how to do this, and the dragon was close—and Apparated himself onto her back.

He landed on simmering scale with a thump that made blisters rise on his palm and his legs ache and burn, and the dragon reared back, her fire spraying into the air, and screamed.

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Falco circled in the air, staring. He had attended the ceremony that marked the end of the rebellion in his sea eagle form, watching with angry eyes as Harry accepted the Minister’s terms and then signed the scroll. Others didn’t know or care about the changes they were inflicting on the wizarding world, but at least they had either fought against it or mindlessly followed their leaders into what they thought was a better day. They had not, as Harry had, possessed immense magic that could change the balance of the world and then not paid attention to what they were doing.

And then the dragon appeared. Falco himself was still debating what he should do—he had never faced a British Red-Gold before, and they had been dead long before his time—when Harry Apparated himself out from under the shield.

The dragon reacted at once to the presence and the weight on her back, slight though it was, confirming all the rumors Falco had ever heard about the sensitivity of scales along that region of the neck. She swung her head up and turned and tried to bite the new threat, her flame dying out from between her teeth so that she didn’t singe one of the few parts on her body vulnerable to fire. But Harry had chosen a good position, just behind the neck, and she couldn’t reach him with her teeth.

She began hovering in midair, with awkward beats of her wings, one clawed talon rising to pluck him off.

Falco stared, and felt something like a shard of envy pierce his heart when he saw what Harry did next. *To be that young again, and that reckless.*

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Harry felt as if he knelt on sand in the middle of summer noontime. The scales shimmered beneath his hand, the color of blood in sunlight, incredibly beautiful, but Merlin, they hurt, blisters were already forming and bursting all along his palm, and he could feel his clothes beginning to smolder.

There was one thing that might shield him. He concentrated on the idea of what would happen if Acies should roast all these people beneath him simply because she’d been drawn by his song, how monstrously unjust that was, and how he would have more deaths on his conscience, because of that, because it was always his fault when something like that happened.

With a roar, his own phoenix fire rose and spread out through his skin. Harry blinked at the world through a sheening of blue
flame, and felt the burning in his legs and hand stop. Then he opened his mouth, took a deep breath that smelled of smoke and brimstone, and began to sing again.

He hoped the Shield Charm had held long enough, though in his heart of hearts he thought he would know if Snape and Draco had died. He hoped the white fire sliding down it had not reached the roofs of buildings on either side of the alley, which they would turn into torches. He hoped many things, but he kicked them all out of his mind, sinking them into the Occlumency pools, and concentrated on the song.

This time, Harry was remembering those images that Fawkes had given him as he danced among the clouds on Midwinter night nearly a year ago, the moonlight and starlight and sunlight and all the legends that came with them. He had given Harry the gift of his voice, and the gift of his fire, and, once, the gift of his tears, which Harry had spent on Evan Rosier. But he had given him something more than that. He had died as a sacrifice.

And what came through him was Light.

Harry sang the song of morning, and he reached out and touched the wild vibrations of the dragon’s mind, which was tuned to the song of the Dark. Dragons were the prime Dark creatures in at least one sense. They were all wildness, all will. They did as they liked and cared for nothing that held them back. Harry had seen that when he peered into the minds of the three dragons at the Triwizard Tournament. And they had all been lesser dragons, smaller cousins of the British Red-Gold breed.

She was Wildness.

Harry felt his song meet a greater one, brooding in the dragon’s mind for centuries with no one else to unleash it. It sang in every beat of her wings, in every turn of her talons, in every blast of her fire. It did not want to listen to him, and it did not want to turn back; in fact, the very fact that there was a Light singer abroad in the world this morning had infuriated it, and had given it the strength to break free of the sleeping spells that Calibrid cast on it. It had come to find him because it could not bear to see Harry exist, singing his little songs of tameness and enslavement.

Those words of hatred were the Dark song’s lyrics, and they appeared in Harry’s head as if branded there. For a moment, the heat of the dragon’s scales crept back into his consciousness, and he knew that he would burn if he thought too much about it.

He shook his head and threw himself into the song again, forcing his way forward through shields of blue, telling the Dark song in wordless warbles that it had made a mistake.

The song uttered a sneering screech and insisted that it had not.

_But you did_, said Harry, with a windy phrase that he thought Fawkes had intoned that night, dancing between the dark clouds. _You think I am a Light wizard with the voice of a phoenix. But I am not. And he thought at his hand Manus flagrans!_

The jolt of alien heat that he sent up through Acies with the Burning Touch Curse did not hurt her, but it was a Dark spell, and one that most Light wizards would not use. Harry felt the astonished silence of a starry gulf spread around him. The Dark song, reeling, did not know what to think.

Harry tried to convey that as best he could. The phoenix’s voice was not the best place for a discovery of the Darkness within oneself.

But there might be a place, the place where Dark wildness and Light respect for free will met. They were not so different in those aspects, Light and Dark. But the Light cared more about restraining itself for the sake of others, while the Dark would take other wills captive so that they wouldn’t interfere with its own—and thus they produced the aspects of Light tameness and Dark compulsion.

Harry was more Light in that aspect, and he could not deny it, but he had known rage. That night when Bellatrix had cut his hand off, he had come near to joining the wild Dark that roared between the stars, simply because his emotions and his magic had both spiraled out of control. The Dark song in the dragon’s mind caught a snatch of that and bayed like an eager hound, demanding to know more of it.

Harry took a deep breath, to fuel the music that he would need to tell this, and then plunged straight into song and out through the other side.
Falco could not believe that Harry had not killed the dragon yet. He must know that even a British Red-Gold likely would not survive a jolt of magic to the heart. And he was closer to her heart now than he would have been on the ground. And if he did not know dragon anatomy well enough for that trick, then he could have drunk her power and made her unable to fly or breathe fire, both of which dragons relied on their innate magic for.

Instead, it was as if he were *communing* with her, talking with her the way that he would have an intelligent being, and trying to argue her out of attacking those common wizards who waited below, their necks craned up, staring at the wheeling dragon and the blue-glowing boy on her back.

Falco darted a quick glance at them, the ordinary ones. They were well; the flame had gone away before it could dent the Shield Charm, though a moment more and someone might have been wounded. But they weren’t getting under shelter. Falco uttered a screech of disgust. Had the very sight *frozen* them? Sometimes he despaired of the ability of people to protect themselves. This was yet another reason that he hadn’t Declared. A Dark Lord or Light Lord was expected to shelter those who followed him, and Falco would rather they learned to protect themselves.

His gaze went back to Harry as the song changed. Falco frowned slightly. He had spent a year among phoenixes once, back when his magic was still mostly Light, back when he had hoped that his Animagus form would be a phoenix. And he knew that their voices didn’t sound like that.

Determined to discover what dangerous mistake Harry was planning on making this time, he canted his wings and swept upward, trailing behind the dragon so that she wouldn’t decide to roast him and scoop him up for a meal with her talons. Wizards had died in stupider ways, facing a British Red-Gold.

Harry, with a grimace, gripped some of the careful not-thinking he had grown to prevent these memories from ambushing him and *ripped*. They came flooding back into his mind as if they had happened yesterday, and the Dark song did not see them, but heard them through his voice.

Harry sang the despair he had felt as he writhed with helplessness and watched the boy Greyback and Whitecheek had killed die in front of him. They had died in the end, and one could argue that they had paid for their crime with their lives, but that hardly mattered to the exposed, raw memory. Harry should have been able to protect him—he was still the strongest wizard there, before Voldemort’s resurrection ritual—and he had not.

*And I did not Kieran, and I did not Claudia. I make empty promises and I do not keep them.* Helplessness was a wine he had forgotten how much he hated, a cold poison sliding down his throat. *If I could use a Time-Turner to go back in time and prevent Gloriana from killing Claudia, Loki from killing Kieran, and Whitecheek and Greyback from killing him, then I would.*

The Dark song howled eagerly, and demanded more.

Harry gave it the pain and the suffering of having his wrist cut off, the impressions he’d fallen through, down into some neverending ocean of black and red. He had thought, at the time, that he would never stop falling. Sharp teeth bit his left wrist, and fire clawed at it, and he forced his eyes open to see that it was bleeding, the blood sizzling into steam on contact with the dragon’s scales.

*More,* hissed the Dark song.

Harry gave it the rage he had felt when fighting Voldemort. And the Dark song sighed and crooned and hissed at him.

Harry was glad his eyes were open. He saw the moment when the dragon, freed as if from the necessity of communing with him, turned her head back down and eyed the streets of gaping, screaming Muggles beneath her. Secure in the knowledge that she bore a Dark singer and not a Light on her back, she could get on with the hunger clamoring in her belly.

Harry tilted his head back, and sang joy, and sang Light, and snagged the dragon’s attention into furious roaring again.

*He cannot alter like that. He cannot move between Dark and Light like that.*

It wasn’t possible, as Falco well knew. He had once studied the arts that he thought would permit him to move between the allegiances that easily, and song was one of them. Why should it not be? It meant different things to each listener, and yet it was
lauded as a universal language. And he had come to the conclusion, sadly, that the Dark and Light knew all about song, and the other ways of escaping their attention and not Declaring, and he could not fool them that way.

So he had learned to think the thoughts that must be thought, courting first one and then the other until he knew the paths and the secrets of both well enough that he could flit seamlessly into and out of them, tempting both with the knowledge that his Declaration might be right around the corner.

And now Harry was moving between them in such a crude way, throwing himself from rage to joy.

Falco shook his head from side to side, an unnatural gesture for a sea eagle, but perfect for the negation he wanted to express, and heard expressed, as well, in the dragon’s roar. *The Dark is not so easily fooled. She knows what he is now, and she will pull him off in a moment.* The dragon had already pulled up to hover again.

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Harry poured all the intensity and all the joy of the moment of Draco’s arrival at Woodhouse into his voice. This was what he was, damn it. The Dark song did not get to say that he was only Dark, only wild and war-like. He might be more wild than he was at peace, but those moments of happiness were part of his life, too.

The Dark song rolled back to him and stabbed him with chords made of his own memories, showing him all the despair and guilt and hatred that he had admitted to, and asked him whether most of his life had not been suffering. Even this settling of the rebellion had come from the desire to take vengeance, hadn’t it? He hadn’t settled the grief about Kieran in his soul, and that had driven him to take extreme measures when it came to claiming justice for Claudia. He was not grieving; he was raging, and trying to destroy her murderer, and those were things that someone Dark, someone obsessed with revenge, would do.

Harry told it about the moment when Draco had appeared in his bedroom at Woodhouse, the flooding joy and shock and relief when he had realized what this meant, the hesitancy he had had in accepting the offer until he realized that Draco’s long absence had come from the *need* to think this over, and how no kiss had ever tasted so good as the one they shared then. Draco had followed his own heart, his own choice, his own goal, his own will. That was what Harry wanted for everyone, that kind of courage. It was the hardest thing to do—or perhaps the second hardest, with the only thing more difficult than that being restraining one’s own will and making sure one did not step on others. But that was Harry’s task as vates. Draco’s task in that short period of time had been to make sure he knew what he really wanted, and he did.

Harry had never loved Draco so much as he did in that moment. He would never understand why weakness of will might draw someone else to a partner. Harry loved and admired and *needed* strength.

The Dark song coiled and lashed about him, confused. Harry heard it hissing steadily in his ear, and then he felt the scrape of talons on his head as the dragon tried to pluck him from her back once more.

Harry sang the memory of the Walpurgis Night when Voldemort had tried to enslave the wild Dark, and he had helped it. He gave the Dark song that was Acies’s mind the image of that, the freedom, the utter submission he’d done to the Dark—riding it, not trying to chain it or confine it—let her mind fall headlong into that, and then ripped the image into something else.

He was high in the air above Britain, on Midwinter night, his heart aching as he watched the Light grip and fight the wild Dark, forcing it back. Fawkes had died, an immortal creature who should have burned and come back to life again and again. That immortality laid down, freely given, had been enough to open a gate and bring the gryphon through. The Dark song recoiled, screaming.

Harry threw it into the Chamber of Secrets, himself kneeling on the floor, his mind in shreds after Sylarana’s abrupt death, and the silent self swallowing the bit of Tom Riddle that he’d left in the diary, swallowing his magic, and then coming over to show pictures to Harry. He had tried to reason that he did not hate his family, that he had no reason to hate his family, and the silent self had replied with implacable truth, implacable fury. The Dark song came back to him, purring and growing fat on the loathing Harry had felt for his parents and brother.

And then they were in the Owlery on the day that Harry had broken free of the phoenix web, and Harry sent notes like arrows to sting and scratch the Dark song, and show it how he had come free of that web in the moment at spring equinox when Light and Dark were balanced. Triumph, gentle and fierce, rose in him, and once more the dragon screamed in confusion. She knew no gentle triumph. From the moment dragons broke the egg, all life was a war, an endless battle to send their wills forth and not have them balked by others. The shell was the first enemy, and then the hatchlings that would devour their siblings in the nest if they could. She did not understand how a victory could be for the self and not involve hurt to someone else.
Harry twisted again, and showed her a victory that had done harm, when he killed for the first time. Rodolphus Lestrange’s body had carried a piece of Voldemort, once imprisoned in a locket that Sirius wore and Regulus stole, and Harry had known it was necessary to kill him. But he had been thirteen, and exhausted from Sirius’s death, and the revelation of him being the one to deflect Voldemort’s Killing Curse and not Connor, and the freeing of the Dementors. He had just wanted it all to stop. That kind of dizzy exhaustion that lashed out because it didn’t know what else to do was familiar to the Dark song, and it crept back, suspiciously, singing a low chorus at him to confirm what he was.

And then it understood, and Harry had no need of the violent alteration between memories. It grasped him, it understood him, as both Dark and Light, dragon-phoenix, human-Singer. It had never known something like him in the world before, just as the dragon knew nothing else like her. It wrapped itself around him and clung, as one comrade-in-arms to another, hissing and purring. Harry took a deep breath, feeling his throat burn, and murmured reassurances, all the while thinking of what he could possibly do with a British Red-Gold. There was no way she could come back with him to Hogwarts, of course. She would burn down the Forbidden Forest and devour everything that lived within it in a week.

The Dark song cried to him again, the song of something swimming alone in the deep gulf between the stars. Lonely. So lonely, it said, in a series of repeating roundels. It had gone to the Isle of Man because it had sensed the presence of the skeleton that the Opallines had made into Gollrish Y Thie, and it had thought it might find another of its kind there. But then it had not, and the dragon grew maddened and breathed her fire out.

Harry swallowed. He knew one way to change that, to change things, but he had no way of knowing if the Dark song, and the dragon herself, would accept it. He could only ask.

He conjured an image in his head, and let it pour through his voice. The image was small, and hopped, and leaped, and flapped, and was not unlike the small rushing things that Woodhouse thought of all animals not part of itself as. He gave the dragon the image of hatchlings, hatchlings of her own blood, and wondered if she would accept that.

The dragon let out a roar that cascaded through a dozen harmonies, and made Harry’s ears bleed and his eyes burn, and let him know that hatchlings of her own blood would be more than welcome; they were needed, necessary. She wanted to mate, wanted to lay, but she could not find a mate of her own kind anywhere in the world.

Harry sang understanding, peace, compromise. She would not find a mate of her own kind anywhere in the world. But before her building rage and despair could overwhelm her, he presented her with the image of the Hebridean Blacks on their isles. They lived near the cold, deep sea, where much food drifted and swam. They had males who had bellowed back to the phoenix song even as she had, and had been angered by the presence of a Light singer in the world. They were not her own kind, but perhaps they were close? Perhaps she would go there, and accept a mate, and produce hatchlings of her own, hatchlings of mingled blood?

The dragon thought about that, and then she turned her wings to the north.

Harry bent over her scales, still protected by phoenix fire that he kept from dying with sheer will, and breathed.

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Falco followed the dragon on wide wings of his own, and wondered, in his heart of hearts, what this all meant.

There was no doubt in his mind that Harry needed to Declare. Of course he did. And then he went and alternated between Dark and Light as if he needed not to, and Falco did not see how he could do that and expect to get away with it. The Dark and the Light were amused with him right now, perhaps, and knew that he was so young that his bounding between them was no more than the gamboling of a spring lamb. But they would catch on, and they would not be amused, and they would demand that he choose one side or the other, and Harry would not be ready.

And he had used this alternating in a very dangerous manner, to tame a dragon who might have destroyed a city—who had appeared in front of very many Muggles, all of whom would have to be Obliviated. The sight of a dragon was sometimes blamed for causing the persecution of witches and wizards that had resulted in the separation of the magical world and the mundane one. Of all the sights in the magical world, the Muggles least knew how to cope with a dragon, how to accept what it would mean for them if creatures mightier than they were existed.

This was no game, this was no joke, and yet it had been treated as if it were a game and a joke. Harry had only won by a gamble that either Light or Dark—or his magic, stretched thin as it was—might have decided to put an end to at any time. This could not be allowed to continue, with the wizarding world and the balance Falco lived to preserve teetering on the edge of risk.

Falco made his choice. Harry valued free will more, and that put him closer to Light. And he carried a phoenix’s voice in his
body, and that meant that he actually carried a shard of the Light in his throat.

And despite Falco’s efforts to help Tom, he was not getting better.

Therefore, Harry himself must be made to Declare for Light, and Falco himself would have to take the position of Dark Lord. He mourned it, but to keep the balance, sacrifices were sometimes necessary, and he would demand them of himself, too.

He thought he heard thunder rolling around him for a moment, and felt a general heaviness in the air, but then it was gone, and he concluded it must have been a manifestation of wild magic stirred up by the dragon. He shrugged his wings and continued following Harry and the British Red-Gold, wondering where Harry would finally set her down.

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Harry was shivering with effort by the time the Hebrides finally came into view. That was not long as the dragon flew—and this dragon flew enormously fast and, at last, high, so that there was less chance of Muggles seeing her—but he had to fight to keep singing, to protect himself from her heat with his own flames, and to ignore the cold of the wind that whipped past him and wasn’t impressed with the phoenix fire. Then his lungs started laboring because they were thousands of feet in the air, and Harry gave up counting the minutes or worrying about Muggles seeing them. He would sing to her and keep her calm enough to fix on the idea of a mate, instead.

The dragon slanted down, and Harry saw the isles appear below, out of the leaping sea. He saw Dragon-Keepers running in circles, and smiled wanly. Those would be the members of the MacFusty clan, the wizards native to the Hebrides, who tended their dragons and kept them from getting out of control. Of course, right now the Blacks were dangerously close to getting out of control, rearing and spreading their wings and flaunting themselves if they were male, or crouching low over their nests and snarling if they were female.

Acies wheeled once, and then dived straight down. A moment later, a Hebridean Black shook off the wizards trying to calm him as if they were nothing and rose to meet her. Acies spread her wings wide and roared, fanning flame between them, and he roared back, not seeming at all intimidated by her strange color or even stranger size.

Harry looked about for a moment, but he could see no convenient way for him to simply leap off, and he certainly didn’t wait to stay on Acies’s back during her mating. He lowered his gaze, fixed on a tiny rock among the lashing waves, and Apparated to it just as the Hebridean Black breathed, bathing Acies’s talons in flames that only seemed to tickle her.

He appeared on the rock, and staggered, struggling to keep his balance on the water-slicked stone. He tried to grip with his hand, and then snatched it away again. The blisters were so painful that he’d be surprised if he were able to hold a quill for the next few days.

*Good thing that I already signed that scroll with Scrimgeour,* he thought, and then cast a Sticking Charm on his feet so that he would stay still and looked up.

His breath caught. The dragons were dancing above him, displaying for each other, their voices deep and booming music that made the stone beneath his feet vibrate. As Harry let his song and his flame die at last, he saw Acies rake her intended’s back with fire. The Hebridean Black rolled and bit to put the flames out, and scratched her on her right foreleg. Blood drizzled into the ocean water, and Acies flew higher and spread her wings to show off their colors.

“*Vates*?”

Startled, Harry looked up. An older wizard was standing on a rock not far from him, little more than a stepping stone, his wand in his hand and a smile on his face. He wore thicker robes than Harry was accustomed to seeing, and his gray eyes were surrounded by lines from squinting into sun and rain. He had long, wild white hair that reminded Harry a bit of Moody’s.

“My name’s Gerald MacFusty,” he said. “I wrote to Headmistress McGonagall at Hogwarts when the British Red-Gold woke and left us.” He glanced up for a moment, as though he didn’t know how not to watch the mating dragons, and then he shook his head and looked back at Harry. “I have long experience working with dragons,” he said gently, “and know how to offer some healing for burns.” He nodded to Harry’s hand, and, Harry realized, his legs. He had taken some burns before the phoenix fire managed to protect him. “Hold out your hand.”

Harry gratefully did just that. As the pain in his hand eased, he found his gaze going back to the dragons. “They’re wonderful, aren’t they?” he asked.
“Oh, they are that.” Gerald murmured an incantation Harry wasn’t familiar with, and the dry pain in his legs eased. “We wish more people remembered that, both how beautiful and how dangerous they are.” He leaned across the water between the rocks then and gripped Harry on the shoulder. Harry looked back into his face.

“Thank you for not killing her,” Gerald said softly. “We feared you would have to, when she left.”

“So did I,” said Harry. “But she was bound with a sleeping spell, and then—well, I woke her up with my music today. I won’t spread my voice around the Isles like that again without thinking of the consequences,” he added.

“We know, lad.” Gerald nodded to his feet. “Unstick them, then take my hand, and I’ll make sure that you get some tea and something to eat before you have to go back south.”

Harry murmured *Finite Incantatem*, and then heard Acies roar again. He looked up, shading his eyes with his hand, to see the dragons chasing each other, twining around each other in a spiral dance straight into the heart of the sun. A deep contentment spread through him.

*She’s still alive. She’s still free. Sometimes, I can keep my promises.*

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Chapter Forty-One: Dawn and Dusk, Sun and Shadow

Draco paced. The Minister had invited them all inside the Ministry, and had invited Draco, Snape, and Helcas into his office. Draco had refused, though, preferring to have the space of a corridor where he could move back and forth as he needed to, his hands rubbing and clenching over one another and sometimes disordering his hair.

“You’re making yourself look ridiculous, Draco.” Narcissa was seated on a conjured chair with her back to the wall, her eyes trained on a book that Draco was also sure she hadn’t brought with her. “Do sit down. Take a few deep breaths. The air will not hurry away from you.”

“And what would you do, if Lucius was flying Merlin knows where on a dragon?” Draco snapped at her.

Narcissa glanced up at him; her eyes were calm and cold, and her face had not the slightest sign of any emotion but irritation. “I would trust that he had a good reason for doing so, and would come back,” she said. “You must trust your partner, Draco darling, or what good is the joining? He trusted you to make you own decision when Lucius threatened to disown you. From what you and he have said, he never once asked you to make the decision earlier than you did.”

“But that was making a choice, and this is jumping on a *dragon*,” Draco explained, thinking his mother didn’t quite understand that. He would have remained outside, staring up into the sky, the way that some of Harry’s other allies and the people who had come to witness the ceremony were doing, but that just made him feel a right idiot. He hated being a right idiot in front of people. At least he and his mother were the only ones in this corridor; Snape and Helcas were shut in the Minister’s office with him.

“That’s a bit different, Mother.”

“Is it?” Narcissa carefully marked her place in her book with an embroidered scrap of cloth that Draco was also sure she hadn’t had earlier, and folded her hands primly over her knees. “Is it really, Draco? He trusted you. Do you trust him? He has gone off into danger before, and always come back. Besides,” she added, with a bit more censure to her tone than Draco had heard so far, “whether you are angry or not, it does not do to lose one’s composure in public, my son. It shows your enemies that you have weaknesses.”

“Everyone has weaknesses,” Draco mumbled, and knew he was being childish. His face heated up. Grateful as he was to his mother for joining him in the rebellion and turning against Lucius to be with him, at the moment he wished she had never come at all. Not even Harry could make him feel as embarrassed and deeply ashamed as his mother did.

“But they don’t always show them,” said Narcissa, and the coldness in her voice had deepened. “I think you have gone too long without being reminded of that lesson.” She sat up, and Draco had the uncomfortable vision of a great cat looking down its nose at him shortly before it set to eating him. “I will be the first to admit that you have strengths your father will never understand, Draco. But he has imparted wisdom to you as well, wisdom that you should make good use of. You are in a very public position as the spouse-to-be of a *vates*. Whether or not you wish to have it so, many eyes will be focused on you. And the son I raised would wish to have it so.”

Draco sighed and tugged a hand through his hair, messing it up further, but unable to care right now. “I do want people to pay
attention to me, Mother, but there’s no one here right now.” Even the Aurors who usually guarded the Minister’s office had gone inside, perhaps because they didn’t trust a goblin alone with their precious Scrimgeour; Draco wasn’t sure. There were wards watching them, of course, but no passers-by.

“There is always someone watching,” said Narcissa sharply. “Remember what I taught you about comportment, Draco. Why do some people practice all their lives for it and never achieve it?”

Draco could feel his flush deepening again. “Because it goes deeper than skin and bone,” he muttered, letting the words be tugged from him. “Because someone who does not live grandeur in his mind will never live it in his body.”

“Good,” said Narcissa, with cold approval. “That is very good, Draco. You can do this. Your beloved is on a dragon riding to who-knows-where, but the last time we saw him he was still alive, and he is one of the most powerful wizards in the world. Think about those things, rather than the fact that you do not know where he is.”

Draco nodded, and then began breathing with more regularity. He could feel the flush fading from his cheeks, and he drew his wand out and spelled his hair to lie flat again. He wondered what he had been thinking, as his emotions cleared from his head.

They were in the Ministry, and in the Ministry, someone was always watching. It didn’t matter whether his last name was Malfoy or Black, here, and it didn’t matter whether Harry was on a dragon’s back or gone to face Voldemort. He accomplished nothing for his own reputation or Harry’s by losing his temper.

He heard footsteps around the corner just then, familiar footsteps. He looked sharply at his mother, only to find that she had heard them, too. But Narcissa didn’t rise to her feet as he had expected. Instead, she sat where she was like a winter queen on her throne, ice in her hands and her eyes.

Lucius stepped around the corner and paused as if he had come on them suddenly. It was a very good performance. If he had been caught up in his ranting over Harry, Draco might even have been fooled.

Now, though, he could see how the performance was off, just a note or two. Lucius was feeling it in his skin and bone, but not his mind.

Draco drew himself up and offered a bow to his father. He was remembering lessons seared into his brain before he had ever started Hogwarts. He had not learned some of the older and less common pureblood rituals until he was thirteen, and then only thanks to Harry, but he knew the common ones. He gave Lucius the bow one would give a respected enemy, and saw his father’s eyes linger on him a touch longer than they should have in response.

Then his father looked at his mother. Narcissa looked back.

And Draco saw what it was like when people of equal strength fought, and both of them knew why they were fighting.

“I have missed you in my home of late, Narcissa,” Lucius said, with politeness that Draco thought more appropriate to a dinner party. “I have sometimes turned a corner and expected you to be there, or held out my arm, expecting you to feel your hand on it, and encountered nothing but air.”

Narcissa did not even blink. “I have not missed your home, Lucius,” she said. “I have been living in a wooden house, and sleeping in a cramped room, and helping my son and my future son-in-law prepare for the changing of the wizarding world.”

Draco winced, but he had the sense to do it inwardly. Narcissa had not only refused whatever reconciliation Lucius was offering —though, knowing his father, Draco suspected it was only on his own terms that Lucius was offering one at all—but made the point that she was part of the political power structure around Harry and his father was not. She might have slapped him in public and done less damage.

“I have keen eyes,” said Lucius quietly. “I can see where the flow of power tends. And I have followed that flow, instead of locking myself in fetters to the useless, crumbling stone of structures whose time has passed.”

“I am happy for you, in your freedom,” said Narcissa. “I have chosen not to follow power. I have followed strength instead.”

Draco’s eyes darted back and forth from face to face, noting every line, every twitch, every hitch in their breathing. And he realized why Narcissa was winning. She believed absolutely in what she was saying. Body and mind said the same things. She had no regrets about her decision, because she had made the right one in the first place.

Lucius was trying to say he had made the wrong one without actually doing anything that would require him to back the statement
up. And so, Draco thought, he was faltering, and far more hurt by Narcissa’s words than she was by his—if his hurt her at all. Draco thought they simply shattered against her stone.

Draco understood, at that moment, why hypocrisy was a bad thing. Not because the “good” people like Gryffindors claimed it was, but because saying one thing and believing another weakened one’s ability to act as if one were perfectly right. The contradiction existed beneath the surface no matter how furiously it was denied. Bringing them into alignment required a single smooth belief, no matter what lies one might tell others. One had either to tell the truth to himself or lie so smoothly that one could shift between lies at need.

Draco felt that understanding come over him as an epiphany for his particular situation—if he did not act as if eyes were watching even when they probably weren’t, then he would fail in front of actual eyes—and as a burst of contempt for his father.

He must have made some noise. Lucius’s eyes turned on him. “And you, Draco?” he asked, with a faint tremble of amusement in his voice. “Have you followed strength? Or would you give it another name?” The slight sneer to the words implied that he thought Draco would say something about following his heart.

“I would,” said Draco. “My mother, lovely as her phrasing was, missed two important words.” He could see Narcissa’s brows rise from the corner of his eye, but he was concentrating on Lucius, and could not spare the attention it would take to think properly about that. “I would say that I followed my own strength.”

Lucius frowned. “You know that are you still disowned,” he said almost pleasantly.

“I know that.” Draco managed to hold his voice and face blank, and even interject a tone of boredom into the former. He saw a slight twitch around Lucius’s mouth that indicated he knew he had lost.

He managed a graceful retreat, at least. “You might consider coming to Malfoy Manor for dinner,” he told Narcissa. “Or even a light lunch. The house elves miss being asked to cook the delicate dishes that you so preferred.”

“You may ask the house elves to prepare the dishes, of course,” said Narcissa. “And then put them on one side of the table in front of an empty chair, while you sit across from them and stare at them. It would match the amount of conversation you would receive from me.”

Draco did not quite mask a laugh. Lucius’s gaze came to him, deadly as a scorpion’s sting, but he knew when he was beaten. With another slight bow to the both of them, he retreated around the corner.

Narcissa waited until the footsteps faded, then waved her wand in a subtle gesture that Draco knew meant she was checking for listening spells. She relaxed a moment later and turned to Draco.

“That is one useful thing that our alliance with Harry has taught me, at least,” she said. “That having one’s will all the time is not quite a good thing. He could have so much with a small compromise, but he is unwilling to name the compromise aloud, let alone ally with someone else, as you and I have done, on equal terms to win it. His pride is a hollow ice shell.”

Draco nodded slowly. The father he had once so admired was not a good guide, it seemed, in terms of either power or strength.

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“must say that it does concern me.”

Rufus resisted the urge to press his hands across his brow and massage away the headache forming there. He remembered, fondly, the time when Severus Snape had been guilty of enough stupidity that Rufus could speak a few words and remind him that this was not how Slytherins behaved. Now Snape was behaving like a perfect Slytherin, ferreting out every possible suspicious term in the scroll he and Harry had signed, and suggesting ways in which they might turn to his ward’s disadvantage. Rufus had assured him that no one would choose members of the monitoring board overtly hostile to Harry; they couldn’t, when both Harry and Griselda Marchbanks as well as Aurora Whitestag would have to approve the choices. None of that kept Snape from twisting words back and forth and sideways to see if they held up, and pointing out if they didn’t.

“The scroll clearly says that all three must make the choice,” Rufus said now, in a deeply final voice. “I will not change that so that you can have a part in it, Mr. Snape.” He would have used the title “Professor,” but since the man was no longer teaching, he didn’t deserve it.

“Did I ask you to?” Snape watched him with implacable dark eyes.
The stress must have been affecting Rufus more than he thought—that, or the impossible fact that Harry had signed their treaty and then flown off on one of the largest dragons the world had ever known. He didn’t demur with courtesies or backtrack and adhere to the letter instead of the spirit of Snape’s words. He didn’t even care that the northern goblin Helcas, originally invited into the office so that he and Rufus could discuss the terms of the Goblin Board, was watching them argue with a highly amused expression. He found himself saying, “You did in all but name. You may be present when they make the choices, if all three of them agree. Otherwise, no. You are Harry’s guardian, but Merlin knows that Mrs. Whitestag and Elder Marchbanks will treat him more like an adult.”

Snape’s eyes narrowed and his face paled, but he said nothing. Rufus seized the chance to turn away and nod to Helcas. “It seems only fair that there should be a member of each magical species the vates is concerned with on the board as well. What do you say, Helcas?” He had some hesitation about addressing the northern goblin by his first name instead of his clan name, but Griselda had cautioned him that the clan names were actually prized more by the goblins, and he should never call a member of a clan by one without explicit permission to do so.

The northern goblin’s eyes narrowed, and his claws flexed. Rufus watched his hand as unobtrusively as he could. He wondered if northern goblins really did wear their nails longer than southern goblins, or if the fact that he knew the goblin sitting across from him was free from any magical constraint made him notice them more.

“We do not wish to control our vates,” said Helcas at last. “But neither do we wish anyone else to control him. Yes, I will accept a position on the monitoring board, to make sure the power is not being abused.”

Rufus blinked a bit. “If all three approve you, of course,” he said.

“But you said that there should be a goblin on the board,” said Helcas, looking directly at him. “Obviously, you mean to have a hand in the process, Minister, if only in the selection of candidates. And those of my people who are with me now will refuse to stand for consideration. So yes, I will serve on the board.”

Snape’s amused gaze was all too heavy. Rufus nodded sharply, and hoped that his embarrassment wasn’t obvious. “Then we should—“

“There is another clause in the treaty that I had questions about,” said Snape pleasantly.

Rufus forced himself to smile.

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Aurora Whitestag sat with her hands neatly folded in front of her, and listened to the others talk. She wondered that no one else around her seemed to notice that they would win as much by silence as by words.

“—can’t let that change things!” Philip was saying sharply. Aurora cast him a slow glance of pity. His grief for his daughter had long since mutated into a striving after empty vengeance. In some ways, she thought the monitoring board would be a relief for him, even though he wouldn’t be able to sit on it, because he would have to find something else to do with his life. “Just because he flew away today on a dragon doesn’t mean he’s a hero or anything like it.”

“You don’t see things from our point-of-view.” Lisa Addlington stood with her hands on her hips, trying to smile at Philip and failing. Aurora nodded a little. Lisa was useful, but she did have little tolerance for poor Philip and his inability to understand the most basic facts of the wizarding world. “No one else could have done this. And he will be remembered for this. And what he did was an explosion of glory that not even the Ministry might be able to contain from the Muggle world.” The Obliviators had been sent out, Aurora knew, but if people weren’t babbling about seeing a dragon, she doubted they would find all the Muggles who had. “And he obviously didn’t arrange for this—“

“Of course he did,” Philip snapped.

“You can’t control a dragon that way, even if you’re a Dragon-Keeper.” Lisa’s patience was obviously cracking. “You just can’t.” Aurora had the feeling that she barely kept herself from adding, “Muggle.” “So I believe that he accidentally summoned the dragon with his song this morning, or attracted her because he’s—I don’t know, attractive to dragons. There was something about it in the Daily Prophet last year, I think.” She shook her head and looped a curl of her hair around her finger, as if to prevent herself from saying something she’d regret. “This wasn’t a publicity stunt. It is an act of heroism that’s going to make him look even better than he used to in the eyes of the wizarding world. We have to change with that, move with the times.”
Lisa was probably the smartest of all of them, Aurora thought, standing. She made a good second-in-command.

Their eyes came to her at once. She was the one who had worked hard to make sure that they got at least this much from Harry. She was the one who led them. She was the one who had argued Philip into seeing that a monitoring board was better than a trial that would probably release Harry back into the world anyway, because most of the Wizengamot considered him a brave little abused boy or someone too powerful to anger.

No one was too powerful to anger, Aurora thought. That seemed to be something that wizards and witches who followed Light and Dark had trouble comprehending. Aurora was glad now that she had never Declared, though her own ideals were closer to the Light than anything else. If one saw something wrong, then one had to confront and fix that problem. One didn’t cower because the wizard in question was magically powerful, or the Minister, or vates.

“Harry won’t want to use the publicity,” she told them with absolute certainty. “It will still exist and influence people’s opinions of him, of course, but that doesn’t mean he’ll consider it a weapon. So we can use it to promote the monitoring board instead. These are the men and women willing to mentor and guide a young man who can ride a dragon and prevent her from destroying the city of London. He is the strength, but we are the power.”

They listened to her—except Lisa. Aurora liked Lisa. She pulled and champed at the bit, and her son had died beside the lake, too, so that she had moral authority equal to Aurora’s. And rebellion was good, Aurora thought. It was a sign that other people were thinking about this. “Do you really think that’ll work? The Daily Prophet will just want to run stories on him. They won’t ask us.”

“Of course they will.” Aurora lifted her eyebrows. “Why wouldn’t they? We’re witnesses. More to the point, we’re witnesses that can tell connected, coherent stories, with pithy and pretty phrases, about what happened.”

Lisa smiled abruptly. “And we’re the ones who’ll remain close to him, so that we can help manage his public reputation. It’s not a duty that he wants the trouble of assuming, so why shouldn’t it be left up to his advisors?”

Aurora inclined her head. “Quite.” It sometimes appalled her, how little Harry cared about what he appeared like to others. His reputation would have galloped quite out of control in the past few months, especially among Light wizards, if she hadn’t worked to pull them all together into some kind of unified response, and sometimes given interviews to the Daily Prophet when they asked. It wasn’t about telling the truth, of course, or not just that. It was about saying things that looked good in print and helped sell newspapers.

It had been quite fascinating, to read about what a vates was and how Harry could be one, and to understand what the consequences of that were going to be for the wizarding world. It sometimes seemed to Aurora that Harry’s parents and Albus Dumbledore had set out to breed themselves a vates. They’d required not only a powerful wizard, or a powerful wizard in love with freedom, but a powerful wizard in love with freedom and willing to limit himself so that others could flourish when necessary.

Interesting. So interesting. Aurora was determined that Harry not be left to run wild, for the good of the wizarding world, but it would be interesting, too, where she would have thought the task might have contained inherent boredom.

And she, unlike Dumbledore and Harry’s parents, would see what was in front of her. Harry had changed from the boy he was, into a young man who simply needed more of an introduction to principles of Light and restraint, and less of the guiding hand on the reins that he might have required if the monitoring board had been added last year. As he changed, those who hoped to keep up must change with him.

She could do that. She didn’t understand what was so hard about it.

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Hawthorn couldn’t help her gaze straying up to the sky, even though it had been hours since Harry and the dragon had vanished, and twilight was creeping over the buildings of London now. She had remained in the alley outside the Ministry when most of the others went inside or departed, not having any fondness for the building where she had spent three days without Wolfsbane, magic, or freedom.

She had had no time to think when the dragon appeared. She had gaped, and then Harry had raised the Shield Charm against the flames, and then he had vanished and reappeared on the dragon’s back. And then he had glowed with blue flames of his own, and his song had raised and soothed the Dark and the Light, and then the dragon had flown away.

Hawthorn clenched her hands so hard that her nails dug into her palms and the blood ran. A few of the others still waiting,
Peregrine and Trumpetflower in particular, glanced over at her, sniffing as they smelled the blood. Then they caught the expression on her face and turned away.

There was no reason that this should be so hard on her personally, other than the reason it was hard for everyone: they could not be sure that Harry was alive or dead.

Except that it was, and Hawthorn grabbed it and dragged it into the sunlight—or the deepening twilight—and held it there until she figured it out. Then she wished she hadn’t.

I am a maze of contradictions lately, she thought, and in the back of her mind, her wolf howled, demanding blood and vengeance for Claudia.

He didn’t kill her, though he could have, and it would probably have been better for everyone in the end. He leaped onto her back and argued with her—or communed with her—and then took her away. He’s probably taking her somewhere she can’t interfere with the wills and freedom of others.

It didn’t matter that the ceremony to end the rebellion was today, and that the monitoring board has to be established, and that we’re all waiting for him. He wasn’t going to kill her just because of that. He made time for her, and he’s going to make time for similar things in the future. He might get impatient or angry, but he’ll make time for them.

And I was going to devote my life to vengeance from now on.

Hawthorn shut her eyes until they hurt her like her clenched hands. She had said she was a pureblood witch. She had thought that, when Harry came and rescued her from Tullianum. She had said that she was going to be that when she wore silver ornaments to Draco Malfoy’s festival confirming him as magical heir last year, and didn’t care about the burns they left on her skin.

And her enemies mistreated her and wounded her, and she lost a packmate, and suddenly all she was, again, was a werewolf?

She had said she would not let them define her. And then she had let them do it.

A deep current of shame ran through Hawthorn. She had thought a few days ago that she did not bear Harry’s burdens, and was glad of it, because if she were as busy as he was, she would have no time to work on the werewolf cure. Now she wondered why her life should revolve around the werewolf cure, or around getting vengeance for a fellow werewolf.

There is more to me than that. That is what Harry has remembered. There is more to him than sixteen-year-old boy, or Lord-level wizard, or abused child, or even vates. And there is more to me than werewolf, and more than pureblood witch, and more than someone who must seek vengeance for Claudia because no one else will.

My life didn’t end when my husband died. My life didn’t end when my daughter died. My life didn’t end when I was bitten. And I would have ended it now, because I would have broken the Alliance oaths with Harry, and I would have broken the formal family oath—her hand traced the scar on her left arm, cutting across the Dark Mark—because I wanted to drown myself in bitterness and hatred.

She shook her head and let out a slow breath. Perhaps the time is coming when I can’t recover from something like this, when I won’t be able to do anything but surrender to the flow of events. But it’s still not yet. I can still rise above this. I’m strong enough.

And then Harry Apparated into the alley.

The others stirred, including Camellia, whom Peregrine and Trumpetflower had snarled at until she stopped howling. But Hawthorn was the one who stepped forward and enfolded Harry in a deep embrace.

Harry blinked at her, but certainly didn’t object to the hug, and even curled an arm around her neck in tentative response. “Mrs. Parkinson, are you all right?” he asked. “I’m sorry that it took so long, but I literally couldn’t think of anything else to do, and then I had to recover from the flight with the MacFusty wizards, and then I had to come back by multiple Apparitions. I didn’t want to try to cover the whole distance in one leap.”

“Thank you, Harry,” Hawthorn said softly into his ear.

“For saving your life?” Harry’s puzzlement grew more pronounced. “I—of course, Mrs. Parkinson.”

“Call me Hawthorn, please.” Perhaps that would help anchor her, help her remember that for all the loss and sorrow she had
sustained, including the loss of her family, she was still alive.

Harry might have sensed something of the reasons behind her request, because he didn’t protest anything about politeness. He went still against her instead, then whispered, “Very well, Hawthorn,” and put his hand on her left arm, covering oath scar and Dark Mark both.

She stepped back then, and let his packmates swirl about their alpha, muttering and licking, and Bone come up to shake his hand. Peregrine was stiffer—in some part of herself, Hawthorn thought, she still remembered that the vates had not been able to save her pack—but she nodded to him and murmured something about being glad to see him back safe.

*Werewolves are not rational when they lose packmates*, Hawthorn thought, watching her. *And that was what I was doing. Indulging my wolf’s rage, instead of my own grief. I will have to ask how an accepted werewolf mourns.* Her gaze went sideways, to Camellia, who stood watching Harry with a rapturous expression. *I am sure that some of them will not mind telling me.*

“Harry!” a voice shouted from the telephone box.

It was Draco. Hawthorn stepped back and watched, smiling, unable to decide if she were more amused or pleased to be a witness to this.

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Harry swallowed nervously as he caught a glimpse of Draco’s face. It was almost-composed, now, but pulses of other emotions moved under it, and his hair was disarrayed, if only from the wind of his run as he moved through the Ministry. Harry wondered how he had known he was back, and then told himself it was probably simple coincidence. Draco had come up to see if he’d arrived, and found him here.

“Draco,” he said, and then he took a deep breath and forced out the notion that he might have to accept a scolding. *I cannot live in fear of them.* He walked forward, so quickly that he seemed to startle Draco, and then caught him in an embrace and kissed his cheek, while Draco blinked.

He recovered quickly, of course.

“You heroic idiot,” he breathed into Harry’s ear. “Will you ever stop doing things like that?” His words had a certain wistful tone to them.

Harry swallowed and replied honestly. “I’m not sure, Draco. Probably not. I see what the best solution is, and I tend to do that without a lot of discussion.”

“That’s one reason that you need me, then.” Draco’s arms tightened around Harry’s waist hard enough that Harry grunted as he was pulled forward and against his boyfriend’s body. “To make you see why discussion is important, and help you plan ahead of time when possible.” His hand ran through Harry’s hair. “And to try to prevent situations like this from happening,” he added wapishly.

“I know,” Harry whispered. “And—I know it hasn’t happened much in Woodhouse, Draco, but I hope that the next few months of my life will be at least a little quieter. And I’d like advice on how to live with the monitoring board, how to move in politics, how to make decisions without letting my emotions influence me. The last thing has happened too often.”

Draco remained silent for a moment. Then he said. “I can do the first two, but what makes you think I’d be any good at the third?”

Harry had to pull away from him enough to see his face properly—a little hard to do in the falling night. “Because you are,” he said. “You waited and made the decision to come to me *rationally*, Draco. I was pleased about it, of course, but you pleased yourself, and not me or your father. You have a strength of will that I admire. Didn’t you know that? One reason I love you is that you’re so strong. It’s a strange strength, sometimes.” He was smiling. He didn’t want to, because it was such a serious subject and he didn’t want Draco to think he was making fun of him, but it seemed inevitable. “It manifests in being petulant, or shrieking at me when anyone else would lower their eyes and pretend everything was fine, or sulking when most people would try to keep their emotions concealed. But it’s always there, no matter how it’s disguised. And when it rises purely to the surface, I don’t think there’s a thing in the world that can stop you or make you afraid.”

Draco’s voice trembled when he spoke, and so did his hand as he reached out to stroke Harry’s hair. “I had no idea you thought that.”
Harry felt shame squirm in his stomach. “You didn’t? Merlin, Draco, I’m so sorry.” He squeezed his hand and met his eyes. “I’ll try to say it more often. I forget that just because I think it and it seems obvious to me doesn’t mean other people know it.”

Draco dragged him into a kiss without saying anything else. Harry forced himself to forget about their audience, and the fact that they still had details of the monitoring board to work out and his enemies would be waiting for him, and became an equal participant in the kiss, rather than just letting it happen.

Under his enjoyment, he had a new determination.

*His strength is not always self-confidence, then. I did forget that. I want him to see how much more he means to me than he might think he does. There’s no reason that he should always be the one to give attention and time and words and kisses. I can give that back just as well. Harry reinforced the determination with stubbornness. And from now on, that’s what’s going to happen.*

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**Chapter Forty-Two: The Monitoring Board**

Harry wasn’t surprised when the werewolves didn’t follow him inside the Ministry. The moon would be rising soon, and though they’d taken Wolfsbane, confined corridors were not the best place for several large wolves. Harry did think about riding back up in the telephone box to charm them invisible so that no Ministry lackeys or Muggles would take it into their heads to hunt them, but Draco’s arm closed around his waist when he mentioned that plan.

“Laura Gloryflower’s with them, Harry,” he said calmly. “Or was. I saw her walking around the corner of the alley just as the telephone box started to lower us. She’ll Apparate them back to Woodhouse, charm them invisible, or do whatever else needs to be done.”

Harry pondered that for a moment, then nodded and relaxed back against Draco’s arm. “You’re right,” he said. “I should be thinking more about facing Whitestag and the parents of the Dozen Who Died, shouldn’t I?”

Draco gave him an odd look.

“What?” Harry asked.

“What,” Draco murmured, though the look on his face was so odd that Harry thought it had to be more than nothing. But he gave Harry silence, so they reached the Atrium without Harry becoming any wiser.

There, they found Aurora Whitestag waiting for them. A few other men and women stood behind her, people Harry didn’t know, but he found it hard to look at anyone save her. He wasn’t sure if that was the result of magic, the importance he knew she would hold in his life in the future, charisma, or all three. She was one of those people who could command attention by the way she stood, though, and she was doing it now.

“Hello, Madam Whitestag,” said Harry, deciding that formality was the best way to handle her. If nothing else, it would show that he wasn’t reluctant to offer her respect, and she did technically hold a title now that she was part of the monitoring board. “I am sorry to have kept you waiting. The British Red-Gold is settled in the Hebridean Black sanctuary now.”

One of the women behind Aurora started to say something uncomplimentary, but Aurora held up a hand, and she fell silent. Harry studied her eyes. They were dark and serene. *I will have to learn what invisible leashes she has everyone else on, Harry decided.* *Is the basis of her control the way she speaks? What she thinks? What she knows? Or something else? He knew it couldn’t be magical power. Aurora was considerably less powerful than Snape, and perhaps even weaker than Draco was, though any comparison of a teenage wizard and an adult wizard was hard to make.*

“It is of no moment, Harry,” said Aurora gently. “What matters is that you’re here now, and willing to work with me and Madam Marchbanks to choose the members of the monitoring board. I trust that you are ready to work with us?”

Harry nodded firmly. He was very tired, having been up two days and one night now, but he wouldn’t let himself think of it, or use his magic, which might go wonky with his weariness. He would make the best decisions he could, and listen to Madam Marchbanks if he had any doubts.

“Good.” Aurora smiled at him and turned towards a small door Harry hadn’t seen before, located in a corner of the Atrium not far from the gates. He’d always thought there were only Floo connections there, for Ministry employees to come in and out. The small gathering of witches and wizards behind Aurora followed her steps, so Harry and Draco did, too. He was aware of some of
the strangers looking askance at Draco’s arm around his waist. Harry ignored that. They could think what they liked. If it crossed into the realm of action or words, he would sit on them.

One of the women did open her mouth, but Aurora glanced back, caught her eye, and shook her head.

*She’s dangerous. She must have heard a small gasp, felt a twitch, something. I’ll have to be careful how I deal with her.* Harry worked up as much resolve as he could. A night without sleep wasn’t his greatest problem, here. The sheer variety of experiences the day had offered him was. He had sung a phoenix song, signed a treaty signaling the end of a rebellion, ridden a dragon north, and Apparated back to the Ministry again. Now he was going to negotiate, which was something he hadn’t done so far today. Harry thought he would have preferred to ride another dragon.

He reminded himself that, looked at in a certain light, this was riding a dragon. He had to keep track of shifting currents of wind and the dragon’s flame, and ignore certain other things that were not as important. He was quite sure that Aurora would manage to sneak certain conditions past him, or have people on the board that Harry would not have chosen for himself, because they seemed neutral on the surface and truly weren’t. But what he wanted was to make sure that he had some Light wizards in the Alliance, that they swore the oaths, and that they would not unduly restrict him from his *vates* tasks.

For that, he could put up with—

And then Draco set his feet and shook his head, perforce pulling Harry to a stop as well. Harry blinked at Draco. The room they were about to enter looked perfectly ordinary. There was a long table in the center of it, surrounded by carved chairs that Harry thought had been conjured; they were too fine for the normal run of Ministry furniture. Madam Marchbanks sat at one end, in the middle of a cluster of three seats. Harry knew that he and Aurora would take the other two.

“What’s the matter?” he asked Draco.

“Professor Snape isn’t here,” Draco said.

Harry blinked again, then said, “No one said that Snape would be choosing the members of the monitoring board—“

“But he can be present when you choose them,” said Draco flatly. “And he bloody well will, Harry, or I’m hitting you with a sleeping charm now.” He said the last in such a fierce whisper that Harry was fairly sure no one else heard him.

A hissing trail of yellow light curled around Harry’s fingers—his magic getting out of control with his temper. He tamed it. He didn’t want to hurt someone. And the more he thought about it, the more he winced at the thought of Snape being left out of these negotiations. He would think Harry had chosen guardians to spite him. And he would certainly distrust most of them, and examine the wording of the treaty again and again, looking for sore spots.

“Very well,” he said, and shrugged apologetically at Aurora as she turned around to look at him. “Sorry, Madam. I want to call my guardian and make sure that he can join us and speak for me.”

“I would prefer that you not call him,” Aurora replied, voice just this side of censure. “He intimidated several of my people merely by his appearance in the alley today. I fear we will not make fair, unbiased decisions if he is in the room with us.”

Harry started to reply, but Draco’s voice got there first, harsh and cold as grinding ice floes. “Harry is sixteen,” he said. “Not of age yet by the common wizarding standard. And Professor Snape is his guardian. He will be with him for something this important. You should know this, Madam Whitestag, since you are, after all, a stickler for rules, and laws, and justice.”

Aurora studied Draco for a long moment, then said, “I’m well aware of Harry’s age, Mr. Black.” She nodded to Harry. “Summon your guardian, then.”

Harry tapped his left wrist and murmured the communication spell, and heard Snape’s voice respond at once, tight and eager as a racing hound’s. “Harry? You have returned?”

“Yes, sir. I’m in the doorway of a small room in the Atrium—“

“I know it. I am coming.” And the communication spell cut off. Harry could feel himself flushing dully under Aurora’s eye. She did not look condemning, not precisely, but he felt rather like a student who had insisted on having his parents with him when he faced the Headmistress over a minor infraction of Hogwarts rules.

“The last I heard of Professor Snape, he was rather—upset,” said Aurora, with the air of one hunting for a delicate word and
finally settling on an inadequate substitute for what she really meant. “Are you sure it’s wise to have him in a room with other people who might make you feel uncomfortable even if they don’t mean to, Harry?”

Harry sighed. “He’s past that now, in large part, Madam. And Draco is right. I’m sixteen, and my guardian should be with me.”

Aurora said nothing, but simply stood with them, obviously more than willing to wait. Her companions had filed past her and found themselves seats about the table. Harry struggled not to shift from foot to foot, or, for that matter, to lean against Draco as if seeking comfort. He had to impress these people, so he stood as straight as he could and with as much of a cold expression on his face as he could muster. It was easier once he remembered what Lily might have told him to do if he was in a case concerning Connor, and then the self-consciousness fell away. He wrapped himself in a cold shell, and nothing could hurt him.

It truly did not take long for Snape’s footsteps to sound up beyond the gates, and then he was there, his eyes flitting over Harry’s face as though looking for signs of damage taken in the hours since they had parted. Then his left hand gripped Harry’s shoulder. Harry managed to conceal his start, but he’d been gone far enough into the coldness that being touched felt strange.

And he knew Snape was keeping his right hand free so that he could use his wand. That annoyed him.

“Let us begin,” said Snape. “Helcas and the others who wish to be considered for membership in the monitoring board are following me, but they said that they wanted to speak with the Minister first, and they care little about which humans sit the board. They are more interested in those humans’ actions. Attempting to control their vates, for example.”

Aurora gave Snape a flat, unreadable look, and gestured into the room. “After you, Mr. Snape.”

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Aurora had to admit to being rather nonplused as they all finally, finally, sat down at the table where they should have sat the moment Harry Apparated in. The reports she had received from Hogwarts said that Snape was a broken man. Everyone agreed on it. Students from all four Houses. He could barely teach Potions. He certainly could not defend the vates he claimed as his son in an environment like this. Since he would cast curses at everyone who looked at him sideways, Aurora was within her rights to ask for him to be excluded.

And now, this. Aurora didn’t think his façade was perfect; there was strain that might show if he was pressed. But she did think that he would watch their candidates so closely that some of the people she needed on the monitoring board might not make it. He would object to any Light wizard, almost certainly.

So vexing.

But she knew how to respond to vexation. One stepped back and thought of new plans. And so she watched as Harry moved to the head of the table to take the chair on the left side of Madam Marchbanks, while his guardian and his lover sat on the left of him. She saw the yawn that Harry could not quite conceal, and the way his partner all but bent over him, and the mistrustful looks that Snape was giving everyone in the room, even those undeclared witches and wizards who were here because they thought the safety of the wizarding world a good idea.

Aurora smiled a bit. It may be true that Harry is sixteen years old and needs his guardian with him, but he is an adult in that he makes adult decisions, and we are granting him an adult part in the monitoring board and the selection of its members. He doesn’t need to be shepherded, or watched as if he were going to break an arm on the way to his chair.

Treat Harry like an adult, insist on his opinions and not the opinions of his guardian and lover, and Aurora thought this would work. Harry was obviously tired, and would miss some things. That meant that the monitoring board could do what it needed to do, rather than what Snape and Lucius’s son wanted it to do.

Aurora shut the door and moved around the table to take the chair on Marchbanks’s right.

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“I think we should begin with consideration of Light wizards,” said Madam Marchbanks. “Since, after all, part of the original purpose of this monitoring board is to introduce more Light wizards into the vates’s councils.”

Draco sat back in his chair, his eyes narrowed. He couldn’t quite stop looking at Whitestag—he knew she was up to something—but he forced himself to. The first candidate was sitting up at the end of the table, consciously shifting in her chair. This was obviously something the Light’s running dogs had planned. And Harry wasn’t ready to deal with this yet, Draco thought, as Harry
concealed another yawn. He should have been in bed.

But they would insist on this now, and even fully conscious, Harry might have allowed through some of the witches and wizards Snape and Draco would disqualify. That was all right. That was one reason they were here: to be the suspicious Slytherin bastards Harry couldn’t be when he was making a good faith effort.

“I agree,” said Whitestag. “And the first candidate of the Light is Lisa Addlington.”

“Is this wise?” Snape asked, even before Draco could raise an objection. “I know that Mrs. Addlington’s son died beside the lake.” He gave her a shallow nod that couldn’t really be interpreted as sympathy, Draco thought. “Grief may drive her to make her decisions, rather than interest in the safety of the wizarding world or my son.”

“I think I may speak for myself, thank you,” said Addlington, with a sniff. Draco didn’t like her. Not only was she Declared for Light, but she had a manner of tossing her head that he thought was affected. Only much younger women should do that, and Addlington’s face wasn’t of the pureblood, elegant mode that would allow a witch like Narcissa to get away with the dramatic expression she was trying now. “I will not allow grief for my dead son to control my actions. I do think that power should be used safely and responsibly, always, and what happened beside the lake was neither safe nor responsible.”

“Do you know what happened there?” Snape’s voice was low, and remarkably ugly, Draco thought. “If you had the slightest idea —”

“I think Mrs. Addlington knows,” said Draco, with a faint smile at the witch and a warning shake of his head at Snape. They would accomplish nothing if all they did was insult the lapdogs of the Light. “But I am less clear why she should be a member of the monitoring board. Having lost a child is qualification enough?” He put a politely inquiring frown on his face and looked at Whitestag.

She was watching him as though she were really noticing him for the first time. Draco resisted the temptation to preen or stretch at the attention.

She may see me as dangerous now, but I’ll be even more so if I don’t let on that I noticed her noticing.

“Mrs. Addlington has lost a child,” said Whitestag, with a degree of control that made Draco wonder how she could stand to surround herself with all these fools. She was a pureblood witch with composure Lucius might envy, or at least the ability to pretend to it. It must hurt, to see the rest of her circle so unskilled in acting. “And she is of the Light. And she is committed to the future change of the wizarding world.” Her eyes grew half-lidded, and her voice took on the tone of a mother scolding her child. “And I must ask, Mr. Black, that you refrain from interfering. The final decision for each member of the monitoring board must be made by Madam Marchbanks, the vates, and myself.”

Draco didn’t allow himself to react to the last name she’d given him. It was true that, technically, until Lucius confirmed him as his legal heir again, Draco’s last name was his mother’s. Most wizards, however, would be courteous enough to ignore that and refer to Draco by the last name he’d been born to. Whitestag was making a point.

He made one back. “I was unaware that objecting to a possible choice not yet made by the monitoring board constituted interfering,” he said. “Strange, that critical thinking and the Light seem so often hostile to one another.”

“Draco, please,” said Harry, with weariness in his tone that made Draco look sharply at him. His eyes were shadowed, but he watched Lisa Addlington keenly enough. “I’d at least like Mrs. Addlington to explain what kind of commitments she’s made to future changes in the wizarding world.”

“I’ve continued to invest my money in Gringotts, despite the new demands made by the southern goblins,” Addlington said stoutly. “I do think that humans and magical creatures should live together, not apart. I’ve tried to persuade some of the other parents who lost children to Harry’s magic that taking vengeance wouldn’t do any good, because he’s the Boy-Who-Lived, and we need him.”

Draco bristled. He saw Harry blink once, as if absorbing the blow of her words, and then nod. “You have the knowledge that you’ll be required to work with magical creatures, at least,” he said. “And that is a prerequisite for swearing the oaths of the Alliance and becoming part of the monitoring board. Will you swear the oaths now, even before you become part of it?”

“I will,” said Addlington, and drew a knife from a pocket in her robes.

Draco could almost feel Snape getting ready to breathe a curse beside him. Harry forestalled them both. “Mrs. Addlington,” he
said, “we do not swear by blood in the Alliance of Sun and Shadow. It might create an unfortunate precedent. We use words alone.”

The woman blinked at him, and Draco was at least pleased that Harry had managed to disconcert her on his own. “What are the oaths, then?” she asked slowly, laying down the knife. “And what are the consequences for breaking them?”

“I will drain your magic,” said Harry. As the first time he had said it, Draco was terribly impressed by the level tone Harry managed in that threat. He could do it, and he would do it. He had no need for elaborate torture.

“I understand,” said Mrs. Addlington. “And the oaths?”

Harry sat up. Draco could almost see him throwing weariness off like a cloak. A bit of his magic woke up and curled about his shoulders in a blanket of pale mist. Whitestag drew back from him, Draco was pleased to note.

He should be the only one who found Harry’s magic not frightening at all.

Harry said that all as if he were delivering a self-evident truth—the way that he probably thought of the Grand Unified Theory, Draco thought, with a slight grimace. But this wasn’t the Grand Unified Theory. This was an oath that he had sworn himself, and held to, when he made his decision, and not out of fear. The more Draco thought about it, the more he could see that he’d sworn to and kept those oaths. He wondered if Addlington would be able to say the same.

Falteringly, Addlington repeated the words, guided patiently through them by Harry. Draco concealed his sneer as best he could. No, she’s not worthy of the title of pureblood, not if she can’t memorize something that simple in a few seconds.

When that was done, Harry smiled at her. “Welcome to the Alliance. I do want more Light wizards and witches within it.” He turned to Madam Marchbanks. “Do you have any objections to her, Madam?”

Broodingly, the old woman studied Addlington and then reluctantly shook her head. She wanted to protect Harry’s safety, Draco thought, but that was hard when he seemed out to sabotage it. He knew exactly how she felt.

“Good,” said Harry. “Lisa Addlington is accepted as a member of the monitoring board, then.”

Draco saw Whitestag smile, and he wanted to say something. But he could never have come up with the words that Snape did a moment later, the perfect words to stop the stupid choices in their tracks.

“Perhaps we should define the extent of the monitoring board’s supervision?” Snape murmured. “How much it might oversee Harry’s actions, how much he must consult with them, what they reserve the right to veto and what they do not?”

“I think that an excellent idea,” said Whitestag. “And since there is so far only one accepted member of the monitoring board, beyond the three of us who make the decisions, I think it appropriate that all other candidates, as well as those involved in, ah, overseeing the process, wait outside the room.”

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Harry could see what Aurora was doing. He was a bit surprised that it had taken her so long to object to Draco and Snape’s presence, really.

He met her eyes and said pleasantly, “Really, now, Madam, I see no reason for that. This monitoring board, and the fact that it exists and will help me make decisions to control my behavior, is a matter of public record. We do not need to keep its function and the extent of its power secret.”

Aurora hesitated for the briefest of moments, but she must have already chosen her tactic, because she moved swiftly. “Of course, you are right, Harry,” she murmured. “I only thought that, as an adult and someone who is capable of making adult decisions, you would prefer to have such private matters, well, private. The relationship between a leader and his advisers is rather intimate. Adults do not need to be disciplined in public.”
Make me seem and feel like a child, Harry thought. And leave me with no other option but to send Snape and Draco away, if I don’t want to look weak. Clever. But she should have done it earlier. Draco already set this context up by demanding that Snape be here, as my legal guardian, and she was the one who emphasized my age when she spoke to the paper.

“As you have so often said, Madam, I cannot be trusted to act on my own as yet,” he said, flavoring his voice with regret. “If I were completely adult, then I would have found some way out of the situation by the lake, and I would have no need of the monitoring board at all. As it is, I am only a sixteen-year-old with power, both magical and political, far beyond what might be expected of someone my age, and I need adult guidance and help. That includes the guidance and help of the adult I trust most.” He leaned backwards towards Snape without taking his eyes off Aurora. “And, of course, if the other candidates truly want to become part of the monitoring board, they need to know what their duties will be.”

Aurora didn’t show any sign of defeat. Harry hadn’t thought she would. She simply nodded, as though she had expected everything to work out like this all along, and murmured, “Of course, vates. And now, how much adult guidance and help do you think is necessary to control your actions?”

Finally, Harry kept himself from breathing a sigh of relief, but it was a near thing. This was another reason he had been able to agree to the suggestion of a monitoring board where he hadn’t been able to agree to the suggestion of a trial. Standing before the Wizengamot for crimes he could not convince himself were crimes would be a farce and add nothing to his task in the end. But a monitoring board could help him by giving him extra pairs of eyes when he began to tread a downward slope.

“I have made decisions that I would consider to be wrong,” said Harry. “Sometimes, as beside the lake, I do not know what right decision I could have made. But another pair of eyes, or several pairs, could help me see a way out of this. Recognize the limits of personal power, and show me where integrity lies. Teach me where illegal is not another word for ‘the whim of those in power,’ but does happen to coincide with ‘moral.’ Show me aspects of Light pureblood culture I might have ignored in my haste to embrace the Dark.”

“Forgive me, Harry,” said Aurora, voice low and smooth and concerned. “I was convinced that you were familiar with Light pureblood culture, as your father is a Light pureblood wizard.”

Harry shook his head, and ignored the way Snape’s hand tightened on his shoulder. There was nothing he could do about Snape’s personal dislike of James right now. “Not in detail, Madam. Lily Potter never thought I had to learn the specific rituals, because I would not need them to build alliances with other families. Connor’s dedication to the Light would be enough.”

“Then teaching you those courtesies and rituals must be part of the duties of the board, of course,” Aurora murmured. “And having myself and Mrs. Addlington on it may teach you ways out of decisions like the one you made by the lake. I have to admit, Harry, I have been over the situation many times in my own mind, and I do not see what else you could have done.” She ignored the muted noises from some of the other people in the room, keeping her gaze on Harry. “So I believe the problem is one of fundamentals. We should not have depended on you so much in the first place. You should not have had to take up a burden better settled on the shoulders of adults.”

Harry could hear the passion in her voice, and suspected she was telling the truth. She was not blinded by the Boy-Who-Lived legend, then, or at least she was more than aware of the Boy part.

“I wish I had not had to,” he said simply. “But I am vates now, and leader of the Alliance, and several other positions that I cannot give up. The monitoring board will not ask me to do that.”

“Of course not,” said Aurora, and Harry realized that had not been a concern for her. He would have to judge her more carefully, he reminded himself, so that he could learn more about what she wanted and not what he thought she wanted. “We will ask you to come to us when you make decisions that could have political consequences in the wizarding world. If you move specifically within a single magical creature species, that is not a problem. But since you are a political leader at such a tender age, you need the wisdom of older and more political wizards.”

Harry stifled his impatience. She is only right, only speaking from a position of truth as she sees it. “And what about those decisions that must be made quickly, Madam? I could hardly have consulted with the whole monitoring board about leaping onto the dragon’s back today.”

“Ah,” said Aurora. “But if we handle this correctly, such situations will become less frequent, Harry. I do not think it ridiculous to ask that when you hear about something happening at a distance—for example, a dragon raiding in Ireland, if such a disaster ever happens—that you come to us and ask.”
“Even if stopping the dragon would have no political consequences for the wizarding world?” Harry asked.

“Of course,” said Aurora. “Because your death would have enormous political consequences for us all, Harry. A negotiation or a web-lifting within a magical creature species, as I understand it, does not endanger your life. But a situation that threatens your safety? Yes, I think I must insist that you consult with us.” She looked over Harry’s head, and he turned to see Madam Marchbanks nodding.

Of course she would, Harry thought, frustrated. She makes it sound so reasonable. None of them understand that sometimes my life is a tool like the rest of me, like my freedom or my magic, to be used to do what must be done.

He felt teeth close on his ear, a reminder that his magic, at least, didn’t like being thought of in such a way. Harry hid a grimace, and wondered how he would reconcile using his magic for enjoyment with what the monitoring board wanted him to do.

“Very well,” he said. “I agree to that. If the situation crosses over into the wizarding world and would endanger my life, I will consult you.”

Aurora smiled. “Good. And of course, we must think more carefully about the balance between Light and Dark on the monitoring board—”

“And the balance of species,” Harry said, as the door opened and Helcas entered, followed by Bone. “And the balance of blood, I would say. Madam, do you have any Muggleborn or halfblood candidates waiting?”

“Several.” Aurora ignored the confusion that stirred in the rest of the room, as her cronies tried to accommodate a centaur and a northern goblin at the table. Harry was amused to see Helcas simply take over a seat that had sat empty between two wizards, while Bone stood behind him and scowled at the walls as if he didn’t like the way they shut him in. “Would you like to meet them?”

“Yes,” said Harry. “I would.”

Aurora gestured a wizard forward who had short brown hair and a permanent squint; Harry thought he probably needed glasses and refused to have them. “This is Marvin Gildgrace,” she said. “His father is Muggle, and his mother a pureblood witch.” She smiled at him. “Tell us why you’d like to be a member of the monitoring board, Marvin.”

“I’ve thought a lot about this,” said Marvin. His voice was abrupt and grated on Harry’s ears, but that, he told himself, wasn’t a good enough reason to dislike someone. “I’ve read about Ministry laws, although I’ve never worked in the Ministry myself. I can tell you when something is illegal, Mr. Pott—that is, vates. And what the consequences are likely to be of breaking the laws.” He blinked hopefully, and leaned forward. “And how to deal with them, of course,” he said in a low voice, with a nod to Helcas and Bone. “And what options they have when dealing with wizards.”

“They’re in the same room we are, Mr. Gildgrace,” said Harry. “Why don’t you speak to them?”

Marvin blinked as though that had never occurred to him, then turned and repeated what he had said to Helcas and Bone. Helcas didn’t bother to respond, simply looking at his claws as if he thought they needed to be trimmed. Bone stared straight at Marvin and said nothing.

“I don’t want to accept him,” said Harry. “Prejudices against magical creatures don’t make him a good recommendation to me.”

“There are few other halfblood candidates,” said Aurora, and smiled at him.

“I’m not prejudiced!” Marvin protested at the same time.

Harry sighed, and settled down to the dickering.

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It was past midnight when they left the room. Harry stumbled on his way into the Atrium. The lack of sleep was catching up with him, and the lack of food. The cup of tea he’d felt necessary to take while he was with Gerald MacFusty was the only nourishment he’d had for too long a time—he couldn’t remember when he’d last eaten, actually, since his stomach had been wound too tight with anxiety to do so this morning—and he wanted to go back to Woodhouse, eat, and rest. Draco’s arm around his waist was more than welcome, now.
But they had accomplished what they set out to accomplish. The monitoring board had eleven Light wizards and witches on it, three of them halfblood, one Muggleborn, and only Lisa Addlington one of the parents of the Dozen Who Died. All had sworn the Alliance oaths, all had said they would not interfere in his vates work but would help him with Light pureblood courtesies and Ministry law and the “Light perspective,” and all had been approved by all three of them.

Harry was quietly disgusted that Marvin Gildgrace was a sitting member at all, but he had said again and again that he had nothing against any other species, and he was one of the few halfblood candidates, and there was nothing incriminating in his past. Harry had been all but compelled to accept him, especially when Aurora had agreed without pause to let an equal number of Dark wizards have a place on the board. She had even mentioned that she would particularly welcome the additions of Narcissa Malfoy, Hawthorn Parkinson, and Adalrico Bulstrode, which meant Harry was left, again, uneasily convinced that she was far more clever than he’d thought.

Madam Marchbanks had raised hardly any objections, except to a woman who’d turned out to have been sacked by the Ministry for theft. And she had welcomed Helcas and Bone, as well, of course, as an unnamed southern goblin representative who would not be the hanarz. Because Helcas, Bone, and this goblin were the only candidates of their species who offered themselves, Aurora accepted them as well.

So the monitoring board was mixed, and would help him with matters where Harry feared he might abuse his own power. It was really the best solution he could have hoped for.

“He’s asleep on his feet,” Draco’s voice said quietly, close to his ear. “Do you think, sir—”

“Yes,” said Snape, and then picked him up. Harry could only decide that they must be safely out of eyeshot of any of their tentative allies. He would never have made Harry look weak like that in front of them.

“I can walk, sir,” he murmured. He could open his eyes and walk and make political statements. He just preferred not to right now.

“Call me Severus,” Snape murmured into his ear. “I did ask that of you. If you can walk, you can do that.”

Harry sighed. “Very well. I can walk, Severus.” He tried to open his eyes, but someone’s hands seemed to be pressing on them and keeping them shut. He yawned.

Snape put him on an expanse of warm muscle that felt like Bone’s back. Harry opened his mouth to ask if Bone had actually offered to carry him, and then slide into sleep in a simple, uncomplicated manner. He never felt the Apparition.

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“But do you actually think we can keep control of him?” Lisa stood in the room off the Atrium when the others had gone, looking expectantly at Aurora.

Aurora clucked her tongue at her. “Of course we can,” she said. “And it’s not about keeping control, anyway, Lisa. Do you control a storm? Do you control a dragon? You can bridle them and turn them, perhaps, but not control them. So we teach him to run along a more confined path, instead of making his own by destroying everything and everyone who stands in his way.”

Lisa nodded slowly. “And you really think that we’ll be able to achieve that, with the way this board is set up?”

Aurora thought of the many times she had nearly seen Snape draw his wand to curse someone during the meeting. She thought of the passion in the eyes of Harry’s Malfoy lover—protective passion, of course, but still too mixed with apolitical considerations to be truly effective. She thought of the glances exchanged among many of the board members when Harry had insisted that other magical species be granted a few seats, and that at least some of the Dark candidates be werewolves. She thought of the way Harry had accepted the offers made in good faith as made in good faith, and what she had heard of and seen in the way he interacted with people, gradually relating more and more to them as individuals and less and less as representatives of a particular interest.

A friend would be able to give more and broader advice, on many other topics than the monitoring board had limited itself to.

“I do,” said Aurora, and smiled.

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Chapter Forty-Three: The Aftermath

Harry opened his eyes slowly. He knew he had fallen asleep—he could remember the feeling of Bone’s tendons and muscles shifting beneath him, if he concentrated—but he didn’t know what had happened after that. He tried to roll over, and heard a grunt as his elbow connected with soft flesh.

“Watch where you put that, please,” Draco said, blinking open his eyes and regarding him with his head tilted to one side.

Harry opened his mouth, and then shut it again when he realized that both he and Draco were naked, his back against Draco’s chest, Draco’s arms locked around his waist. He had to find something adequate to the moment, but his stomach took over the chore, interrupting with a loud rumble.

“I thought you would be hungry,” Draco murmured, making no effort to release the hold he had on Harry’s waist. He nodded to the right, and Harry followed the motion to see a tray of food already sitting on the table next to the bed. Draco moved his hand so that he could hold his wand and gesture at the food, and the pancakes and sausage started steaming slightly from warming charms. He’d left the orange juice and slices of apple alone, Harry noted in relief. “Now you don’t have to go far. "Wingardium Leviosa,” he added, and the tray floated towards them.

Harry managed to sit up, although Draco made it more difficult by refusing to let go of him unless Harry actually shifted and made it clear he wanted that to happen. At last they wound up with Harry propped against the pillows, the tray on his knees, and Draco sitting with his arm around Harry’s back and his head leaning on his shoulder.

“Don’t you want some food?” Harry remembered to ask, just before he speared one of the pancakes with his fork.

“I ate last night, and then again a few hours ago,” said Draco evenly. “I wasn’t quite as tired.”

Harry felt his face turn crimson, but he refused to act embarrassed, even if his skin insisted on giving him away. He cut up his pancakes into chunks, and ate two of them before he asked. “So what happened after we returned?”

“Snape put you to bed,” said Draco. “I ate my meal and joined you. Then I woke up a few hours ago, ate my breakfast, and fetched this meal for you.” He paused. Harry waited. Draco was arranging matters in his head, he realized, rather than acting impulsively. He wondered if that had come about because of something that had happened yesterday.

“I have heard,” Draco said at last, neutrally, “many people wondering what’s going to happen now. The rebellion is done, but most of the packs don’t have a home to return to.”

Harry nodded. “I’ve thought of that. And I think the best solution for a home for them would be to stay in Woodhouse, at least for now. There’s plenty of room for them here, and I can construct wards that will protect them.” If my idea about asking the place magic to defend them doesn’t work. “As for food and jobs, now that werewolves can have paying jobs and they’re no longer fugitives, I was thinking that the Alliance of Sun and Shadow needs people working exclusively for it.”

“Really, now.” Draco shifted, and Harry winced as his chin dug into his shoulder. Draco murmured an apology and moved to a more comfortable position. Harry took another bite of pancake, wondering why in the world Draco wanted to be this close. “And you think werewolves would be the best choice?”

“They’ve sworn the oaths, most of them, and I’m going to ask those who didn’t to swear them before I give them jobs,” said Harry dryly. “And they’re the ones who need it most. Others are part of the Alliance, but either have commitments outside it or don’t need the jobs, like the goblins. Besides, some of the werewolves are Muggles—“ he thought with a pang of Camellia, who had been able to enjoy being a witch for so short a time “—and wouldn’t be able to find a job in the wizarding world that easily. I don’t want them condemned to the kind of menial labor handed to Squibs so often. So I’ll create a headquarters for the Alliance, and set them to work promoting it. Talking about the oaths to those who are interested, explaining those aspects of pack culture they feel comfortable sharing, giving interviews to the newspapers and writing articles for the Vox Populi, making political links with people who don’t want to swear the Alliance oaths yet, that sort of thing.”

Draco was silent. Harry finished his pancakes and started in on the apple slices, and still he said nothing.

“What?” Harry asked finally, when he’d swallowed the first few bites of apple. “Don’t you think it’s a good idea?”

“It’s not that,” Draco murmured. “I just think that your political enemies will make a bit of a fuss if you only have werewolves working there.”
“Do you have any other suggestions?” Harry asked eagerly. “Because I think you’re right, but most of the witches and wizards who aren’t in the Alliance won’t want to work with werewolves anyway, and they are the ones who need this most.”

“Then use the witches and wizards who are in the Alliance,” Draco suggested. “Some of them are purebloods and don’t need to work. And some of them don’t have defined tasks, or won’t now that the rebellion is ended. What about Ignifer Apollonis? Do you honestly think she would object to working with werewolves?”

Harry shook his head. Ignifer had been a bit uneasy around the packs at first, but she’d relaxed, and she’d even made friends with one of the werewolves who had nearly bled himself dry of magic protecting Peregrine. “How many ordinary wizards and witches do you think should be mixed in among the werewolves?”

“A fair number, at least,” said Draco. “You don’t want people to avoid the Alliance altogether for fear of being bitten.”

“And we also don’t want to encourage fear and prejudice,” Harry reminded him, and chewed the next apple slice emphatically.

Draco paused, then nodded. “That’s true,” he murmured. “If we use wizards and witches as the public face of the Alliance, it only looks like we’re afraid to admit to the werewolves.” He thought again while Harry ate. Then he suggested, “Perhaps a quarter as many wizards and witches as there are werewolves? And I don’t mean that has to happen right away, either. Slowly, as more people hear about the Alliance and swear the oaths. It could be just Ignifer and anyone else who really wants to do it in the beginning. Rose Rhangnara might be another good choice.”

“Really?” Harry was startled. He hadn’t noticed her being friendly with any werewolves in particular.

Draco nodded again. “She’s not going to Hogwarts or Beauxbatons, and of course her father wouldn’t send her to Durmstrang again even if it was open. She’s not of age, but she does spend a lot of time among the packs. I saw her talking to the alpha who calls himself Hawk the other day. Talk to Thomas. I think he’d probably agree because she can learn so much.”

He imitated Thomas’s voice so well on the last words that Harry had to laugh. Then he choked, because of the bit of fruit caught in his throat, and Draco had to pound his back to get it out.

“Watch out,” Draco murmured in his ear. “Of all the embarrassing ways to die, Harry, choking on a piece of apple in your boyfriend’s arms! What would the monitoring board say if they heard that?”

Harry started to answer, and then paused, and not only because his throat was burning. Then he said, “What do you think about the monitoring board, Draco?”

“That it’s a monstrously bad idea, of course.” Draco leaned away from him for the first time, folding his arms and glaring just past Harry. “The way I always did. Whitestag acts as if it won’t be that way, but it will. The definitions they imposed on themselves leave a lot of maneuvering room. And I don’t like the way they persuaded you to accept Gildgrace.”

Harry sighed. “I had to. He was one of only a few halfblood candidates, and he did swear the oaths, and he—well, I think he’s prejudiced against goblins and centaurs, but he does insist he isn’t, and was I really going to say that I trusted my interpretation of his thoughts more than his statement of them? And Helcas and Bone didn’t object when I asked them.”

“You could have used Legilimency on him,” Draco commented, still staring slightly past Harry. “Learned whether he really is prejudiced or not.”

“And violated his free will,” said Harry, his voice sharpening slightly. “I’m sure he would have said no.”

Draco took a deep breath, then shifted forward and clasped Harry’s left wrist. Since Harry was about to take his first bite of sausage, and he didn’t think Draco would have interrupted his eating without good reason, he stared at him, waiting.

“Harry,” Draco said, his voice so soft that Harry nearly lost it in the sound of his own breathing. “You don’t need to offer your enemies chances to trample you. You acted as though you really wanted the monitoring board to control you, yesterday. Some of the things you said, some of the compromises you agreed to….” He shook his head. “I don’t understand why you did it.”

Harry relaxed a bit. He had been afraid Draco was about to confront him with evidence of some massive political mistake he’d made. But he wanted an explanation, and it wasn’t one Harry was at all averse to giving him.

“Because I think I have been too reckless,” he said. “I don’t really expect the monitoring board to be able to help me all the time with situations like a British Red-Gold suddenly appearing. Some decisions I’ll have to make fast and on my own. But perhaps
Draco reached out with his free hand and tilted his chin up, meeting him eye to eye. “May I enter your head and see that for myself, Harry?” he asked.

Harry gave a shallow nod, and held his possible panic in tight control as Draco leaped into his mind, not controlling his body but reading his thoughts. It felt like a cold wind, which blew through one ear and out the other. Harry shook his head sharply, shivering.

“You really feel that way,” Draco said. “You do think you need to be more controlled than you have been.” He collapsed back against the pillows as if someone had stolen all the strength from his muscles, staring at Harry.

Harry nodded. “One thing I thought of while riding the dragon was how hard it is to hold my own will in check, Draco,” he said quietly. “Particularly when I think I can do something good. That has resulted in arrogant behavior on my part in the past. I know best, so I do what I think is best, but it’s not always right. I’m not looking at the monitoring board to change my habits of behavior so much as my habits of thought. Maybe next time, I will set up a plan instead of leaping in, and I will learn to think more clearly instead of letting my emotions take over.”

“And my own efforts and Snape’s weren’t good enough for you, then?”

Harry almost shoved the tray off his knees in his haste to put his arms around Draco. Luckily, he did remember to mutter a Levitation Charm so that it could hover beside the bed instead of just dropping off into oblivion. Then he could lean forward and hug him, and Draco could hug back. Harry held him tightly enough that he hoped he could squeeze out the pain he’d heard in Draco’s voice.

“That isn’t it,” he whispered. “You and Snape love me, and in the end, if restraint would hurt me, you tend not to give it. And when I feel bad about hurting you, it’s about hurting you, not because I think what I did wasn’t a good idea. So I need people who don’t care that much about me to teach me more impartial habits of thought. That’s all, Draco. Really. I have to learn not to ride all over their wills, and I get away with it around you more often. This is about my acknowledging your emotions, not avoiding them.”

Slowly, Draco relaxed, and they sat in silence for a few moments longer. Then he said, “And what if you disagree with a decision the monitoring board makes?”

“They’ll argue with them.” Harry sat back, smiling to encourage him. “I do still have a mind and a will of my own, Draco. What I’m asking for help with is restraining the excesses of that mind and that will. I’m looking for someone to argue with, not order me around.”

Draco bit his lip as if he would say something about that, but then shoved Harry’s shoulder and said, “Finish your breakfast. It’s almost noon already. Then you should have a shower and get ready to address your adoring public.”

“Almost noon?” For some reason, Harry hadn’t gathered that from the angle of light coming through the window. He started to throw back the blankets, and Draco got there and pulled them back up just as efficiently.

“You’re not facing them naked and hungry,” he informed Harry. Then he tilted his head, and a small smile touched his lips. “Unless, of course, you’re not hungry for food,” he said. “Then I think they can wait a little while longer, until we’re sure that your—stomach is full.”

Harry damned his blush and tried his best to match Draco’s tone as he replied, “If we made sure of that, it would be evening before I was ready to talk to them.”

That made him even more embarrassed, in a way, but it was worth it to see Draco’s mouth and eyes widen, and he had the tray that he could pull into his lap to cover his own unfortunate reaction.

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Draco lay back on the pillows and listened to the sound of Harry’s shower, wishing he could go in and join him. But no, he needed to think about this, and for that, he needed at least a partially clear head.
So. Harry wanted a monitoring board to teach him those things he didn’t think he could learn from the people who loved him.
And if those things had been only Light pureblood courtesies and the like, then Draco would have understood. It was true that the Light wizards closest to Harry were atypical in how little regard they had for those courtesies. The thought of Tybalt Starrise trying to be dignified and teach Harry the proper way to receive a guest made Draco snort in laughter.

But Harry also wanted someone to restrain him, just in case he trampled on someone else’s free will.

Draco rolled his head restlessly on the pillow, then arched his back and stretched. At least it worked a little of the tension out of his muscles, and the last thing he wanted to be when he stood with Harry to address everyone in Woodhouse was tense. He already knew some of the werewolves—the ones transformed by Loki, at least—would object to Harry’s plan. He wanted to appear relaxed and coolly dismissive, not as if he were going to hex them on the spot.

*When will he understand that just because his will conflicts with someone else’s doesn’t mean it’s a trampling? Or that just because someone’s angry with him over something he did doesn’t mean they have a good reason?*

Draco frowned thoughtfully at the ceiling. What he had seen in Harry’s thoughts was a good deal more reasonable than what he had seen a year ago. Harry had healed, had improved, and at least he no longer objected to people wanting to follow him.

What he objected to was commanding them. He wanted to be a leader, because that was inevitable at this point, but by equal argument and debate and discussion and agreement, negotiation and treaty, rather than by ordering people around. The rebellion had bothered him even as he organized it, Draco knew, largely because it involved breaking apart from the Ministry, which had legal authority, and ordering people to do things like protect Woodhouse. There was a reason that the Alliance oaths were so loose; they were designed to encourage the free will and ability to act of those who swore them, and if someone wanted out of the Alliance, it was a simple thing to announce that and turn away from it.

Harry no longer objected to seeing himself as equal. He still didn’t want to see himself as being in control. If he had an impartial authority he could listen to, such as the monitoring board, he thought that wouldn’t happen.

Except that Draco didn’t believe the monitoring board was impartial, and he didn’t believe they would give Harry just advice on restraining himself for the good of everyone else, and he was damn sure that they didn’t see Harry as equal to themselves. There were some contexts in which Harry would be under control if he didn’t claim control. This was one of them.

He doubted he could make Harry see that, though, at least until the monitoring board badly misstepped. Harry was likely to think that the more he objected to the board, the better a job it was doing; they weren’t there to please him, but to advise him. At least he’d objected to Whitestag’s attempt to send Draco and Snape out of the room yesterday.

*I’m less reluctant to trample on people’s free wills than he is.* Draco gave the ghost of a smile. *So I’ll be readier to guard his back, and try political games to limit the monitoring board’s power.*

Draco already knew what his first tactic would be.

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Harry stood patiently, with Draco at his right shoulder and Snape at his left, awaiting the first protest. He had explained his plan to offer shelter in Woodhouse to those werewolves who wanted it, and working for the Alliance of Sun and Shadow as a means to grant them money and independence. *Someone* would not like it, he thought. He had a private wager going with himself whether that would be George or someone else.

“And what are *we* supposed to do?”

*George. Of course.* “That’s up to you,” Harry said quietly. “I know that some of you have families back in the wizarding world, families you didn’t dare go to when the hunting season was still in effect, in case you endangered them or forced them to choose between their safety and yours.” A few of those bitten by Loki nodded. “I wouldn’t force anyone to remain in Woodhouse, or accept employment from me. It’s a choice. So if you do have a family and a home to go to, count yourselves lucky.” He looked towards Peregrine and the other alphas whose pack homes had been utterly destroyed by the curses cast at them. “Others do not have as many options.”

Peregrine’s eyes glittered at him. “We do not, vates,” she said. “And I thank you for offering this.”

Harry inclined his head, and turned back to George. “I can’t win a paying job for you otherwise,” he told him. “I can’t *force*
someone to hire you. I can’t even ask the Ministry to take you back, unless they can find a position for you in some other Department, because the Department you worked for is gone. If something happens and you think that someone refuses to hire you because you’re a werewolf, then I can help. But otherwise, if you don’t want to accept employment from me, I don’t know what you expect me to do.” He heard the sharpness of his voice on those last few words and winced, sliding the anger away. When dealing with George, anger didn’t help; it just fueled his own rage, and then they would be engaged in a shouting contest, and it wouldn’t end well.

“I’m not worried about someone refusing to hire me because I’m a werewolf,” said George, though his expression said otherwise. “I’m worried about someone refusing to hire me because I was a fugitive. You didn’t give us a choice about remaining in Tullianum or coming with you. Death or becoming an outlaw isn’t a choice.”

Harry heard Camellia growl, joined a moment later by Trumpetflower and Evergreen. He held up his hand and shook his head, and the growls slowly slid into silence. Harry sighed. This would be something his pack would see as an insult to their alpha.

“I gave you as much of a choice as I could at the time,” he said. “Besides, the Ministry has said that all crimes done during the rebellion are excused. They couldn’t refuse to punish the people who hunted you and experimented on you, and then turn around and punish you for running away from that hunting and that experimentation. So if someone does refuse to hire you because you’re a fugitive, you also have grounds on which to come to me.”

“And if I don’t want to depend on you?” George’s head rose as if someone had challenged him to see how high in the air his nose could get.

“Then don’t,” said Harry, his patience very nearly at an end. “I am offering you as many choices, as many paths, as I can. It’s not my fault if you refuse to walk those paths.”

“Really, George,” said a young man who had also suffered Loki’s bite, whom Harry didn’t know very well. He thought he was only nineteen, though. He frowned at George as though he were a small bug the younger man wanted to crush. “What do you expect him to do? He’s offering us jobs and a home if we want it, and you’re going to scorn it because those aren’t the jobs and the home you want?”

“That’s not what I’m saying!” George snarled. “I’m saying that it’s thanks to him that we’re marked as werewolves and fugitives in the eyes of the wizarding world! And if he thinks anyone will be happy to hire us, he’s stupid.”

“I can’t do anything about it until it actually happens,” said Harry evenly. “Insisting that I punish potential employers for what could happen is just as idiotic. Ask me for help if you will. Blame me if you will. But if you refuse to help yourself, then it’s your own call what happens to you.”

He rolled his eyes and turned away, searching for Thomas. He found him not far from the wall, staring intently at it and writing down notes on a piece of parchment. Harry blinked as he realized what was happening. Thomas was nicking the wall with a knife, and watching as Woodhouse’s magic caught the chips of wood before they could fall to the floor and put them back in place.

“Fascinating,” he said, when he saw Harry watching him. “It really takes care of its own, doesn’t it? And it knows intent. It’ll punish the people who are hostile to it, but it just ignores the people who aren’t, and cleans up their mess.”

Harry smiled. “It is fascinating,” he agreed. “And, sir? Is it all right with you if your daughter Rose works with the Alliance of Sun and Shadow to help the werewolves?” He had already asked Rose, and she had verged on ecstatic. Harry thought she was one of those people who had fretted at being unable to do something to personally distinguish herself during the rebellion.

Thomas raised his eyebrows. “In what world would that not be all right with me?”

Harry laughed in spite of himself. “Some of the parents did rather object when their children fought without permission in the Midsummer battle,” he admitted. “So I thought I should ask you.”

Thomas waved a hand idly and turned back to the wall. “She’s perfectly capable of making those decisions on her own,” he said. “Many of those laws—even the one that says wizards come of age at seventeen—come from parents not trusting their children enough, or being too afraid of accidental magic. I did some research into them when I first began looking at the Grand Unified Theory, you know. And accidental magic is much less accidental than they think it is, and much less likely to happen just because a child is angry.” He abruptly looked at Harry. “That reminds me. Jing-Xi has asked to meet you, sometime in the near future.”

“Who?” Harry asked, blinking. He knew the blinking didn’t make him look any more intelligent, but he had no idea whom Thomas’s mind had leaped to.
Thomas smiled. “One of my fellow research wizards,” he said. “From China. A Light Lady. She’s interested in the level of your magic, I think, and how you became so powerful so young.”

Harry swallowed a bit. He had never met another wizard of Lord-level power as anything but an enemy, at least since he was twelve. “I’d—have no objections to meeting her, of course,” he said, aware his voice was strained. “Did she say when she wanted to speak with me?”

Thomas waved his hand again, his attention focused on the wall. “Sometime,” he said. “Not that soon. Jing-Xi knows that a rebellion is rather time-consuming. At one point, the Chinese government wanted her to do something, and she proved to them they couldn’t force her. It took her about a year.”

Harry nodded, rattled, and stepped away from Thomas. Draco caught his arm in turn.

“Longbottom and Weasley are asking when we’re going back to Hogwarts,” he said softly, and gave Harry something to think about other than a Chinese Lady who was probably going to tell him all the finer points of etiquette between Lords and Ladies that he’d violated. “I think Weasley’s worrying about the reception she’ll have from her family.” Draco was smirking. Harry frowned at him. He knew the Howlers Ginny had received almost daily for a time had amused Draco, but there was a limit.

“No for a few days,” he said. “I think we have to talk to McGonagall about actually being readmitted as students. The more gestures of good-will we can make, the more people will see that we’re serious about fitting back into the wizarding world.”

“We are?” Draco murmured the words, shifting so that his nose was buried in Harry’s hair. “In a way, it would be so nice if we could stay here, Harry, and act as the political leaders we already are.” His voice was soft, coaxing, and his hand slid up and down Harry’s back in that way Harry found hard to resist. “School will seem so boring after this.”

“Boring I can take, right now,” said Harry. “Normal and quiet are other words for boring.” He moved away from the hand on his back, which was harder than he’d thought it would be. “But I do want to show that we’re going about things legally. We’ll appeal to McGonagall and the board of governors. So we’ll look like good little children.”

“And that’s the image you want to project?” Draco demanded.

Harry snorted. “Not necessarily, but I think it’s the one we’ll have to project right now. The people who only rely on appearances will be contented, and the ones who know better won’t start thinking less of us just because we speak a few contrite words and look appropriately resigned to finishing our education.”

Draco snickered and kissed him behind the ear. “Can we wait until after Halloween?” he asked abruptly.

Harry blinked at him. “Why?”

“The third part of our joining ritual is on Halloween,” said Draco. “In case you forget.” His eyes said that he knew very well that Harry had forgotten.

Harry winced. This hurt more, and in a different way, than the realization that Draco hadn’t known Harry loved him for his strength of will. “I did,” he said. “I’m sorry, Draco. I don’t—“ He shook his head and squeezed Draco’s hand, unable to say what he wished, or didn’t wish.

“After this one, I don’t think you’ll forget again,” Draco murmured into his ear. “After this one, I think you’ll be looking forward to them, and demanding to know why they don’t arrive faster.”

Harry smiled, because he couldn’t think of much else to do right then, and stepped gently away from Draco. “I should owl McGonagall, and make sure she knows that we’re formally requesting permission to return to Hogwarts,” he said. “And then I should speak with Snape, and see if he actually feels like going back to teach, or whether he’d rather remain in Woodhouse until he’s healed.”

“I think you’ll find that he’ll want to go wherever you go,” Draco said.

Harry gave a rolling shrug of his shoulders. “I wish he could make decisions the way you could,” he said. “Considering his own health and wants first, and what responsibilities he owes to anyone else secondarily, if at all. Given how selfish he always thought he was, you’d think it wouldn’t be difficult for him.”
“Not all of us can be me,” said Draco, “gifted with the ability to think rationally.”

“And pride nothing can make a dent in.”

“You wouldn’t love me if I were any different,” said Draco, and kissed him again, this time with a challenge in his eyes, as much to ask if this would embarrass Harry. Harry was aware of the eyes watching them, at least some of them critical, but he kissed back, and nodded as he pulled away.

“I wouldn’t.”

*We have just as much right to do this as anyone else,* he told himself again. *It’s not my fault if someone underestimates Draco because of this, or thinks I never pay attention to anything but him, and tries a stupid political move. There’s no reason that we should have to confine kissing to our bedroom, or why I should have to pretend that the ring on my hand means nothing.*

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Harry did not understand, that much was plain. He was frowning as he listened to Snape telling him that he wished to go back to Hogwarts and take up the duties of Potions Master and Head of Slytherin House that Minerva was willing to return to him, rather than stay in Woodhouse.

“But, sir—“

Snape raised his eyebrows.

“Severus,” Harry corrected himself, with a sideways look to ask if Snape was sure he wanted that level of informality. “You’d be able to heal better here. More cleanly, without as many distractions. I know that you’ve grown better able to bear the strains of teaching now, but are you sure that you want to bear them at all? Woodhouse would make your—“

“Harry.”

To his credit, Harry stopped talking and gave him his full attention the moment he heard the sternness in Snape’s voice. Snape held his eyes for a long moment without blinking, just to make sure his notice didn’t wander.

“Harry. I wish to continue my healing at school, in the midst of teaching and other duties. Joseph says, and I agree, that the isolation of the Sanctuary, or Woodhouse for that matter, would only weaken me. I have enough practice at being strong enough in front of only myself, or myself and a few others. The true test will be acting like a human being in front of other people, including those who have no reason to care about my fits of temper.”

Harry looked a bit doubtful, but nodded.

Snape continued to push. “Besides,” he said, “if I remained, we would find it hard to continue our bargain with each other, to be a better father and son. Draco would find it difficult to cope with the monitoring board alone. And you would begin living without healing at the same time, I think, since Joseph would be here with me.”

Predictably, Harry bristled. “I did promise Draco that I would start looking for a way to break the fourth curse on my wrist,” he said. “And using my magic for enjoyment’s sake, so that it doesn’t desert me.”

“And healing from your emotional wounds?”

Harry looked away.

“What’s the matter, sir?” Harry muttered. “The last thing Joseph wanted to speak to me about was—it didn’t matter. I’ve dealt with it.”

“And that would be?”

“Kieran’s death at Loki’s teeth,” Harry said, looking back at him, his chin jerking upwards in a little defiant movement, as if daring Snape to ask about this, either. “And I told him the truth—that I turned that into anger for the rebellion. I’ve dealt with the emotions of that by transforming them. I don’t see why I need to talk about them.”
“Regardless,” said Snape, “you did make the bargain with me, Harry. And it will be easier for you to keep if Joseph is there.”

Harry reluctantly nodded. “It’s not that I don’t want to keep my promises, sir—”

“I would never know it, from the way you’re addressing me.”

“Severus,” Harry said. “But some of these things are more important than others.”

“That we can agree on, at least,” Snape said. But not how we rank them. You would push anything to do with yourself to the bottom of the list, if you could.

Harry smiled at him in relief, and then darted out his hand and touched him on the arm, as if a stronger touch would hurt him. “It’s not that I don’t want to keep my promises,” he repeated, a wistful look on his face. “And it’s not that I don’t want you there. But I saw how you suffered last time, sir—Severus. I don’t want to see you suffering like that again. It hurts me too, you know.”

“I know,” said Snape. “I should know, Harry, from the way it feels when I see you suffer in your turn.”

Harry ducked his head. “I should go, Severus,” he said. “I need to talk to Woodhouse and convince it to shelter the werewolves—and let me go, since I’m still strongly bonded to it.” He paused a moment, as if waiting to see what else Snape would say, and then quietly slipped out the door.

Snape turned back to the potion he’d been brewing, an idle experiment more than anything else, an attempt to change the potion’s color from deep purple to pale purple. He had a conversation with Joseph in a few minutes, and he intended to go into it with a will and as clear a mind as possible.

It will be interesting to see how truthful Harry’s words really are, when we are back at Hogwarts. The rebellion is done, and there is no immediate crisis on the horizon, only those that will take some time to build. I hardly expect the monitoring board’s interference to become obvious overnight.

Harry will have the time and the peace to concentrate on his own healing as well as those building problems. If he avoids that, it will be up to us to show him he is. No more forced healing, however. He is less than a year away from being an adult; it is time we pointed out the path and let him walk it on his own.

Snape blinked as an odd pang struck him in the chest. He had felt something like it before, but not for a long time. After some searching of his memory, and probing at his Occlumency pools, he discovered it again.

It was the restrained trepidation he had felt when he let Harry go to Godric’s Hollow for Christmas his third year, the fear that he was making a mistake, but had to let his child make it. Sooner or later, all parents had to let their children walk into danger, and hope it did not damage them too badly.

Has it taken us this long to get back to that point?

Snape stepped back and contemplated the sickly purple color of the potion—not quite what he wanted, but it would do. No, I think not. Then, I suspected he would break, and he did, and Draco and Narcissa and I had to work to put him back together.

Now, we may actually stand a chance of stumbling, and not breaking when we land. ...

Chapter Forty-Four: Glory Be

Woodhouse did not understand why part of itself would ever want to leave. It preferred to dream and grow, and the current of magic that circled it paced the same path over and over again. With that, it could achieve a depth that the small rushing things would never understand. They thought that life consisted of traveling far and broad and wide. Only Woodhouse knew that life meant deep, knowing itself so well that no small rushing thing could ever fool it.

And now part of itself wanted to go away. Woodhouse sang to the small leafless tree in the dream, and tried to understand why.

The leafless tree’s dreams flowed into it, and Woodhouse absorbed them and understood. The tree was not leaving them forever. It would still have a root system that extended back to the valley, and tied it to the hills and the soil. Those roots were more small rushing things who could become small leafless trees, as it had—not entering the dream, but bound to the dream. If Woodhouse
would consider them part of itself, then it could still be whole.

Woodhouse was pleased. Other small rushing things would learn to be leafless trees, and then they would not wish to harm the valley, because they would be part of it. The dream would grow deeper, and not split into parts. And if the network of roots extended outside the valley, then Woodhouse’s awareness would travel with the leafless tree, and they could always pull back and fold into the valley if they met with any trouble. Woodhouse would learn the far and the wide without ever sacrificing the deep.

It agreed, and went back to dreaming of winter.

Harry blinked and touched a hand to his head as he rose unsteadily to his feet. He hadn’t—well, he hadn’t expected that to happen, at least. If he understood correctly, Woodhouse now considered the werewolves who would stay here part of itself and would defend them, which was what Harry had wanted, but it would retain a connection to him, too, and consider the werewolves extensions of him, and thus also of itself. And it would keep a bond fastened to his mind, so that he could retreat to the valley whenever he wanted.

Harry looked around the hills and the trees, felt the battering current of place magic as it passed him in its endless rounds, and shook his head. At times he thought the worst mistake British wizards had ever made was letting knowledge of place magic pass away from them.

He turned back to the quadrangle of buildings in the center of the valley, and scratched his forehead. His scar didn’t hurt, not exactly, but it tingled all over with a slightly itchy feeling, as if his skin were a little too tight for him. He’d been feeling that all day, since he ate breakfast, and somewhere in the back of his mind even while he communed with Woodhouse and should have been able to feel only the valley. He wondered what it meant.

As he entered the quadrangle of buildings again, the tightness on his forehead grew so bad that his head slewed to the side, like a unicorn’s following the guidance of his horn. Harry gasped and stumbled for a moment, wondering if this was some odd side effect from being in close quarters with a karkadann. He had spent the last few days since he’d appealed to McGonagall to return to Hogwarts mostly with other people, but he had soothed her when he could, and ridden her once. He didn’t think that her magic should be so sulky that she could summon him away from other things he was supposed to be doing.

“Harry?”

The pulling tightness to his skin vanished. Harry blinked up and realized he was standing in front of Draco, who must have come out a back door of the wooden house. He looked at Harry in puzzlement for a moment. Then his face broke into a smirk, and he nodded.

“What?” Harry demanded, a bit irritated to think that Draco knew what this strange thing was or meant, and hadn’t bothered to share it with him.

“You’re feeling it now,” Draco whispered. “It is Halloween, after all, and this is the third time we’ve done this. I partially arranged the first ritual, offering you the gift of the ring, and you had to choose the setting of the second.” His eyelids dropped, shading his eyes. “And now, this third time, the magic is arranging things for us. It makes you want to be close to me.”

Harry just stared at him.

Draco laughed a little. “This ritual is old, Harry. And like all old rituals, it’s partially a mold for the magic that comes into it, but it also directs and shapes the people who participate in it. And now it’s directing and molding us. It wants you to touch me, to be close to me.” He shrugged and reached out to put his arm around Harry’s shoulders. “Not that I object. I want the same things, after all, and I don’t have a problem giving in to those impulses.” He bent and kissed Harry firmly on the mouth.

Harry returned the kiss for a moment, then broke away with a gasp. The air between him and Draco seemed stretched as taut as his skin, and the air whined and buzzed in his ears like the words of the vicious bird. He felt as if he might climb out of his skin and up the walls. “Wait—Draco—”

“Yes?” Draco just raised an eyebrow, and didn’t move back from him.

Harry moaned, and winced to hear himself. “Why would it be affecting us this strongly, just now?” he asked. “I thought the ritual proper doesn’t begin until tonight.”

“The Walpurgis ritual began at night,” said Draco patiently. “The ritual on your birthday began during the day. This is the whole day. It began at dawn, properly. And why shouldn’t it? This ritual is called the Breaking of Boundaries, Harry. It would be strange
if it let itself be confined on one side of the divide of night or day.”

Harry shivered. Now that he was close to Draco, he could feel the magic humming, contented, in his skin, no longer pulling on him. But he could feel other sensations, too, as if potions were brewing under his flesh, and his cheeks were already darkening with arousal stronger than anything he’d felt before. And he knew it was going to get worse; this was low tide.

Draco’s hand rubbed his back. Harry leaned into the touch, closing his eyes, and felt the arousal calm a bit. “I didn’t—I didn’t know,” he whispered into Draco’s ear.

“I know,” said Draco. “Why do you think I left those books on the ritual for you out, Harry? I wanted you to be warned. And I did tell you, two days ago, that we’d be spending most of this day together.”

“I thought that was a ritual requirement, not a magical one.” Harry shuddered and bowed his head. He was slipping along the edge of control, and he hated the experience. It had been hard enough for him to let go behind wards, when he knew the emotions from the Occlumency pools must be released. He could not imagine how he was going to get through this. What would happen if the barriers on his magic broke and he hurt someone else?

“If you would stop worrying about others for three seconds and enjoy yourself,” Draco murmured into his ear, forcing Harry to hear him over the mad pounding of his heart, “you would know that you can’t hurt them, Harry, not today. The ritual is drawing a circle around us. It wants us close together, it wants us focused on each other, and it wants us able to touch and influence only each other. Your magic could hurt me—if it ever would, which I know it won’t—but today it can’t do so much as raise a bruise on someone else’s skin.”

Harry frowned at him. “How did you know that I was thinking about that?”

Draco touched his forehead, slightly to the left of his scar, never taking his eyes from Harry’s face. “The ritual opens up our minds, too, Harry, and mingles our thoughts. And your thoughts are loud. I wonder how Snape taught you Legilimency, if he could hear you shouting in his head all the time.”

His voice was light and teasing, but Harry was beginning to panic again. He imagined the boundaries that could break, and now what struck him was not fear that he would hurt Draco, but fear of what Draco would see.

“Really, Harry.” Draco’s voice was somewhere this side of hurt. “After everything? You really think that I’d see something in your mind or your heart that disgusted me? You’re really ashamed of showing me part of what you are?” He paused, cocking his head to the side. “And did you never think that I might be ashamed of showing off who I am?”

“You have nothing to be ashamed of,” Harry whispered. “I—Draco, I—” His entire face felt on fire, and not because of the magic. He had never been so embarrassed in his life. There were—there were baser things in him that he hadn’t wanted to share. Everyone had those, didn’t they? But most people didn’t enter a ritual that was going to break down the boundaries and force those secrets to splay like thrown dice over their unsuspecting partner’s mind.

“Harry. Look at me.”

Reluctantly, Harry lifted his eyes and locked them on Draco’s, and to his shock, it was like falling down a tunnel. He could see into his mind, see into his thoughts, grasp them and understand them. The thoughts coiled around him like veins of ore in a tunnel, and he could follow them wherever they led.

There was a dark vein of obsidian that Harry looked into and found was hatred for Connor, simmered and baked deep. Draco still saw little use to the prat. He knew he was important to Harry, and for that reason, if nothing else, he tried to be civil to him, but still, Draco didn’t see a single thing Connor had done so far that couldn’t have been done more admirably and with more strength by someone else. He had been a fighter in the Midsummer battle, but they all had been. He was Harry’s brother, but that was more a source of weakness than use. He had existed to take the Potter inheritance so that Harry wouldn’t have to, but there were ways of changing the inheritance so that it was no longer linked to the Potter name, and then Harry could have had what few solid gifts his parents could have given him. He was just there, and he irritated Draco.

Reeling back from that, Harry banged into another, this one a vein of crystal. That was Draco’s feelings about his father, unexpectedly turned clear and pure by the encounter he’d had with Lucius in the Ministry when they went there to end the rebellion. He’d seen the way his father’s tactics failed against his mother’s. He’d seen that just because one had a cool face and cutting words didn’t make one into a victor. And he’d decided that what he wanted most was real strength, under the surface. Chill masks had their place; Draco would never deny that. But he hungered most for the strength that made the chill mask a natural part of one’s armor.
Harry turned again, and behind him was a glowing strand of emeralds, dark green flecked with gold, the lust Draco felt for him. And if Draco dreamed of fucking, of sex until they were exhausted, of days in bed when they could make love slowly and no one else would expect anything else of them, of a time when Harry would look at him with glassy eyes and begging body and nothing else in the world mattered to him—weren’t those his dreams? Wasn’t he entitled to dream them?

With an enormous effort, using the training Snape had given him in Legilimency, Harry jumped back and out of Draco’s mind. He stood where he was for a moment, eyes locked on Draco’s, chest heaving with his breath.

Then he Apparated frantically away, feeling his skin stretch yearningly towards Draco as he did so.

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Draco stood blinking in the aftermath of Harry’s vanishing, and then shook his head lightly. He didn’t have to wonder why Harry had fled, after all. The Breaking of Boundaries had already let him see the answer to that, blazing in his boyfriend’s eyes and echoing in his thoughts.

Harry had had the chance to learn what the ritual was about. Draco had left the books for him, and hinted at it sometimes, and waited patiently for Harry to ask questions. And he hadn’t. He had ignored the books, other than a few nervous sideways glances. And he’d always found something more interesting to struggle with or ask about when he could have been learning about a ritual vital to his future happiness.

Draco wasn’t that surprised, he thought, as he walked leisurely towards the tugging. Harry was probably Apparating into several places around the valley, since the pull on Draco’s skin changed direction constantly. He didn’t mind. Harry would find out soon enough that he could not leave a certain radius. Even if he wanted to Apparate to the other side of the world, he couldn’t do it.

No, he wasn’t surprised. He was exasperated.

How many promises had Harry made that he would concentrate on things that affected him personally? How many times had he said that he wasn’t afraid of what he and Draco would someday share? How many words had he spoken about wanting to spend time with Draco and think about his healing when the pace of events calmed enough to allow him to do so?

And Draco had waited, been patient even when it seemed as if his body was one low constant ache of arousal and need, and not complained. He had known when he fell in love with Harry that Harry wouldn’t be able to return his love immediately, so he couldn’t complain. It would be hypocritical if he did. He was only facing the challenges of a situation he had entered with his eyes open.

But he had relied on Harry’s willingness to make an equal effort, and work against his training, and get used to being seen, and stop fucking running. And Harry hadn’t done it. Oh, he had hidden his impulse not to do it well, because he had so many responsibilities and challenges of his own, but that didn’t matter. Face him with the first true test, and he ran.

Draco lengthened his stride, and smiled a little. This wasn’t a test that could be run from. The ritual was only the third spoke out of thirteen on a swiftly turning wheel. Their free consent to enter this three-year dance had given the magic the permission it needed to bring them closer together, and the fact that Draco had acted during the first ceremony and Harry had acted during the second one had been another confirmation, if one was needed. So now the Breaking of Boundaries was happening. Draco’s hands itched with the need to touch Harry. His eyes watered, and what would best soothe them would be looking into Harry’s eyes and reading his thoughts.

And Harry’s boundaries would be falling, including the ones he’d put up to protect himself against those things he wanted and thought were ugly. Draco grinned, and didn’t try to stop it. This was the first time, he thought, that Harry would come face to face with his desires, as opposed to lust he could always pretend was focused on Draco.

That was the main reason Draco was giving him a few minutes alone, instead of hurrying directly to his side now that the pull on his skin had settled into a steady tug towards the pine woods. Harry needed this time to face himself. He needed to acknowledge that not only could he want to be the source of Draco’s pleasure, but he could want pleasure for its own sake.

And if what Draco had read on the surface of his thoughts was true of the bottom, that was the mildest of the things Harry was close to learning about himself. He had at least acknowledged, a time or two, that what they did in bed felt good.

Give him time, Draco told himself, and halted near one of the hills, leaning his face against the rock. His skin streamed with sweat in the chill air. Yes, I could have told him about this, but more to the point, he could have asked. And I want him to acknowledge
that, yes, this isn’t just about what the magic wants and what I want. It’s about what he wants.

Snape and I can encourage him, but in the end, we can’t fight his battles for him. We made that mistake once already, and he told us we were acting like Lily, and he was right. Now, he has to be the one to stop acting like James.

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Harry had Apparated to the outer ring of Woodhouse’s hills, the place where they sloped down to the grass. He found he couldn’t go any further. He could imagine London well in his head, and even Hogwarts, though that was a longer jump than he would have been willing to try under ordinary circumstances.

But he couldn’t go there.

He felt as if he were a horse on a great lead rein, plunging in a circle that widened only a few feet now and then, and shrank most of the time. The circle was centered on Draco. His muscles shivered and shook, his skin was so sticky with sweat that Harry felt as if he were about to slide out of his clothes, and when he Apparated back into the pine woods on the eastern side of Woodhouse, he had to fight to keep his mind from being taken over by a vision of Draco.

He landed hard on stones and roots and needles, and lay there gasping, painfully aroused, biting his palm as he struggled to hold in sounds that would betray him worse than his frantic panting did.

He could feel the magic of the ritual, wilder than the patient wearing-down of the air in the Sanctuary, more persistent than the place magic, diving into the depths of his mind and wrenching up memories he didn’t want to look at and drilling through barriers he would have preferred to keep in place and forcing acknowledgments out of him he didn’t want to make.

You want.

And he did, he wanted, there were times he wanted nothing so much as to wank until he came or throw Draco onto the bed and fuck him, and—

Harry gave a slick shudder of revulsion. He couldn’t believe he felt this. It was so selfish. He didn’t want to feel it. He wrapped his arm around his face and gasped into it, but that was no good, because the touch of other flesh or even fabric now was making him think things he didn’t want to.

He refused to touch himself. He could do that.

Angrily, he twisted through the waves of lust that were attacking him. He knew what it must be. Most sixteen-year-old boys were victims of lust, or of their hormones, or of whatever name they wanted to give it. Harry had always been sturdily proud that he wasn’t, that he’d managed to subdue those rare longings he had and get past them. His training had helped with that. He was grateful to his mother for it, because hormones would have proven a distraction to everything he had to do.

And now the barrier was broken, and they were attacking him.

Harry hadn’t wanted it broken. He tried to imprison the emotions behind a wall, but if he could still build a decent one, the ritual’s magic ate through it in a few moments. Harry made a harsh sound and shuddered.

Did he need to be ashamed of this? Draco certainly didn’t act ashamed of it. But then, Draco wasn’t vates, or leader of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow. He was important, of course he was, the most important person in Harry’s life. But he could make political decisions when he needed to; he wasn’t required to make them all the time.

Maybe you aren’t, either.

It was the same voice that had accused him of wanting. Harry wasn’t sure whose voice it was, his or Draco’s or Snape’s, but the more he listened, the more it sounded like a prim version of his own.

He wished his bones would stop telling him they would crawl out of his skin if he didn’t go to Draco. He had fought stronger magic than this, and kept his sanity intact. He should be able to fight this. He was an adult, he said, he didn’t need a guardian, and he should act like one. He set himself to fight.

Then he realized the problem with that. He wasn’t fighting an exterior enemy casting Imperio or some other compulsion spell at him. He was fighting himself, his own buried wants and desires and longings that he’d suppressed because he didn’t want to feel
them. And now he had a voice insisting that those suppressed things were all right, that he didn’t have to avoid them.

Harry shook his head in confusion, and then lifted his face in alarm. All around him, the pine trees were blazing. Had he lit them on fire? Since Woodhouse considered him part of itself, and thought that no part of the valley could attack any other part of the valley, it wouldn’t necessarily stop him.

Then he realized this wasn’t fire. This was pure magic. Coronas of color extended around the trees, deep purple closest to the trunks, blazing red and green and blue further out. As Harry watched, conjured birds blazed into being from the blue rings, doves colored almost the same as the pines, and wheeled around each other before they scattered across the forest. They took on more solidity as they went, and he doubted they would fade once they got out of range of his magic.

His power was breaking loose. And its first impulse was to create and drape beauty over the trees, not destroy things. Harry blinked and stared at the images for a long time before the flinches in his skin made themselves known again. Then he stared at his hand, and pondered what he’d learned.

*I—I didn’t destroy Woodhouse because I let my magic fly. I always assumed I would, and then I didn’t.*

Perhaps that meant that some of the other things he desired weren’t as disgusting as he’d believed. And perhaps that meant that if he did break a barrier on occasion, and acted as he wanted instead of as he thought he must, the world wouldn’t come to an end.

“Harry.”

Harry lifted his head sharply. Draco stood a few feet away, his back against one of the pines, shivering as the light played over his shoulders like warm feathers. Harry could only imagine the self-control it was taking for him not to come closer right now. And then he didn’t have to imagine, because looking into Draco’s eyes made him know. It was like standing a step away from water when one was dying of thirst.

Harry let out a deep breath. “I chose this,” he said, getting to one knee and then managing to stand. He knew his clothes had many small rips in them from rolling around on the stones, and that blood might be trickling over his skin, too. He didn’t care. The rush of well-being that had swallowed him on seeing Draco was already fading, and other urges were making themselves felt just behind it. “And I have been remiss in keeping my promises. If I hadn’t been, then this wouldn’t be striking me so powerfully now.”

Draco nodded. Sweat was already matting his hair to his cheeks and the sides of his face. Harry swayed forward a step, and then forced himself to stop. If he touched Draco now, that would be the end of rational speech, and he didn’t want Draco to think he’d been dragged into this unwilling. Draco had to understand.

“I want this,” Harry said clearly. His vision was awash with fire and light and magic and wonder, the barriers in him breaking more rapidly now that he was so close to Draco. “I do. And for once, I’m not going to be afraid of it.”

Finally, finally, he gave in to the magic that was sliding around him and tugging at him like many small impatient hands, and walked forward. He caught Draco’s mouth with his own and Vanished his clothing and Draco’s.

There were rocks on the ground, roots, dirt, and needles. Harry willed some of them to transform into a cushion, and that ceased to be a problem.

He found it very hard to stop kissing Draco. It felt as if he had never understood before what it was like, to have someone else’s tongue in his mouth. And then he realized that he hadn’t, because he had never allowed himself to concentrate on his own feelings to that extent. He’d been too preoccupied, waiting for his training to come back, or worrying that he was hurrying or hurting Draco.

“Stop thinking, already,” Draco insisted, tugging his mouth away and than yanking on Harry’s hair with both hands. Harry hissed at the pain, but even that ran along his nerves as if it had new paths to travel for the first time. “Feel, Harry.”

And Harry leaned forward, and did.

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Draco knew the difference now. He had thought Harry relaxed and uninhibited when he’d lured him into bed after the release of his emotions from the Occlumency pools, but now he knew Harry had been constraining himself, keeping up a barrier so that his magic would never do anything potentially frightening and Draco had nearly to coax him into orgasm.
Not this time.

Harry rolled him onto the cushion, his magic giving his muscles strength Draco doubted he would have had in any ordinary situation. Draco caught his breath for only a moment before Harry landed on top of him, driving it out again.

And then they were kissing, and who cared about breath?

Draco licked every corner of Harry’s mouth he could reach, knowing it was enormously wet, and not caring. Harry’s glasses were going to get broken between them—but the moment he thought that, they were gone, safely Vanished. Harry’s eyes were open, full of falling green, and staring directly into his, and he’d read Draco’s thoughts.

Draco could read his now, too. Harry was being forced to question those opinions he’d relied on for so long that he’d thought of them the same way he thought of objective reality. He no longer thought he was evil for wanting to simply reach out and take control sometimes, not if the person involved was inviting and welcoming the control. And he no longer thought it was selfish or base to want to feel the pleasure he felt when he was in bed with Draco.

He wanted to scoff, he really did, that Harry could ever have thought he was selfish, but Harry was tearing free of his mouth abruptly, and that hurt, both to lose the kiss and to break eye contact, and Draco hissed an obscenity, and Harry hissed something back, practically in Parseltongue, and rolled down his body, ignoring the way his elbows jabbed Draco’s stomach in his haste.

Draco was not sure what he expected. He pushed himself up on his elbows just as Harry let his breath ghost over his groin. Draco blinked, and then his head fell back and he moaned loudly just as Harry took his cock in his mouth.

Harry let his tongue guide the sucking, obviously realizing that teeth weren’t a good thing to let touch such sensitive skin. Draco wasn’t much help. His mouth was shaping words, but they weren’t the most articulate words around. He rolled almost off the cushion at one point, but Harry seized his thigh and held him in place. He tried to express his enthusiasm in some way other than the violent pulling on Harry’s head and jerking of his hips, but he didn’t think he was successful.

Harry chuckled. Draco almost screamed. Merlin, so close to coming already, he wanted to, he wanted to, and he didn’t think he had ever cared so much about one thing. Of course, his body had wanted this since he woke up this morning, or, at least, wanted contact with Harry.

He made himself sit up and look down at Harry, reaching out one hand to cup his cheek. Harry glanced up at him, still sucking lazily, and their eyes met.

Draco looked for a moment straight into pure power, pure exultation and pleasure, swifter than riding on a broom above the Quidditch pitch and wilder than a ride on a karkadann—the first time in his life that Harry had ever forgotten self-restraint and simply taken joy in what he could do.

Draco felt spiral trails of triumph and pleasure rise and dive through him, seeming to originate from the crown of his skull and his stomach, and when they met as a helix in the center of his chest, he came, shuddering and shaking in a way that seemed the fulfillment of all the twitches he’d experienced since waking this morning. Harry was laughing around him, but Draco didn’t much care. He’d never felt anything so good. When he shut his eyes and thus cut off his gaze with Harry, tilting his head back, the pleasure lessened only a little.

Harry pulled back, wiping his mouth when Draco peeked again. He was smiling, still smugly self-content.

_Time to test how much he’s really changed,_ Draco thought, and fought past the lassitude in his muscles that wanted him to lie down and go to sleep. “You’re going to let me return that,” he said, eyes locking on Harry’s.

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Harry felt his own breathing speed up, and wasn’t afraid of what Draco might think the reason was. Draco was meeting his gaze, anyway, and he knew what the reason was.

The thought of someone doing that to him made him want to leap out of his skin with excitement, and at the same time roused old spasms of fear. He didn’t want to lose control. More to the point, he didn’t want to take a position that could possibly be construed as stronger than Draco. He didn’t want to control anyone.

Draco’s gaze sharpened. “This is my choice, Harry,” he said. “And it’s going to happen, I promise you.”
Harry closed his eyes and swallowed. His arousal was painful by now, and if he didn’t allow Draco to touch him with something soon, mouth or fingers, then he was going to have to wank. And Draco was offering freely, and Harry wanted it. For a moment, desire battled desire, and Harry wondered if he could show even Draco this much trust.

Then he opened his eyes, fastened them on Draco’s, and nodded, lying back on the cushion and spreading his legs.

Draco’s grin lashed across his face like a whip. He leaned forward first, and, too quickly for Harry to read his intent out of his eyes, sucked at the place on Harry’s neck that he hated, because it was so sensitive.

Now, with his skin stretched tight and hot over most of his body, it made Harry scrabble madly at the cushion with his hand, his cries incoherent; he thought he started on a curse but didn’t manage to finish it. He wanted to come, damn it. He hooked his legs around Draco’s and pulled him forward, chest to chest. If Draco was going to be a tease, then he could damn well rub against Harry like a rabid animal and finish what he was starting right here.

But Draco pulled away, shaking his head, his mouth twisting as if he wanted to smirk but was too astonished to do so. “Remind me to ask for this side of you again,” he murmured, inching down the bed until his mouth was promisingly close to Harry’s groin. “It’s not in the same room with cringing and shy.”

“Are you going to bloody do this, or not?” Harry demanded, and Draco didn’t give him a wounded look for the demand. He only smiled. Harry felt a fear so old he’d barely known it was there any more char and die. He could speak in a sharp tone, be something other than the perfect pureblood who asked for more with a tone of cold courtesy in his voice or the diplomat who expected a refusal, and it was not the end of the world. Draco, in fact, was looking at him as if he wanted to fuck him.

“Of course I’m going to bloody do this,” Draco murmured, and then leaned forward.

Harry had wondered what this would feel like. He had sometimes imagined he wouldn’t be able to tell the difference between a blowjob and ordinary wanking. Not that he’d wanked, either, but he knew better how that felt.

It was incredibly different. Harry screamed, and then bit the palm of his hand. Draco said something around his cock—Harry didn’t know what it was, but he found his hand whipped away from his mouth by an invisible tug of magic. He supposed the point was that Draco wanted to hear him, not hear him hold back.

He didn’t. He fell into some realm where all that mattered was what he felt. He could sense the heat around him, eating up his skin, and the magic of the ritual inside him, eating through any wall he tried to raise, and the softness of the cushion behind his back, shifting as he rolled from side to side, and the slick trickle of saliva and sweat and wetness on his groin—

He came.

Unlike the other two times this had happened, there was no reluctance in him to pour himself out, to enter a moment when the pleasure was so keen that he couldn’t keep track of his body or his magic. Harry knew he made some sound, deep and embarrassing, by the feeling of rawness in his throat when he floated back down, and he knew he was tired and limp and so sated that the relaxation seemed to travel into his bones. And for a moment he had been sure he knew what standing in a British Red-Gold’s fire was like.

But it was done, and he couldn’t even move. He slitted his eyes when Draco crawled up beside him, and tried to say something, but wound up shaking his head as a yawn strained his jaw.

Draco read it from his eyes, anyway. And for the first time in far too long, his smile was without an edge. This is what he wanted, Harry realized, as they kissed, slowly and lazily this time. To see me completely open to him, not worrying about what would happen tomorrow, or making shagging him just one among many things I needed to do, or thinking of anything but him.

That’s what I wanted, Draco’s thoughts agreed. Now go to sleep, Harry. You want it.

And Harry did want it, no matter how much he thought he should stay awake, because it was the kind of thing someone honorable would do. He blinked and curled himself into Draco’s arms. The heat was flying away from him now, but being against Draco’s bare skin brought it back, and the ritual magic remained shining in his chest like a phoenix egg.

Then he did what he wanted, feeling better than he ever had.
Chapter Forty-Five: Readmitted

Harry snuggled closer to Draco. He had been unwilling as well as unable to leave him for long yesterday, and though he knew the ritual had technically ended at midnight, there was no law against wanting to hold his boyfriend in their bed, too. Draco never woke. His breathing was deep and contented, and the biggest movement he made was to press his back to Harry’s chest.

_He was right_, Harry thought, dropping his head so that his hair slid down the back of Draco’s neck. _After this joining ritual, I can’t wait for the next one._

A flutter of wings broke his reverie, and he glanced up over the curve of Draco’s shoulder. An owl sat in the window, patiently watching him. Harry frowned a bit. He didn’t think the bird was a breed he’d seen before—ash-gray, with gleaming orange eyes. In fact, he saw as he slid gently backward from Draco and stood, it wasn’t an owl at all. Someone had sent him a goshawk, and someone had convinced the bird to bear a letter. Harry didn’t know what the context might be. From what he had read, goshawks were more likely to bite a wizard’s thumb off than carry his messages, and spells made to tame other birds didn’t work well on them.

Carefully, he approached the bird, a spell to block a sudden strike at his hand or face on his lips. But she simply stared at him, particularly at his throat, and let him take the letter. Harry stepped back, gaze still roaming her for a threat, and cast several detection spells on the letter before he was satisfied that he held a simple piece of parchment.

When he opened it, he had to squint and use _Lumos_, and not only because of the darkness in the room. The penmanship was incredibly shaky, as though the letter-writer had done this on the back of a flying horse.

_Harry:

If you have received this letter, then you should know that my last hunt is done. The last of those who murdered my mate is dead, and the path I walk is growing narrower and swifter and steeper. With November’s full moon, its end comes, and mine.

Because you have taken my place as alpha of the pack, the invitation I extend to them comes also to you. When the full moon rises in November, my pack will be taken to a forest, where I will be waiting. You may come with them. If you choose to resist the magic, it will not transport you, but I would prefer that you come. I would show you, if I can, why I chose the path that I did.

Loki._

Harry’s mouth tightened, and he looked back at the goshawk. She continued to watch his throat—the place where the collar of white light had settled after Loki detailed him to lead the pack, Harry realized. He shook his head slightly.

“Why does he continue to do this?” he whispered. “Doesn’t he realize I would hardly be kindly disposed to him after he killed Kieran in front of me?”

The goshawk gave a little preening flap on the windowsill, as much to say that this did not concern her, and then turned and launched herself strongly into the darkness. Harry stared down at the letter again. Behind him, Draco stirred and murmured a sleepy protest at the lack of warmth.

“Harry? Come here.”

Harry had to smile at his tone, a combination of sulky whine and true longing. “I’m here, Draco,” he said, and floated the letter to the table beside the bed, while he slid in behind his boyfriend and wrapped his arms around him again. Draco flipped over to hold him, and seemingly fell asleep again before he could make another request. Harry rubbed his back and stared at the place where the goshawk had been.

_{He could have done more good by offering himself up to the British or French authorities and standing trial for his crimes like any ordinary wizard. But I suppose the ritual he chose to invoke might not let him. Magic like the power that let him pass me and my wards and kill Kieran has a price._

Harry closed his eyes, and tried to distract himself from thoughts of what would happen in November by the warm and willing weight in his arms. Draco murmured into his ear, and that helped, too.

The dream of pine needles and the sharp smell of snow and wolves howling did anything but help.
“And you can’t be convinced otherwise.” Camellia’s face said that she knew it was a lost cause even as she pleaded it, but she made the request anyway, her eyes shining and her throat all worked into one tight lump.

“No. I’m sorry.” Harry leaned forward and squeezed her hand. “Even if I didn’t want to return to Hogwarts, I think I would need to, to show everyone that I’m doing my best to fit back into normal wizarding society. And the pack can’t come with me there. Guarding me the way you would want to would segregate me too much from the average student.”

“But you’re not the average student,” Camellia told him, wrinkling her nose, as if “average” were a dirty word. “I don’t see why you should have to act like one, or why you should have to leave your pack behind you, Wild.”

Harry smiled. He suspected that Camellia was too wound in the ways of the pack to consider any other course reasonable. From what Camellia had told him, there was little point in lying or concealing one’s strength in a werewolf pack. The strongest was the one who became alpha. The thought of holding back on magical prowess or intelligence was foreign, as was the idea of pretending to more power than one had; what was the **point**? And so Camellia saw no reason for Harry to try and soothe other people who might have negative perceptions of him. He should have his pack to walk beside him, and his snakes to form a solid escort shutting him off from the rest of the school, if that was what he wanted.

“I will come visit you on weekends,” he said. “You have my promise of that. Unless you would rather choose another alpha?”

Camellia shook her head. “None of us are discontent, Wild,” she said. “If we are, you will be the first to know, and one of us will challenge you. Or simply ask you to appoint another alpha, of course.”

“And if I chose someone not strong enough to control the pack?” Harry asked. He thought he knew the answer. He simply wanted to see if he was right.

Camellia shrugged. “Then we’d topple him or her, and the strongest one of us would take over. And the loser would be expected to take his or her place in the pack with no resentment,” she added, correctly anticipating Harry’s question. “People who resent the place their own talents earn for them are so—so human.”

“Even if there was a cure for lycanthropy available, you wouldn’t take it, would you?” Harry asked her.

“Of course not.” Camellia looked at him with the kindly exasperation Harry had seen the pack use with one of the human guests who broke some unspoken rule, and occasionally for the werewolves transformed by Loki’s bite when they resisted the obvious. George received it quite often. “I was bitten when I was less than a year old. I’m twenty now. This is what I am, Wild. I would never give it up.” She was quiet for a moment, then added, “Having magic was wonderful. But if I were forced to choose between that and lycanthropy, I would choose to retain my lycanthropy.”

Harry nodded. “I understand, Camellia. And I would never force such a choice on you. I’ll be honest. I still hope that I can give you magic again someday, but I don’t know if it will ever happen.”

“I know that.” Camellia leaned forward and rubbed her cheek against his. Harry sucked in a shocked breath, then forced himself to hold still. He knew the pack relied on such physical affection as a means of creating bonds among themselves. If it felt wrong for him to touch anyone other than Draco right now, that wasn’t the pack’s fault. It was the lingering effects of their joining ritual from yesterday. “If it hadn’t been for such a fortunate chance, you would never have had the ability to give me that gift in the first place. I accept it.”

*She does,* Harry thought, after a few moments more of studying her face. *That must be part of the pack mentality that she talked about. Accept reality and get used to it. Yes, I wish more people around me thought that way.*

“Do you know how long you’ll have to spend at the school before you can come back and see us?” Camellia asked, picking up her cup of tea and taking a sip from it as if nothing had happened.

Harry glanced down at the official letter near his hand. McGonagall had signed it, and all the members of the board of governors. They consented to his returning to Hogwarts as a student, but the language was restrained rather than enthusiastic. That was the governors’ fault, Harry knew, not the Headmistress’s, but it did mean that he would have to act carefully, the focus of many eyes.

“A few weeks, at least,” he said. “I want to establish myself as someone not interested in rebellion, and that will mean obeying the rules. Students aren’t technically supposed to leave the school at all except for Hogsmeade weekends or holidays—or to go to St. Mungo’s if they’re too badly hurt for Madam Pomfrey to cure. I don’t think that my Apparating to Woodhouse counts under any
of those.” He tried to smile, but Camellia didn’t return the smile.

“It shouldn’t need to,” she said. “They should bend the rules for you.”

“That’s one thing we agree on, at least,” said Draco, as he entered the room and pulled up a chair behind Harry. Harry Levitated the milk and a cup of tea over to him, performing a warming charm on the tea as it moved. Draco raised an eyebrow and tipped some of the milk into his cup. Then he flung an arm around Harry’s shoulder and leaned in for a morning kiss. Harry gave it to him, aware of Camellia watching benevolently. He was just glad that the ritual magic, as Draco had explained to him yesterday, would have kept anyone from intruding to watch their coupling in the woods. The entire purpose of the Breaking of Boundaries was to lower the barriers of the joining couple, not to make them visible to everyone.

“You’re different,” Draco said, pulling Harry’s attention away from memories of yesterday, for which Harry was duly grateful. “They should put up with that, instead of pretending that you aren’t.”

Harry shook his head, nearly knocking the teacup from Draco’s hands. He leaned back a little so that wouldn’t happen again, and explained, “That’s the problem. I’ve broken so many rules. I’ve acted as though I was already an adult wizard, and an outlaw, and at a times a Lord. They get nervous, because someone sixteen years old shouldn’t have that much freedom and power, in their eyes. What if other children took ideas from it? So I have to show them that I am willing to accept restraints and limits. The monitoring board is a good idea, but it’s only the beginning. I have to show that I’m a student like any other, that I can receive detentions and attend classes and listen to my Head of House.”

“And that’s what I’m saying,” said Draco, as patiently as if Harry had never responded. “They may want you to act like that, but you’re different. And you’re the one who’s going to save them all when Voldemort comes hunting.” If there was any trace of a flinch left in him when he said that name, then Harry could neither hear nor see it. “They should be falling over themselves to kiss your hands and feet, not saying that you can only do such and such a thing.”

Harry rolled his eyes. This wasn’t a part of the joining ritual, or a discussion of vates principles, or a point of etiquette. This was something on which he and Draco were not ever going to agree. When he’d peered into Draco’s mind yesterday, what he’d seen was a young man who had a mindset remarkably similar to a werewolf’s. He thought strength should take precedence. Unlike a member of the pack, he wasn’t above using manipulation to make people think he had more strength than he really did, but someone who couldn’t be ignored shouldn’t be denied, either.

“I want them to demand that I act like an ordinary student and wizard,” Harry said. “I want them not to be awed, and if the way to reassure them that is to act like a student, like someone younger mentally than I am, then I will.”

“And you’re still so afraid of command?” Draco caught his eyes in a gaze that was not fair, because it carried the knowledge of each other they’d attained during the Breaking of Boundaries out into the open light of day. “If their requests interfere with your conducting the war or being a vates, you’ll still give in and work around them?”

Harry tried to look away, and found that he couldn’t. Draco’s eyes all but compelled an answer, and at least he heard himself saying, “No. I won’t. In those cases, I would break the rules to get what I needed to do done. I’ve done it plenty of times before, after all.”

Draco sat back with a satisfied smile and reached for his tea again. “Good. I think you should remember what you are, Harry. Other people can forget if they want to, but if you do, then I’ll remind you.”

“It might be useful for me to forget sometimes.” Harry pointed out, picking up a slice of bread and biting into it. It would be one of the last meals he ate in Woodhouse, and he tried to stifle the sadness of the thought with rational arguments. “If I can act as I should in front of the monitoring board, for example, then they’re less likely to suspect me of rebellion, and they’ll loosen the restrictions a bit.”

“I have plans for the monitoring board,” said Draco, smiling dreamily into space.

Harry choked on his bread. “Draco,” he said warningly, when he could speak.

Draco cocked his head at him. “Yes?”

Dear Merlin, he was beautiful, the sunlight through the window making his hair and his face gleam with the same level of intensity. Harry found his hand reaching out to touch him, regardless of the half-chewed piece of bread still in it. Draco reached out and caught the stump of his left wrist, his smile becoming something intensely private and self-satisfied. Harry was vaguely aware of Camellia standing and leaving them alone—the way that she might have left Loki and Gudrun alone, he thought.
“I’ll do whatever I think needs to be done about the monitoring board,” Draco said, his voice low enough that Harry wondered if Camellia could have heard anything, even if she had remained in the room. “And you won’t stop me, Harry, because you don’t trample on anyone’s free will, do you?”

“No,” Harry said, and frowned. His own voice was a breathless little huff, and he didn’t think it ought to be. He tried to pull back, to stop his mind from dancing on the dizzying precipice it seemed to prefer when Draco was around, but he only managed to shift the focus of his stare, from Draco’s face to his eyes. “I don’t want you destroying the monitoring board, Draco,” he said, and that sounded stronger. Good. “We worked too hard for it, and it’s the necessary compromise for the end of the rebellion.”

“I would never dream of destroying it.” Draco’s fingers stroked the end of his wrist, a light, absent gesture that Harry didn’t think he would have felt if he hadn’t been aware of every place the two of them were touching. “But I would dream of restraining it. I’m not vates, Harry, and at times like this, I’m very glad.”

Harry closed his eyes. The sensation didn’t end, though. He still sat in early morning sunlight with Draco, and his chest still felt tight and warm, and he was still remembering the ritual from yesterday.

“Excuse me,” he said, and pushed his chair back from the table, standing rapidly. “I—I need to go finish my breakfast.”

Draco chuckled, not sounding at all upset. “Yes,” he said, as Harry shuffled out of the room. “I thought you might.”

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Draco waited until he was sure Harry was out of the kitchen and not coming back. It would have been pleasant if he had, of course, because then they could take care of Harry’s little problem together. But this way, Draco could attend to his letters, the one he had received and the one he needed to write.

He took the piece of parchment out of his robe pocket. He’d received it the day before Halloween, and put it aside because he’d known, even if Harry didn’t, that he wouldn’t be in any shape to do complicated thinking on Halloween. Now he let himself read it one more time, to make absolutely sure that he hadn’t misunderstood a single thing the writer said. It was from a young Auror who’d seen Harry and Draco defeat Dumbledore and taken up a loyalty to them, of sorts. Their communication had been interrupted for a long time, first by the Sanctuary and then by Harry’s troubles with the Ministry, and Draco hadn’t been sure she would respond when he wrote again. But her response had come so fast that Draco wondered if the poor owl had had any time to rest.

_Dear Malfoy:_

_You have nothing to worry about. There are people in the Ministry who are loyal to your partner, even though the Minister could command their nominal faith. The Ritual of Cincinnatus startled us. We think that Minister Scrimgeour still has our best interests at heart, but there is nothing wrong with supporting Harry, especially since he and the Ministry are supposedly allies again._

_And the laws you asked me to investigate are indeed the way you remembered them. It was a way for the Ministry to compromise with Lord-level wizards long ago, so that the Lords and Ladies would not be forever fighting the Ministers. Certain loopholes have never been closed, and certain laws on the books were never changed. No one questioned my copying of those books. Auror trainees are supposed to become intimately familiar with them as a part of their training, after all._

_Below is a copy of the relevant law about restraining a witch or wizard with Lord-level power when they are working with the Ministry for the good of Britain._

_Hugwood’s Decree of 1793: Any wizard or witch of Lord-level power, whether Declared Dark, Light, or neither, who does not officially oppose the edicts and decrees of the Ministry of Magic, and acknowledges a rightfully elected Minister of Magic as his or her legal authority, is entitled to be free of supervision in his or her personal life. This applies but is not limited to cases of Auror raids, investigations by the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures and other Departments of the Ministry, and questioning by the Unspeakables. Suspicion of a crime must be proven to have some basis before any agent of the Ministry may arrest a Lord or Lady, and then they are to be treated with all due courtesy and respect, and are entitled to an interview with the sitting Minister of Magic as soon as possible._

_Thus, your suspicions were correct: in absolute terms, the monitoring board watching Harry is illegal. I suspect they are relying on his age to excuse this, if they even know about Hugwood’s Decree, but the law is clear. Age does not enter into it. Any wizard or witch of Lord-level power must be free to act as he or she will, and the moment Harry’s rebellion ended and he acknowledged Minister Scrimgeour as his legal authority again, their justification for action against him also ended._
What you do with this knowledge is, of course, up to you. I do not intend to move myself until I know that the monitoring board is causing our vates discomfort, and it may be best to save this weapon until the very last moment, since you could turn the board to your own uses. But I wished to tell you that your memory of the law was not faulty.

Draco smirked and folded his letter, smoothing out the creases carefully and putting it into his pocket. He didn’t intend to destroy the monitoring board any time soon. As his friend said, it might be useful, and it kept the parents of the Dozen Who Died content for right now and out of Harry’s way. And it occupied Aurora Whitestag, whom Draco thought was the most dangerous of Harry’s opponents. But if the interference ever became too much, he wanted the absolute confirmation that the Ministry had had no right to ask this as a compromise of Harry in return for ending the rebellion, and that Harry had violated his own rights in asking for it.

Now he had a letter to write.

It didn’t have to be long, and so it wasn’t. Draco also wrote it while people wandered in and out of Woodhouse’s kitchen, fetching themselves breakfast. He felt glances darted at him. He ignored them. Why shouldn’t he be able to? He was a pureblood wizard, and he was doing something perfectly legitimate, and most of the people watching him were halfblood or Mudblood idlers. And if they were his equals, they could never have matched his own confidence and poise.

He finished with the letter and studied it for a moment, then nodded and stood to seek out an owl. He imagined the expression on his father’s face when he received it, and had to chuckle.

It let Lucius know that Draco was willing to take up the Malfoy name and legacy again if he agreed in public that his disownment of his son had been a mistake, and promised never to consider such a course again. It had no trace of crawling about it, although, legally and formally correct, Draco had signed his name as ‘Draco Black.’ It would force his father to bend his pride.

And if he couldn’t, then Draco was still secure. He knew Harry had no compunctions against sharing his fortune with Draco and Narcissa; in fact, his mother would stay at Silver-Mirror until Lucius came to his senses. Neither of them was hurting. Both of them knew they had done the right thing.

Time for Lucius to bend his proud neck.

******

Ginny bit her lip and waved her wand at her trunk. “Pack.”

Her clothes began jumping into it in neat order. Ginny nodded as she watched the books arrange themselves under her clothes. Everything was folded so crisply she could have cut herself on the creases. Bill was arriving at Woodhouse to take her to Hogwarts—or perhaps the Burrow first.

And why am I nervous?

Ginny reminded herself sharply that she had done the right thing. She had come to Woodhouse because she thought she could be of use. And she had been. Even if it was only to cook food—Harry ordered plenty of food from the Squib-owned shops, but it usually arrived uncooked—and to use cleaning charms that didn’t offend Woodhouse and to stop arguments between werewolves and other people by casting a spell that made people pay attention to her instead. She’d done those things. She’d smoothed over minor problems, and maybe stopped some of them from becoming major problems. She’d done things.

She didn’t have anything to fear from her mother, or Ron, or anyone else who might yell at her.

She lifted her head proudly, then shrank the trunk and floated it behind her as she walked out of the house. Harry caught sight of her, and turned at once to offer her his hand. Ginny clasped it, looking into his face, and saw nothing there but honesty and calm and gratitude.

“Thank you for doing this,” Harry said quietly. “Even if you don’t think you changed the course of the rebellion, the fact that you were willing to do this shows everyone that this rebellion mattered to more people than just werewolves. And I hope that you do retain that courage, Howlers or not.”

Ginny found it a lot easier to smile when he said that, though she knew that worse than Howlers awaited her at home. Surely it would be home that Bill took her to first, and not Hogwarts. For one thing, none of the returning students were expected to attend class today, and Ginny knew that her mother would want to see her.
“Thank you,” she whispered, and hesitated, and then gave Harry a little bow of the kind that pureblood Light wizards were supposed to use. Her family was that, even though they didn’t choose to emphasize the purity of their blood. Harry bowed back, and then looked up.

“Hullo, Bill,” he said.

Ginny turned to face her eldest brother as he brushed casually through the crowded hallway, nodding to the few goblins there more cordially than he did to most of the humans. His gaze locked on hers, and Ginny braced herself. Bill had never sent a Howler himself, of course—that was more Mum’s way—but he could still give scoldings with the best of them. Ginny had almost broken her arm sneaking a ride on Fred’s broom once, and what he’d said to her hurt more than all the half-hysterical screaming from their mother.

Bill grinned at her.

Ginny blinked, sure that her eyes must have been playing tricks on her, and then Bill gripped her shoulders and gave her a little shake. Ginny blinked again, and then Bill said, “You have everything packed?”

“Yes,” said Ginny, in a bit of daze, and then Bill’s hand was on her shoulder, escorting her away from the crowd. She exchanged a few nods with people she passed, and did pause to say goodbye to Neville, but for the most part Bill kept her moving. And yet he wasn’t angry. In fact, he started whistling as they came to the edge of the valley and the end of the anti-Apparition wards. She didn’t understand.

*Unless he’s really looking forward to watching Mum scold me.*

“They are. I think that what I did was the right thing. And I’d do it again, if I had to choose. And of course I couldn’t tell Mum and Dad, because you know they would never have let me go. And—“

“I know that, Ginny.” And Bill gave her that grin again. Ginny recognized it; Charlie got it when he won the Gryffindor-Slytherin match in his seventh year, and Fred and George when they came up with a trick that made their father laugh after a long, weary day in the Ministry of Magic. But she’d never received it before. “I think you did the right thing.” He kissed the top of her head.

“You do?” Ginny felt a surge of warmth travel from the top of her head to the bottom of her toes. “You *really* do?”

“Of course.” Bill caught her hand in a firm shake. “I work with goblins, Ginny. They’re people, some of them better than any wizards, and they deserve as many rights as we have. And then I heard my little sister ran away to join the rebellion and help goblins get rights, even though she had to know that she would get a dozen Howlers. You’re doing the right thing, Ginny, and you went to someone you knew would protect you, not right into the middle of battle.” He winked. “And of course you didn’t get permission. You don’t ask for permission before you follow your conscience. You follow it.”

Ginny knew she was grinning like an idiot, but if idiots grinned when their big brothers approved of them, she didn’t mind being one. She took a firm hold on his hand in return, and said, “Does that mean that you’re not going to join in Mum’s scolding?”

“I’m going to ask her to listen to your side of the story, and support you,” said Bill. “Because you listened to your conscience, Ginny, and if Mum wants to keep you from doing that, she can bloody well stop being my mum.”

Ginny wondered if her grin lingered in the air behind her when they disappeared.

******

Remus had a decision to make.

He had contented himself with watching during the rebellion, noting the decisions Harry made and the way he made them, observing the way that he interacted with the pack, listening to the words he used to justify himself to Peregrine and other alphas who had had their homes destroyed. Now that the rebellion was done with, he had to collect his observations of Harry and put them together.

And what he had learned was this: Harry made a competent alpha for Loki’s pack. He still refused the bonds of the packmind, and that meant he ignored currents that Remus himself would have sensed, or Camellia, or anyone else who had spent some time in wolf form.
On the other hand, Remus was not sure that Harry could make a competent alpha for him. He simply had too much of an urge to correct Harry’s behavior. He looked at him and saw Lily and James’s baby boy, the quiet, bookish child who had hung back and seemed to be a transplanted Ravenclaw at times and a shadow at others. Remus had helped raise him, and he didn’t know if he could bow his head and yield to him now.

But what did that mean, especially since Camellia and the other members of Loki’s pack were content with Harry?

It meant that he should find a different pack. If the problem was with no one else, Remus thought, it had to be with him.

The words had hurt when he first said them aloud to himself, in the darkness of his own, solitary bedroom a week ago. But he had said them many times since, and the sting lessened each time. And now he had a friendship with one of the other alphas, Hawk, who had lost many of his older members to the strike on his safehouse—they had died protecting the children—and had hinted, in that tentative dancing-around-the-truth way that werewolves had when suggesting to another that he didn’t truly belong in his pack, that Remus was welcome in his.

Remus knew almost no one in the pack would miss him. That he could oppose Harry at all indicated that his bonds with them weren’t deep. And why should they be? Remus hadn’t followed the path that any of the others had. Loki had courted him into his pack, not adopted him. Before that, he had formed a ragtag sort of alliance with Hawthorn, Delilah, and Claudia, but the thing they had most in common was the werewolf who’d bitten them, and Hawthorn hadn’t been truly willing to learn the ways of an accepted werewolf, so that pack was doomed before it began.

No, Camellia and the others would close the hole he might leave and heal without him. Hawk would welcome him, and the young werewolves he led, still feeling their way with each other, would accept Remus more easily than older, established lycanthropes in a hierarchy would.

Maybe he would finally be able to act like the werewolf he wanted to be. And if he wasn’t feeling the push to follow Harry’s commands while remembering the child he’d been, Remus might have a chance at a more equal relationship with him.

“Remus?”

Startled, Remus turned his head. Harry stood in the doorway of his bedroom, staring at him quizzically.

“My neck started itching,” he said. “And I could see your name when I closed my eyes. Camellia said that meant you wanted to speak to me. What about?” His voice was guarded, cool, but not outright hostile, and Remus could not blame him for that. It might be what he deserved.

He wanted to smile sadly, but he held it in. Those measures only took effect with an alpha when he and his subordinate weren’t close. They shouldn’t happen at all in a properly run pack. And they didn’t need to happen with Camellia, or Trumpetflower, or any of the others. That was only one more sign that he didn’t belong in Loki’s pack any more.

“Yes, I do, Harry,” he said, leaning forward. “I wanted you to know that I’m going to a different pack.”

Harry blinked. “You are.”

Remus nodded. “It’s just—too hard, for both of us, if I stay here,” he said, staring into Harry’s eyes and ignoring the temptation to look down or off to the side. “I’ll always remember you and resent having to obey someone part of me thinks of as a child and part of me thinks of as a pup. And I still haven’t thought through everything Lily and James did, or come to terms with my part in it all.” He gave a quick shake of his head. “Maybe, if the laws had let me testify at the trial last year, that wouldn’t be the case. But it is, and I don’t think you need me putting such pressure and strain on the pack. In the meantime, the rest of the pack hardly needs or likes me. I’d rather go somewhere I can do some good, and then approach you with an offer of reconciliation when we’re both ready.”

Harry studied him in thoughtful silence. Remus wondered what he would say as the pause stretched into minutes. Would he want Remus to remain where he was, so that they could rescue their connection after all?

But Harry held out his hand, nodded, and said, “I understand. I hadn’t realized how much of this was still festering inside you, Remus. Go somewhere, and bleed it out, and then contact me again. I’d like to have you as a friend more than as a surrogate godparent or a packmate.”

Remus winced a bit at that too-honest assessment, but caught Harry’s wrist and looked him firmly in the eye. “Go with the scent
of snow in your nostrils and pine needles under your feet, Harry," he said. “And try not to worry too much if that blessing becomes literal. You’ll know what to do when the time comes.”

“What?”

But Remus had already said too much. He wasn’t supposed to betray the secrets of pack customs like that. He never had been a very good werewolf.

*Well, it’s time I learned how to be a better one,* he thought, and nodded a goodbye to Harry, and went to find Hawk.

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Finally, there was nothing left to do but go to Hogwarts.

Harry took several deep breaths as he packed the last of his clothes into his trunk. This was the end of the rebellion, and from now on, he could act like a normal student—until the next crisis arose, but as long as he tried to think about what he did before he did it, and listened to the monitoring board, and tried to obey the school rules, then he should be able to **avoid** the next crisis.

The next moment, he groaned. *This is never going to work. I’m doomed to land in the middle of crises all my life.*

“Ready, Harry?”

The door had opened to reveal Snape. Harry nodded and shrunk his trunk, then looked towards the loo with a frown. “Draco!”

Draco stepped back out, a preoccupied frown on his face. It was a look he’d worn all day. Harry wondered if he were more worried about going back to Hogwarts than he appeared. “Are you all right?” he asked.

A toss of his hair, and Draco was back to his normal self. “Yes,” he said, and picked up his own trunk. “I want to say farewell to my mother, of course, but since she wants to say farewell to us, I hardly think that’s a problem, is it, sir?” He darted a glance at Snape, who merely shook his head.

Joseph joined them as they made their way towards the kitchen, where the people who wanted to say goodbye awaited them. Harry watched in amusement as Snape’s face tightened, but then had to look away as Joseph met his eyes and mouthed something about having a conversation soon. He wondered when the Seer would understand that while he was perfectly happy to talk about things that actually **mattered**, he’d dealt with Kieran’s death, and that was in the past now.

Narcissa was the first to meet them when they entered the kitchen, but she was *only* the first; there were many more people than Harry had suspected. He felt his face flame, even though so far they were only staring, and Narcissa was stroking Draco’s hair back from his forehead and murmuring something in his ear that was probably much more embarrassing than being stared at.

Draco nodded. “I’ve thought it through, Mum,” he said. “This is what I want to do.”

Harry believed he heard Narcissa utter a delicate sigh, but she turned to him then, and Harry had other things to say. “I hope you understand that you’re always welcome in Silver-Mirror, Mrs. Malfoy,” he said. “For as long as you like.”

“Narcissa,” she reminded him, and hugged him instead of merely clasping his outstretched hand the way Harry had thought she would. His face now hot enough to hurt, he hugged her carefully back, and she murmured into his ear, “Take care of him, Harry, and let him take care of you. And I’ll see you soon, since I have a seat on the monitoring board.”

“Yes, Narcissa,” Harry said automatically, because he couldn’t think of another thing to say, and turned away to face the others.

Hawthorn touched his shoulder with one hand, a soft push more intimate than an embrace. “Take care of yourself, Harry,” she said. “And thank you for my life back, and my freedom, without which life is worth nothing.”

Harry considered her warily as he reached up to touch her arm in return. *Something* had changed her from the woman who tore apart her bedding over Claudia’s death, but he still couldn’t tell what it was. He hoped it would stay constant, though, so that Hawthorn would not yield herself to bitterness and outrage again. “You deserve freedom,” he said. “And so much more than that. I wish there had been some way to bring justice to the Aurors who hurt you, but—“

Hawthorn shrugged carelessly. “Sometimes there is not.”
That made Harry look at her suspiciously, but Adalrico Bulstrode had come up and asked for his attention, so he had to let it go. And then, after a cordial wish for his continued good health, Adalrico actually said, “At first I longed for bloodshed, to show you why my name was feared when I walked among the Death Eaters. And then I decided that a war of words is better.”

Harry blinked. “Really, sir?”

“Yes. This way, my enemies are much more likely to underestimate me.” Adalrico chuckled. “Their memories of the time I was feared are nearly twenty years old. If I have to go to battle again, they will think me soft because I did not fight in this rebellion, and I can prove them wrong.”

Harry smiled, though the logic was strange to him, and shook his hand.

Pierre Delacour was waiting behind Adalrico, his hand intertwined with Millicent’s. And next to him was Adrienne, his Veela cousin, and she spoke first, before Pierre could say a word—or perhaps instead of him, Harry didn’t know. “I will carry a good report back to the Veela Council, Harry vates,” she said, eyes fastened to his. “You have what we seek.”

“What is that?” Harry asked. It might be something as simple as “magical power,” for all he knew. The most useful piece of information he possessed about the Veela Council was that their decisions needed to be unanimous, and with several hundred members, it took them years to get anything accomplished.

“You were outraged when you heard about the deaths of werewolves,” said Adrienne. “Most wizards are not. They—” She said something in French, then shook her head. “They say they care about Veela,” she said. “They think they care about Veela. But they care more about humans. We do not blame them. They cannot help it. But you will have werewolves and centaurs and goblins and Veela with you, and they will matter as much to you as humans. Not as much as your mate, perhaps.” She smiled at Draco, then smiled back at Harry. “But you will care if someone puts them in prison, or hurts them. That they are not human does not matter.”

“Of course it doesn’t,” said Harry blankly, wondering why the Veela Council had needed an observer on him to figure that one out. “I could hardly be vates if I thought differently.”

“There are many who have claimed to be vates, or claimed our allegiance, and do not care,” said Adrienne placidly. She was the one who took and kissed his hand this time. “Good wishes go with you.”

Harry nodded, still surprised, and turned around to say farewell to the werewolves. Some of the alphas had accepted his offer to shelter their packs in Woodhouse and work in a headquarters that would operate out of London, once Harry figured out which of several seemingly abandoned buildings near Diagon Alley actually belonged to the Blacks. Others would return to their safe houses, which could be cleaned up and repaired in some cases, and were formally giving up his protection, though, they hoped, not his friendship.

Harry answered as politely as he could, and worked his way through the packs until he arrived at the northern goblins, who were standing near the back of his room. Helcas had a crooked smile as he watched him. Harry wondered if he had sharpened his teeth into points for a good goblin clan reason, or to frighten the people around him.

“Take this, as a token of our friendship, and to summon our aid if you need it,” said Helcas, pressing a chain into his hand. “Swing it, and we will hear your call, as our southern cousins will hear the call of their horn. We could hardly be your only allies without a way to hear you.”

Harry knew of no way to refuse the gift gracefully, so he accepted it with a murmur of thanks, and coiled the chain around his wrist. “And you will contact me if you are having trouble with the Goblin Board in the Ministry, I hope?” he asked.

Helcas gave him a superior look. “We are not like wizards, Harry vates,” he said. “We can admit when we need help.”

Bone nodded when Harry caught his eye. “So can we,” he said. “We will follow you back to Hogwarts. And we have an advantage over your other allies, vates. We are close beside you. Should you raise your flag in rebellion again, you have only to call on us.” He looked wistful for a moment, and Harry realized that the centaurs had had little chance to fight directly, except when they had gone with him to the Ministry to break Hawthorn and the other werewolves out of Tullianum. Harry was torn between sympathy and hoping fervently that he never had the chance to rise in rebellion again. When he started hunting Voldemort, he hoped it would be a private thing, involving only him and those others who had some reason to hate the Dark Lord, rather than a great war that would rip the lives out of innocents.

“Thank you,” he said instead, and went outside. He had one more person to say farewell to, one who wouldn’t fit into the kitchen.
The karkadann trumpeted on seeing him. She stood on the other side of Woodhouse, but that hardly mattered. She sprinted towards him, her feet tearing divots out of the ground as usual, and skidded to a stop in front of him. Harry shivered. To be so suddenly close to such speed and power and heat was daunting. Her head dipped, and her black horn rubbed along his shoulder as she gave a low squeal.

“I know.” Harry whispered, stroking her mane. It fell through his fingers like heavy sand. “I’m sorry. I wish there was something I could do, some way I could take you with me. But you couldn’t live in the Forbidden Forest. The webs would try to bind you, and the other creatures would try to eat you.”

The karkadann snorted, but it was a cheerful sound, instead of the pouting one that Harry had expected. She brushed her horn against him restlessly, and then breathed out, the stink of rotting meat rushing over and bathing his face.

Harry blinked, and then realized he had a vision in his mind, similar to the visions he used to receive when Fawkes sang. The karkadann was sprinting across sand in a place Harry supposed might be North Africa. She bugled, and webs splayed and spun around her as other karkadanns emerged. The one who had come to visit Harry stopped running and began telling them all about the *vates*. The others stamped their feet as they listened, and then one of them hit another with his horn, and then the whole gathering exploded into an orgy of violence that was also a dance.

He sighed as the vision faded, and looked at the karkadann sternly. She snorted at him, unrepentant. She was going to do it, and he could hardly control her.

“Try to be good, anyway, and don’t let anyone glimpse you on the way out of England,” Harry muttered, and then watched with his heart in his throat as she kneeled before him for a moment, her horn and her forelegs and her mane sweeping the ground, before she turned and exploded towards the east and the pine forest with a burst of pure power.

“Are we going home now?”

Harry started. It was Argutus, curled up in a pocket of his robe, who had asked the question. Harry smiled and stroked the Omen snake’s head as it looked out of the pocket. Argutus had had little to do while the rebellion continued, except explore Woodhouse, and he had made it clear that he was tired of that. He would be glad to see Hogwarts again.

_Hell, I will be, too._

“Yes, we are,” Harry replied, and then turned to find Snape, calming his fears as best he could on the way. For once, he would think about everything working out for the best. The karkadann would get out of England without anyone seeing and shooting her. The Ministry would keep its promises. Those werewolves who didn’t want to stay in Woodhouse would find homes and jobs of their own. His relationship with his pack would survive, and Loki’s strange letter would mean something other than the death it seemed to promise. His bonds with Draco and Snape would grow deeper. Joseph would understand that there were some conversations they didn’t need to have. Hogwarts would a calm place to spend the remainder of his sixth year.

_I can dream, can’t I?_

_—*_—*_—*_—*_

**Intermission: Discovery Is Your Death**

“Severus.”

 Snape continued to brew, because he knew who it was. Only three people called him Severus. One was the Dark Lord, and Snape would have sensed his magic coming and knelt long since. One was Regulus, and his voice was well-known and seemed to reach into the forsaken, neglected corners of Snape’s soul—not that he would allow it to remain there.

The third was Lucius, who used his first name without invitation. And this was him now, sounding intolerably self-satisfied as he lounged against the doorway of Snape’s Potions lab in the Riddle house.

“What does our Lord wish, Malfoy?” Snape said at last, when he thought enough time had passed to allow Lucius to seethe, but not enough to show disrespect. He did not want to become entangled in the twisted games that the man played with the other Death Eaters, not now that he had to keep his mind clear for his three most important tasks. He had to spy for Dumbledore, and he had to convince Voldemort he was still loyal, and he had to take care of Regulus, who had very nearly broken from the intense torture that the Dark Lord put him through for his reactions to the fifteen-minute _Crucio_ Snape had endured. Politics had never
been less of a concern to him than they were now.

“Why must it be our Lord’s request, Severus?” Lucius’s voice was delicate and shallow, and two years ago, Snape might even have believed that he was truly hurt. But he had become a Death Eater since then. The friendly man who had coaxed him into the Dark Lord’s fold, and taught him how to sense magic as pain, might as well have gone into exile. “Why can it not be mine?”

“You wish little that I can provide, Malfoy,” Snape said calmly, watching as the potion came to a boil. He cast the last handful of comfrey he held into it, and the liquid hissed like Nagini. Then it calmed, the ripples spreading out with unnatural speed from the center of it. Snape lifted his wand and cast a stabilizing spell on the potion, then nodded. Ten minutes of cooling, and he could take it to Regulus. It would soothe the jerking motions in his limbs, very nearly bordering on convulsions.

A light step was all the warning he had before Lucius’s wand was pressed against the back of his neck. Snape stared straight ahead and cursed himself. Yes, when brewing, he had the tendency to fall into a trance state and only consider the potion in front of him, not the man behind him, but it was a weakness he usually remembered and compensated for. And he should have done so now. Snape was far more angry at himself than he was at Lucius. Lucius was simply being himself. He would be obsessed with power plays and precedence until the day he died.

“You will not ignore me when I am speaking to you,” Lucius whispered.

“No,” Snape agreed, not letting his cold mask slip from either face or voice. If this potion cooled for more than ten minutes, then he would have to make it again, and Regulus would suffer more hours of pain—only minutes to those who did not hurt as he did, but endless while one endured them. Snape knew that well, even if it had usually been mental knives that laid him flat and not physical ones. Sometimes he thought he could feel the blades stuck through his head if he turned his neck just right. Some James Potter and his friends had put there, some Eileen Prince, and some Tobias.

What Lucius had never done was put one there. And he would have the chance if this took more than ten minutes, and Snape had to brew again. So he would make sure that it did not take that length of time.

“What do you wish, Lucius?” he asked, and took care to make his voice appropriately humble.

On the verge of getting what he apparently wanted, Lucius grew coy. Of course, he was probably able to sense that time was important to Snape, and therefore he didn’t want to hurry. He twirled the wand against the back of his neck. Snape counted heartbeats and translated them into minutes. Three had already gone by.

“I know where you go,” Lucius said at last, in a murmur so soft that Greyback could have been lurking outside the room and he would not have heard, “when you go off by yourself.”

Those solitary journeys were Snape’s trips to report to Dumbledore. He did not dare use an owl, nor slip off on his own too often. He was necessary to the Dark Lord’s success as his Potions brewer, and now he had to care for Regulus as well. He had to go under the cover of his missions.

And if Lucius knew what they meant—

But he did not, Snape was certain. He would have gone to Voldemort if he had. Lucius had tied his life to Voldemort with that Dark Mark on his pale, pretty arm. He could not afford the loss of this war.

*Unless he really does want something out of me more than he wants to see our Lord win against the old fool.*

But no, Snape would not think that. He would think that Lucius was running a very long bluff. And if he was, then Snape would bring his own greatest weapon into play. It was not one he had thought to use so soon, just a few months after he created it, but if it was required, then it was required.

“You do not know, Lucius,” he said calmly.

“And why not?” Lucius’s voice surged with eagerness, no doubt hoping that Snape would tell him what he hadn’t been able to find out himself through sheer carelessness.

*Unless he knows already.*

Snape told himself sternly that Lucius did not know, and that he was to stop thinking of that, now. The emotions and the thoughts dropped back beneath the Occlumency pools, and he could breathe more freely, now. He even managed a smile, and a slight
chuckle, just this side of what would probably push Lucius to curse him.

“Tell me.” The wand poked him hard enough to rock his head forward.

*Seven minutes.* He had three left. And really, Snape hated being pressured to act like this, and he disliked revealing his greatest weapon so early, and he was only confirming to Lucius that there was indeed something important about the way he slipped off by himself, which wasn’t what he had wanted to do. But sometimes, one made a sacrifice one hadn’t wanted to keep playing.

He thought a nonverbal spell, using wandless magic; he was certainly angry enough to do so. And a tiny charmed vial floated out of his robe pocket. Lucius shifted his head to stare at it.

To his credit, he recognized the liquid inside the vial at once. Why not? It was a potion that Voldemort had ordered him to make and use on a prisoner a month before, insisting that Lucius brew it again and again until he got it right.

For a long moment, there was nothing behind Snape, not even breath. And then Lucius took the wand away from his neck. Snape turned to see him bowing. His face was full of hatred, but mingled with the hatred was respect, and a calculation that Snape recognized and even trusted. Lucius would not stop hunting him, trying to repay him for this humiliation, but he did understand, now, what lengths Snape might go to to defend himself, and so he would not try something this stupidly obvious again, either.

“My apologies, Severus,” he said. “I had no idea you were so busy.” He gave him a shallow nod, and then turned and walked away.

Snape floated the charmed vial back into his robe pocket, scooped up a cup, dipped up the cooling potion on the ten-minute mark, and then bore it to Regulus.

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Regulus was half-delirious from the pain, even after Snape had made him sip the potion and then eased him back onto his pallet. That was the only reason he was saying such ridiculous things, or had such a ridiculously tight grip on his hand now.

“You’re a good friend, Severus,” he murmured, his eyes sliding relentlessly shut. The potion induced sleep after it soothed the pain. “Such a good friend.”

“I am not,” Snape sat still, the cup in one hand, and monitored the flutter of Regulus’s pulse in his throat, making no attempt to return the grip. Though it was rare, ingestion of this potion sometimes caused the drinker’s heartbeat to speed up beyond what was comfortable. And what would he do if someone came by and saw him clutching Regulus’s hand and mistook it for weakness? He could not afford it, not now that he was a spy. Discovery of any kind was his death. “Your brother insured that I would never feel any friendship for a Black.”

Regulus laughed, and forced his eyes open. Snape tossed him a cool look. “What have I told you about fighting the potion’s effects?” he demanded.

“You—you’re so much better than the rest of them,” Regulus muttered, and his glance was fond. “And sometimes you act as though you thought you were exactly the same. You can’t see it, can you, Severus? I thought you knew, and were guarding the treasure inside you from contamination against the darkness. And now I realize that you don’t even see it. You do think you’re the same as the rest of them.”

“You are babbling,” Snape told him flatly.

“No, I’m only speaking the truth, something I can’t do now,” said Regulus, and his grin was half-crazed. “You have the strength to survive where none of them do. You have the courage that’s going to bear you out of here. The rest of us might die, but you’ll flutter free like—like some moth. No, like some phoenix.”

“And now you’re raving,” Snape said, frowning. The potion’s effects sometimes relaxed the boundaries of the brain, but not by this much. He peered again at Regulus’s pulse.

“I’m not,” Regulus insisted. “You’re more than just a Death Eater, more than just Voldemort’s servant.”

Snape didn’t look at him warily, because someone was watching. Someone was always watching. The Dark Lord depended on all his Death Eaters to watch one another. “Of course I am,” he murmured. “I am his most trusted servant.” He eased Regulus’s faltering hand from his and back down onto the pallet.
“A phoenix,” Regulus muttered, closing his eyes, finally. “Strong enough not just to survive, but to live.”

Snape shook his head and kept on watching as his restlessness smoothed into sleep. While he did, he thought of the vial in his robe pocket, the glittering, transparent green liquid with a lock of fragile blond hair floating in it.

Lucius had come to them exulting a short time ago, delighted by the birth of his son. It had been the first honest emotion Snape thought he had ever seen on his face. And as he celebrated and conjured wine for those Death Eaters in the Riddle House, Snape had seen a strand of hair clinging to his robe, and had charmed it free with a simple motion of his hand.

This potion, graced with a strand of the victim’s hair, would make them die choking on their own blood. And it worked from a distance, and the younger the victim, the better.

Snape doubted that Lucius would try anything against him while Snape essentially had a knife laid against the throat of the vulnerable Draco sleeping on Narcissa’s breast. But it would have been pleasant to keep the weapon safe and secret for a while. As it was, Snape knew he would have to watch his back. Lucius would kill him if he could.

Perhaps it would be best, after all, Snape thought, as he gazed at Regulus’s sleeping face, if I let him know about the second strand of hair, the one I do not carry on me at all times.

You are wrong, Regulus. I am no phoenix. Or I am, at best, one that burns with a black flame.

Interlude: The Liberator’s Sixth Letter

November 3rd, 1996

Dear Minister Scrimgeour:

I am sorry that I haven’t been able to communicate with you more often, sir. The worst happened. Soon after I sent my last letter, my father did find out that I had communicated with someone else without his permission, though he did not find your name.

I suffered. But it is a means of suffering I am used to, and endure, my eyes looking towards the day when all can be free.

My father released me from the coffin he chose for me when it became obvious that things had changed in such a way as to favor the cause of the Light. The first thing he did when I was conscious again was to tell me about the bargain that the Light pureblood families had made with Harry vates. I asked as many questions about this bargain as I dared, and it seems genuine. At least, it is genuine on Harry’s part.

The Light wizards like my parents, who have always regretted the fall and loss of Albus Dumbledore, will try to secure more out of it than they should rightfully have. I tell you this as a friend, Minister. My father has made no solid plans as yet, but he has not gained as much as he feels he should have in the last few months, and that always irritates him. He is a regular Lucius Malfoy for scheming and planning—but he considers himself different, of course, because of the allegiance he Declared for. I wish that he might look into the Mirror of Erised or another legendary glass at some point, and see his own ambitions writ there in easily recognizable prose. That might reconcile him to the notion that Dark and Light are not as different as he thinks, at least when he is the exemplar of Light in the comparison.

The mirror that my parents used to make contact with, or spy on, Falco Parkinson is gone. I am sorry, Minister. I can only surmise that they grew nervous having it in their possession, and passed it on to another member of the Order of the Phoenix.

The more I listen and look, the more convinced I am that Falco Parkinson never actually made contact with my parents, or any other members of the Order. They wouldn’t be so quick to abandon him and focus their attention on this bargain with Harry vates if that were the case. That does not mean he isn’t dangerous, but you may have to worry less about his fanatical followers and more about him.

Keep as close an eye as you can on Harry and his monitoring board, Minister. And look close to your own allies, as well. One may harbor a serpent in the breast without even realizing it.

May the shadows shelter you.
Chapter Forty-Six: I Am No Lord

Connor hugged him on his way into breakfast a few days later, and Harry turned and looked at him in puzzlement. Connor blinked back at him for a moment, then laughed and hugged him again. “I can’t be glad about my brother being back?” he muttered into Harry’s neck.

“I—of course you can,” said Harry, and gave him a one-armed hug. His hand was clutching his response to Loki, which he’d intended to send from the Owlery after he ate. “But you’ve hugged me every day now.”

“I missed you,” said Connor simply, shrugging, and hugged him again. Harry could feel Draco’s stare on the back of his neck. He ignored it. It was one thing for Draco to dislike Connor for what he’d done in the past, and another for him to be jealous of his touching Harry.

“Where’s Parvati?” Harry felt free to ask, when Connor pulled back. He had held back on the question as long as he could, but he was wondering if the amount of time he’d spent around Connor in the past few days was responsible for driving his brother’s girlfriend away.

Connor glanced at the floor.

Harry made a soft concerned noise, and let the letter hover in the air beside him as he grasped Connor’s chin and tilted it back up. “Well?” he asked, the moment they were eye to eye and he doubted that Connor could hide anything important from him.

“She—said that she needed to think about things, and I needed to think about things, too,” said Connor, with a small shrug of his shoulders. “I still like her, but we disagreed too much. She was afraid that you would come back to the school so proud of what you’d achieved that you wouldn’t hesitate to use your magic on other people.” He peered at Harry from beneath his fringe. “And I told her that wasn’t true, and then when she saw it wasn’t, she turned away from me. I think she doesn’t like being proved wrong.”

“And that only became apparent to you now?” Draco sneered from behind Harry.

Harry gave him a swift reprimanding glance, and turned to his brother. “I’m sorry, Connor. If you think it would help, I’ll talk to her myself, and try to explain that I have no interest in using my magic against others.”

Connor shook his head. “She barely took it well from me, Harry. She’d scream at you, and then feel embarrassed about it later.”

“All right.” Harry was the one to hug Connor this time, and to watch with pitying eyes as he went to the Gryffindor table. Then he took up Loki’s letter again and accompanied Draco to the Slytherin table.

Heads turned as they walked across the Great Hall. Of course they did, Harry thought, and strove his best to stay calm. They had only been back at Hogwarts for three days. That wasn’t long enough for most of the students to start thinking of them as Housemates and not rebels. And if some of the students followed the articles in the Daily Prophet that declared Harry had done a great service for the wizarding world by ending the rebellion, and others followed the articles in the Vox Populi that claimed Harry had made a cynical political bargain with the Light wizards in return for increased power among his favored magical creatures—could Harry blame them for that? Yes, in some ways, both of those were true.

“I wish they would stop staring,” Draco said viciously as they sat down and accepted the cornflakes and pumpkin juice from Millicent.

Harry looked at him in surprise. He couldn’t remember the last time Draco had complained about attention, positive or negative. “Why? Don’t you enjoy being looked at?” He added a teasing tone to his voice, and grew even more surprised when Draco shook his head at him.

“What do you have to do to make them see that you’re not going to use your magic against people?” Draco muttered, and then sank into brooding.

Harry shrugged. “Some of them won’t believe it no matter what I do or say,” he said, and poured milk across his cornflakes. “I try
not to let it bother me, Draco. At least my past isn’t on display in the papers the way it was last year, and people aren’t attacking me with curses the way they did then, either. And at least I have you now, in a capacity greater than I did last year.” He squeezed Draco’s wrist reassuringly.

The frown remained in place. Harry ate, darting glances sideways at his boyfriend from time to time.

*I don’t understand why this bothers him so much. If anything, our roles should be reversed. He’s the one who understands how politics work, better than I do, and he knows that people won’t always be reasonable, especially if it suits their purposes to remain unreasonable.*

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Draco *did* understand how politics worked, and he had read the articles in the *Vox Populi* closely, as Harry had asked him to do. And it seemed to him that a large number of them all had the same style, though of course, as was typical, the paper listed no actual author for the writing.

This author was among the most cautious and clever of them. Rather than claiming outright that Harry was part of some vast conspiracy to take the wizarding world away from its rightful possessors and hand it to the magical creatures, as some of the wilder voices did, she—Draco thought of the writer as a woman, for some reason—suggested that that *might, possibly, could* happen, if certain concerned citizens of the wizarding world didn’t observe the signs carefully. She approved of the monitoring board, and now and then listed increased powers for them as a good thing. She hinted now and then that Harry had won everything he wanted, including herding the Light wizards into his fold, with a minimum of fuss. And what might someone with that kind of power of persuasion do to the Ministry and the political situation of the British wizarding world? He even had contacts in other countries, if the record of foreign Ministries of Magic supporting him was true.

Draco had found an opponent, one he respected, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t incredibly frustrated.

The frustration only increased when he watched the Patil bitch and other students who should have *known* better shying from Harry. He hadn’t flattened the Ministry with his magic, or come back to the school and demanded concessions from the Headmistress. Ironically, Draco thought, it might have been easier for them to understand if he had. Lords had a long history of acting that way, whether Light or Dark. The only thing that varied was *what* they demanded.

But Harry didn’t ask for anything, and so now most of them were convinced he was playing some sort of long-running game, and that the werewolves were merely the first of the magical creatures to receive equal rights. From the murmuring Draco had heard, house elves were next.

He glanced at Harry, eating his cornflakes with a placid expression, and as placidly convinced that everything would work out. He shook his head. That wasn’t to say that Harry was unconcerned by what happened around him, or unresponsive to threats. But he didn’t tend to respond to the threats until they *became* threats. He was all about curing ills, and not preventing them.

He could have used the devotion he *had* garnered from the saner sections of the British wizarding public to ask for anything he wanted. He could have at least asked for small things from his Housemates, such as being made Seeker on the Slytherin Quidditch team again. Instead, he had told Draco that the new Seeker they’d chosen, a fourth-year named Sam, flew better than he would right now, having practiced as Harry hadn’t had a chance to do in the last few months.

He accepted so much of what happened to him.

It drove Draco *mad.*

His attention was distracted when he saw an immense bird flying through the window of the Great Hall, heading straight for him. Even among the maze of owls dropping the *Daily Prophet* and the *Vox Populi* and letters on the House tables, it stood out; it was a great horned owl, and those weren’t used for ordinary message delivery. Draco’s heart beat all the harder when he recognized the owl as Julius, kept solely for Lucius Malfoy’s most important post.

Julius landed in front of him, scattering Draco’s plate and bowl as if neither existed, and fixed him with a condemning yellow eye that didn’t make Draco hold out much hope for the contents of the letter. Draco took the envelope carefully, and still didn’t quite manage to evade the large beak that nipped at him, gashing open one of his fingers to the bone. He was grateful for his father’s training in schooling one’s emotions in public then; his face remained cool even as blood poured down on the tablecloth, and even as Harry exclaimed and cast a healing spell at him.

“What does *he* want?” Harry asked, casting a flat look at Julius. Draco remembered the owl cutting open Harry’s own wrist and
arm, but he had accepted the pain. It seemed it was different when Draco was the one hurt, and he felt a ridiculous stir of warmth at that even as he tried to open the letter without getting blood on it.

“For me to read this and respond, I would wager,” Draco murmured.

The letter was simple, and had been written in gold ink. Draco searched his mind for the significance of that for only a moment before he remembered. Malfoys used gold ink to address traitorous spouses and rebellious children.

November 4th, 1996

Dear Draco Black:

In no way do I accept the ‘compromise’ that you appear to be offering. What promises I make, I keep.

There will be no public apology unless it comes from your own mouth. You will meet me in private, and I will explain how matters stand to you. What lies between your mother and me is our own affair, and I will have a different meeting with her. But for now, you will come to the Manor on this Saturday, and explain your side of the story. I will listen without interrupting, and then I will tell you mine. I am confident that you will see sense.

You will not abandon all you have become, all I have trained you to be, simply because you wish to bed a halfblood.

Lucius Malfoy.

“I received a letter from him, too,” said Harry.

Draco looked up. Harry was holding a piece of parchment flat in his own hand as if he didn’t want to touch the writing, and he gave Draco a small, hard smile.

“This is his formal resignation from the Alliance of Sun and Shadow,” said Harry.

My father has gone mad.

Draco didn’t think that was literally true, but he was sure that Lucius’s pride and stubbornness were preventing him from making some very simple gestures of submission and apology. And now he wanted what he had always had, including a place in Harry’s good graces and admiration in his son’s eyes, without bending one inch of that stiff neck.

“How far can he actually travel from you?” he asked Harry. “He’s in a truce with you, after all, and you gave him the gift of Parseltongue as he gave you the gift of passing the Manor’s wards.”

“He can go as far as he wants,” said Harry, his eyes almost unearthly, “as long as he doesn’t hurt me, one of my allies, or someone else.” He nodded to the letter in Draco’s hand. “If that had contained an actual physical threat to you, I could call him on violating the truce-dance. As it is, he’s approaching you in the context of disowning a family member, and I can’t interfere with a pureblood family, unless they actually ask me to.” His lips twisted. “I wonder if that was one reason he was very careful to truce-dance with me as an individual, and not commit himself to me more than access to the Manor implies. He wanted to be sure that I wouldn’t be seen as part of the family, that I wouldn’t have the authority to ask him what the fuck he thinks he’s doing by disowning his only son and magical heir.”

“I’m not exactly his magical heir,” Draco murmured, his mind racing. “I’m the Malfoy family’s magical heir. He can’t take that away from me. But only certain legacies come down to the bloodline to the magical heir. Blood heirs and legal heirs receive different things, and he might choose someone else as legal heir, simply to make me angry.”

“Draco.”

He recognized the tone in Harry’s voice from long experience, and he shook his head without even looking at him. “He isn’t going to cause a change in the joining ritual, Harry, or what we have between us,” he said, turning his hand so that it clasped Harry’s wrist. “I made my choice when I followed you. He can’t do anything to foul that up. He can accede to what my mother and I want, or he can live the rest of his life in loneliness and isolation.”

And he would probably do it, too. Draco remembered an argument his mother and father had had when he was five that had endured nine months, and at last resulted in Narcissa giving in, because she had not cared as much about the initial insult as Lucius in the first place. The only matters on which she tended to defy Lucius periodically were matters related to him, Draco
Well, that was his mother. But he did not intend to give in this time. It was time for Lucius to realize that his son was not Narcissa, and neither was he a mindless pawn, and he cared about this argument very, very much.

“No response,” he told Julius.

The owl flapped his wings and hissed at him in agitation. This close, Draco could see every shining curve of that scything beak, and could well imagine what it would do to his face, if Julius bit his cheek the way he had bitten his finger. He didn’t care. He forced himself to stare into those unblinking yellow eyes, not blinking himself, and at last the great horned owl was the one to turn and flap away, wheeling the length of the Great Hall before he launched himself through the window.

Draco sat where he was, breathing steadily for a few moments, warmed by the firm grip of Harry’s hand on his. Then he shook his head, retrieved his breakfast dishes, and went back to eating.

He resolved to put Lucius Malfoy and all matters connected to him out of his mind for right now. His refusal and his demands were both simple. The political problems surrounding Harry were more complex and required more of his attention.

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Lucius stood when he noticed Julius wheeling towards the Manor; wards attuned to the owl gave his master eyes to see where he flew, as soon as he came within a certain range. But Julius went to his owlyry without once glancing at a window, and left Lucius to stand there in heart-thundering silence for a long moment.

At last what must have happened occurred to him, but he did not wish to accept it.

His son had betrayed him, for a halfblood lover, a last name tainted by madness, and a wife who had also refused to return, though Narcissa had at least done him the courtesy of sending a note. Draco could not have been blunter had he shown up for the meeting after all, offered Lucius a *Fuck you*, and then walked out again.

Lucius was tempted, for just a moment, to sit down and put his hands over his face, or to give in to some other childish and dangerous impulse like smashing one of the priceless treasures sitting on the shelves of the study. But he stifled the impulse at once. His father had told him the truth when he said that if one let one’s private behavior become less than impeccable, sooner or later one would slip in public.

Instead, Lucius took several deep breaths and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he knew they were as clear and calm as a lake in winter. More to the point, his mind was detached and drifting, and he could consider the matters that pressed in on him carefully, clinically, instead of as problems that would eat him alive if he waited.

He had suffered several setbacks of late. It had become obvious to him that the Unspeakables had betrayed him early on, when he made his once-a-month check for impositions in his mind, and discovered a section of *Obliviated* memories he could not crack open. Add to that that he had not received his promised reward for the distraction he had given them—a werewolf served to them on a platter, and they could not keep Harry’s attention away from politics?—and he was no longer inclined to trust them. So he had become part of the Ritual of Cincinnatus, and he still expected to reap the rewards from that.

And then he had disowned Draco to teach him a lesson, and the boy was too much of a boy to bow his head and make an apology like a man. Lucius would have arranged things carefully for the private meeting, if Draco had agreed to come to it, and that would have ended the matter and repaired the crack in the Malfoy family’s façade that currently gaped open for all to see.

But there was another course he could take. Lucius grimaced. He did not like this course, not least because it would taste like ashes in his mouth.

And it was the only way that he could get close enough to Draco and Harry again to regain their trust, and arrange matters to his satisfaction. Narcissa was a different matter. That she had bothered to send a response meant Lucius could deal with her on another plane.

But the boys…

Lucius shook his head delicately, in sadness for the impetuosity of youth, and went to put matters in motion.

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Harry continued walking out of Defense Against the Dark Arts, even when the footsteps behind him, and the insistent call of the word, made it obvious that someone was talking to him. He turned in the moment before a hand would have grasped his shoulder. He decided that he wasn’t very surprised to find that he faced Terry Boot, a Ravenclaw.

“That’s not my name anymore,” he said distantly, and Terry’s face flushed. But he took a few deep breaths and managed to calm down. Harry could see Draco coming up behind, and practically feel Syrinx, Owen, and Michael starting to converge. Apparently their lightning bolt scars hurt if he was feeling irritated enough, which made Harry wish he had never allowed them to swear those oaths or cut their arms.

“I know it isn’t,” said Terry. “But I didn’t want to address you with your first name, and any other sounds like a title.”

Harry watched him with a little more interest. At least he was intelligent enough to realize how often people used *vates* as if it were a substitute for “Lord.” And intelligent enough to despise it, too. “You have my attention that you wanted so desperately,” he said. “What is it, Boot?”

“Everyone else is talking about what you meant with the monitoring board and your other political moves,” said Terry. His eyes traveled over Harry’s head, and Harry guessed that one or more of his sworn companions had arrived. “But no one seems to have asked you directly. So I will. What are you going to do?”

Harry felt a reluctant smile tug at the corners of his mouth. “What I said I would,” he said. “Meet with the monitoring board on occasion. Work with the Light wizards to make sure they regain some of the political prominence they lost through the accusations against Dumbledore. Protect the rights of werewolves and other magical creatures, including guiding some of the members of the Centaur Committee into the Forbidden Forest.” They had contacted him over the weekend and practically begged Harry to help them find the centaurs—and probably make sure that the centaurs didn’t eat them, though the letter hadn’t actually said that. “Ask more people to swear the Alliance oaths. Speaking of that, do you want to?”

Terry shook his head. “I like to understand someone I’m going to give my political allegiance to first,” he said. “And I still don’t understand you, Pott—Harry.” He grimaced as if he found the name hard to speak. Harry was privately delighted. These were the people he had hoped to reassure by taking on the monitoring board, those not fully committed who would now feel free to speak instead of simply cowering away from him. That he could hear Draco growling about it was irrelevant. “What do you gain from this?”

“Rights for werewolves,” said Harry. “And more people swearing to the Alliance of Sun and Shadow. And more trust from those Light wizards who seem to have forgotten about fighting Voldemort and decided to fight me, instead.”

There was no flinch at Voldemort’s name, and Harry’s estimate of Terry rose another few notches, especially when the Ravenclaw boy just went on studying his face. “And you have no interest in Declaring?” he asked slowly, after a few minutes.

Harry shook his head fiercely. “None. I never will. Just as I have no plans to take a last name right now just to make it easier for people,” he said, and Terry’s smile seemed against his will. “I’m not a Lord. I’ll say that as many times as I need to make people aware of it, to make people accept it. I’ll help in return for help. And I do want to destroy Voldemort. I think it’s the only way to make our world safe from his madness. But I don’t want to rule over others.”

Terry cocked his head. “Hmmm,” he murmured. “Well. I’ll need to think about it a bit more, and have conversations with a few more people. Politicians are good liars, after all. But one of my aunts is on the monitoring board. I can talk to her, too, and see what she thinks.”

“Which one is she?” Harry asked. He didn’t know most of the Light wizards and witches they’d inducted onto the monitoring board. They were candidates that Griselda and Aurora agreed on, and they had sworn the oaths, and that was enough for him.

“Elena Gilliam.”

Harry thought he remembered her now, a sandy-haired halfblood witch with an air of quiet confidence. “Do talk to her, Boot,” he encouraged him. “I want to leave enough room for everyone to make up their own minds.”

“Just the fact that you’re doing that raises you in my estimation,” Terry said, and actually bowed to him a little before he turned away.
“How can you endure insults like that?” Draco asked, the moment Terry was out of earshot. Or perhaps he asked that before Terry was out of earshot. Harry didn’t really know, and didn’t really care. He was flooded with sunlight at the thought of people thinking about him, instead of simply leaping to conclusions based on what he’d done for werewolves or what they’d read in the Prophet or what they felt, as had happened under Dumbledore’s spell last year. This was free will in flood, and of course some of it would be turned against him. He had to be willing to listen to his opponents.

He was looking forward to the first meeting with the monitoring board, Harry realized, with faint surprise.

“What insults?” he responded to Draco, still watching Terry go. And some of the people who had been listening to them had thoughtful expressions on their faces, not stupid or adoring ones. It made Harry want to laugh and dance and sing. “He was honest about everything. That doesn’t mean he was insulting.”

“He questioned your motivations.” Draco was practically vibrating next to him. “How many times do you have to say, again and again, that you aren’t going to be a Lord before people understand you?”

“I would rather say it a hundred thousand times than intimidate one person out of asking me questions,” Harry said quietly, studying Draco with a faint frown. It was true that he’d asked Draco to watch out for political realities around him, and that Draco saw more than he did, but it almost seemed as if— “Draco, do you really think I want all the notice and attention that goes with being a Lord, let alone the unquestioning acceptance?” he asked. “I’m sorry if I gave you that impression. That’s not the truth at all.”

“I think you have the right to demand to be taken at your word.” Draco’s eyes were dark. “And not to have to answer questions that are obvious and rude.”

Harry shook his head and started moving towards the Transfiguration classroom. Professor Bulstrode was unforgiving of late students. “It would save some time. But I want to be questioned, Draco. What I don’t appreciate is refusal to recognize reality, whether that’s on an opposite side or my own.”

Draco took a few deep breaths through his nose. Harry could feel his sworn companions behind him, watching intently, and Michael’s gaze in particular. He would be wondering if a fight between Draco and Harry increased his own chances of flirting with or dating Draco. Harry felt sorry for him, but on top of that, he was mystified. What in the world had given Michael the impression that he had a chance?

“It seems that this is something we’ll agree to disagree on, Harry.” Draco’s voice was resigned. “I agree with Camellia. You should be able to have what you want, what you need, even at Hogwarts. Saving the wizarding world a time or two entitles you to that. If you decide that you want to do without the monitoring board, or to visit your pack, who is anyone alive to tell you no?’

“But I want the monitoring board.” Harry turned to face him in the hall. He would take Henrietta’s detention or scolding or, most likely, combination of both. It would even help to demonstrate that he followed and obeyed rules like the normal students. “It would save some time. But I want to be questioned, Draco. What I don’t appreciate is refusal to recognize reality, whether that’s on an opposite side or my own.”

Draco’s face turned white, and he cast a privacy ward around them that shut even the sworn companions out. Glancing at them, Harry saw Owen putting a hand on Michael’s arm and shaking his head, and Syrinx standing patiently against a wall. Since Harry hadn’t indicated that he didn’t want the privacy ward, Harry thought, she would not burst through it.

“I’ve found a decree that says the existence of the monitoring board as a whole is illegal,” said Draco steadily, eyes fastened on him. “Lord-level wizards are supposed to have a certain freedom in dealing with the Ministry, and something like this should never have been allowed.”

Harry winced. Well. I suppose this was an unavoidable consequence of asking him to watch out for my political interests.

“Don’t interfere, Draco,” he said. “I’m asking you not to.”

“I wasn’t planning on it unless they did something to restrict your freedom,” said Draco. “But when you say that you want someone to question you—Harry, they don’t want to do that. They’re not as honest as you think they are. They’re not going to create a space where people can exercise their free wills, in the end. They’re going to make sure that you compromise yours.”

Harry stirred restlessly. “Do you have any proof that they’re not as honest as you think they are, Draco?”

“Not yet,” said Draco. “Other than some articles in the Populi I think were written by someone on the monitoring board.”
“Those have no names attached!”

“Nonetheless.”

Harry sighed and raked his hand through his hair, then decided that absolute honesty and only absolute honesty would do. He stepped forward and gripped Draco’s shoulder, staring directly into his eyes.

“I want the monitoring board here,” he said quietly. “I know that you don’t. I appreciate that you’re willing to look out for my interests even when I can’t, Draco. I love you. I don’t know if I can convey how much I love you with words, and kissing in the middle of a corridor isn’t ideal, either.” By now, Draco’s face was flushing, but when he opened his mouth to speak, Harry shook his head.

“But in this, I have to ask that you wait to strike at the monitoring board until you have proof of wrongdoing,” said Harry. “I am no Lord, Draco. I never want to be. I never want to demand unreasonable prices from my political opponents, and asking for the end of the monitoring board I proposed would be unreasonable at this point. And that means that I can’t use the exception that you found, either. It’s relying on my magical power, or rather, the threat of my magical power and the precedent of how others with extreme magical powers have been treated, to get me out of trouble. I don’t want to slip and slide out on loopholes.”

“You’re too Gryffindor for your own good,” Draco muttered, sounding as if his throat were full of spiderwebs. “Too interested in curing problems instead of preventing them from arising in the first place.”

Harry smiled sadly. “Maybe I am.” He did kiss Draco, a quick, chaste peck to the side of his mouth that unfortunately made Harry think of other things. Already, he’d had to build several barriers to keep his mind off sex; it seemed that the Breaking of Boundaries had shattered the strongest ones of his training, which blocked his hormones. It was damn inconvenient, was what it was, Harry thought. “But I do ask that you wait. That’s all. I can’t force you to. But I can ask.”

There was a long moment when Draco stared at him and said nothing. Then he bobbed his head quickly.

“If I must,” he said.

“Thank you,” Harry said, and then cast a Tempus charm and cursed. “We are late for Transfiguration, Draco.”

He dispelled the privacy ward, and they ran. Halfway there, Owen and Michael had to turn to go their own classes, as seventh-year students. Harry was sure that he could feel Michael’s gaze on the back of his neck until he peeled off, and that it was resentful.

He shook his head. Maybe I should speak to him about that, though I was under the impression that Owen already had. Then Harry thought of something even better. Perhaps I should offer to release him from his oath. That would lessen both my discomfort and his.

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Draco rapped his fingers against the desk, and immediately attracted Henrietta Bulstrode’s gaze. “Mr. Malfoy,” she said. “If you would come to the front of the classroom and attempt to show us the preferred way to Transfigure Mr. Potter back from a slug, you may be less bored.”

Draco felt his face flush a dull red as he stood. Obviously, Bulstrode hadn’t forgiven him for not paying attention in her class the last few days before he disappeared to join Harry. That he was making one of the most important decisions of his life would not be accepted as an excuse.

As he struggled to reverse the Transfiguration she’d performed on Harry’s brother, his mind went back to the thoughts that were occupying him, and which distracted him thoroughly from appreciation of the fact that Potter was now a boneless creature leaving a trail of slime wherever he crawled.

Harry had asked him not to interfere with the monitoring board.

But Draco was convinced that it was better for him to do so, so that he could have his traps in place when they tried to catch Harry.

But going against what Harry wanted could involve not only arguments with Harry, but distracting himself from other political
concerns and enemies of theirs. And it would certainly make any other threats he identified look less serious to Harry, if he made a mistake with this case.

What I’ll have to do is show him why it’s a good idea to prevent instead of cure, Draco decided, while he struggled through the incantation to try and Transfigure Potter back for the sixth time. Finding out who wrote those articles in the Vox Populi would be a good start, because it would show him that the monitoring board doesn’t want what’s best for him, after all.

“Mr. Malfoy.”

He looked up. Henrietta’s glare was no less intimidating through her younger disguise than it had ever been.

“This is a simple spell that you should have been able to perform by now,” she said, her voice clipped. “For a wizard of your innate power, it is easy. You will write a foot-long essay on what you have been doing wrong, and present it to me on Wednesday morning.”

Draco clamped his teeth together and bowed his head. “Yes, ma’am,” he murmured, and returned to his seat, while Henrietta called Granger forward to Transfigure Potter back. That she managed it on the first try didn’t make Draco feel any better.

Harry squeezed his wrist as he sat down again, and Draco looked straight into his sympathetic smile, though he didn’t say anything. Bulstrode had proven annoyingly good at sensing the slightest stray efforts at conversation.

Draco felt his resolve twist away from annoyance into simple certainty as he watched Harry’s smile. Harry could go on right on believing what he liked about his own status and his own problems. Draco would not openly oppose him, and he would not go behind Harry’s back, as Lucius had tried to do with Narcissa. He would simply find the truth and show it to Harry.

There’s no reason that we can’t approach each other in equality, with the truth. What else have we both fought for?

It was meant in good faith, but that thought sent Draco off into daydreams of what else, personally, he had fought for in his relationship with Harry, and earned him a detention when Professor Bulstrode demanded an answer to a question from him and he nearly said something obscene. At least Harry stroked Draco’s hand sympathetically again while stifling his laughter.

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Chapter Forty-Seven: In Quest of Balance

“I don’t see why you should.”

“Because they requested it,” said Harry, glancing at Draco. “And I don’t have any reason to refuse.” The letter lay on the bed between them. Harry had actually been trying to complete his Transfiguration homework, as well as the extra lines that Henrietta had assigned him for being late to her class. Draco was complaining about the letter, and had been for the last half-hour. At least he had given up on convincing Harry of the evil of the monitoring board, and was instead insisting that they had no right to require him to attend a meeting with them that weekend.

“The Gryffindor-Slytherin Quidditch game is this weekend,” Draco tried.

Harry smiled. “And I’m not playing in it, remember? I’m sure Sam will do fine.”

“He’s not—” said Draco, and then shut his mouth and looked the other way.

“Were you about to say that isn’t as good a flyer as Connor is?” Harry couldn’t help the laughter bubbling up in his throat. “Or does it kill you that a Gryffindor could do better at something than a Slytherin could?”

“He’s not as good a Seeker as you are, I meant to say.” Draco glared at him. “The team would have accepted you back if you insisted on it.”

“And I didn’t.” Harry was growing tired of this. He understood why it mattered to Draco; if nothing else, it was a distraction from Lucius’s stupid behavior and the worry over what his father might do out of stubborn pride. But Harry didn’t have that same stubborn pride of his own, and Draco saying he should become more and more wearing. “Sam flies better with them, now. And I already answered Madam Whitestag, and said that I would attend the meeting on Saturday. This will be the first full gathering of the monitoring board, given that the Dark wizards and witches offered a place on it didn’t attend last time. It’s important.”
“Did she say I couldn’t come?” Draco lifted his chin.

Harry shook his head. “Both you and Snape are welcome. That ought to show that she doesn’t intend anything evil, surely? If she really wanted to weaken me, she would try to separate the two of you from me.”

“She’s waiting,” said Draco, folding his arms. “When you trust her, and are less likely to turn on her the moment something happens, then she’ll move.”

“If she moves,” said Harry, with what he thought was a generous helping of patience, “then she’ll surely reveal herself. Do you think she’s a more subtle political dancer than your mother, Draco? Narcissa has a place on the board. So do Hawthorn, and Adalrico, and Ignifer. Do you think Madam Whitestag can do something that will go ignored by all of them?”

He probably forgot that, Harry realized, as he watched Draco’s face drop. He defends me so well that he forgets he’s not the only protector I have.

Draco chewed his lip for a moment, then sighed. “No,” he said. “But I told you my reasons for being unhappy with the board, Harry. It’s still illegal, and the Minister could still dissolve it if you asked him to.”

“I won’t be asking him,” said Harry, turning his back so that he could work on his Transfiguration homework more effectively. “And if someone else does ask him, I’ll know the source of the request.”

Sullen silence answered him. Harry concentrated fiercely on the words in front of him, until they threatened to blur.

I don’t know why he can’t accept that this is my choice. I have to have restraints and people questioning me. The monitoring board might not be that reasonable on the matters most important to us, but they’ll give the more reasonable people a chance to pluck up their courage and start thinking instead of reacting.

And Harry was firmly convinced that it was, indeed, working. Terry Boot had come up to him, after all, and so had a few of the Hufflepuffs who had opposed him last year, Susan Bones and Ernie Macmillan. They’d spoken in cold but courteous voices, and asked questions, including a very good one from Susan that Harry had felt unprepared to completely answer. And he was grateful to her for that.

“And what happens if someone asks you to make a sacrifice for the good of the wizarding world that hurts one small portion of it?” Her voice still echoed in his head, and her eyes were steady and accusing. “If you did have to choose between sacrificing werewolves and everyone else, what would happen?”

Harry knew the answer to that, of course. It would depend, first of all, on who “everyone else” was, and how the werewolves were being threatened. But then would come his oath to defend werewolves’ rights, which would turn his blood to silver unless he kept it. And it would be pitiful if that were his only reason, his only motive. He ought to be above simple practical necessities. He ought to be able to provide ethical reasoning to back up his actions, reasoning that could convince those who did not care about his vates duties, and who were not interested in hypothetical situations.

If he could not communicate with the people who regularly read the Daily Prophet and the Vox Populi, Harry tended to think the problem lay with himself, not with them.

So it was a good thing that he was being held back, and challenged, and forced to examine his own morals and mistakes closely. It was a good thing that he would be called to account. And with Madam Whitestag in charge of the monitoring board, he could be sure the account would be close and honest.

He only wished he could communicate his sense of hope and excitement about this to Draco.

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Aurora raised her eyebrows when Harry joined them in the small room off the Ministry’s Atrium, the room in which they had laid the foundations of the monitoring board. She had said nothing to discourage him from bringing his guardian and his lover along with him, but she had not expected him to do so. She had hoped he realized that with Snape there, staring at them, and Malfoy sneering at everyone who so much as made a slip of the tongue, the chances for honest discussion were very low.

Well, he is still a child. And he may not have had a choice, no matter how much he wishes to cooperate with us. They could have ordered him to bring them along, and he would have wanted to indulge them.
It was a good thing that she had laid plans for this contingency, and that not all of Harry’s Dark allies were as quick of eye and mind as someone like Narcissa Malfoy was. They had eleven Light wizards on the board, Aurora herself, Madam Marchbanks, the northern goblin Helcas, the centaur Bone, the southern goblin Gripphook, and eleven Dark wizards. Aurora had already told Marvin that Narcissa Malfoy was his task, and a few others would handle Hawthorn Parkinson and Adalrico Bulstrode. She would need someone to distract Snape and someone to oppose Draco Malfoy, now.

She watched the Malfoy boy narrowly as he sat down on Harry’s left side, and saw the way his eyes went to Lisa when she made a remark about being “less than a proper pureblood” and laughed loudly. His sneer flashed for just a moment, but that moment was long enough for Aurora to see it.

As for Snape—well, he had been a Death Eater, and that he had repented for it did not change the past. Shadow, the Light Muggleborn wizard who had abandoned both his names when he saw Death Eaters slaughter his family in front of him, would keep an eye on Snape.

Aurora made her way over to the other side of the room whilst people were still settling into their seats and chattering to each other about their expectations of the Ministry and what they could expect from Scrimgeour. Lisa caught her eye and slid into a corner, raising her brows on the way.

“Draco Malfoy,” Aurora murmured. “He despises everyone who doesn’t act like a pureblood. Ask questions about the Grand Unified Theory. Don’t speak exactly like the image of a pureblood witch urges you should. Keep him from following Harry when I talk to him in private at the end of the meeting.”

Lisa smiled faintly and nodded. She was proud of being a pureblood in her own way, Aurora thought, but the death of her son had severely shaken whatever faith she might have put in Harry. And she despised those purebloods like the Malfoys who set a certain standard of behavior on the surface and pretended that was all that mattered, as if courtesy somehow excused them from being immoral.

She took her place at the end of the table. Aurora made her way to the seat directly across from Harry. She had Madam Marchbanks on one side and the southern goblin on the other. She wondered if they had intended to disconcert her. If so, they would fail.

She sat down and fixed her eyes on Harry’s. His own gaze was far from challenging, but hopeful and even relaxed.

*He does wish to cooperate with us. If we can only isolate him, then everything will be well.* Aurora had a speech prepared she thought should work, especially since Harry himself obviously thought the monitoring board such a good idea.

She leaned forward, smiled at Harry, and began the questioning. “Tell us about your last week, vates.”

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Harry cocked his head. *Simple questions. Well, I can do that.* He felt Snape’s presence at his shoulder, just waiting for someone to do something wrong, and Draco sneering down the table at Lisa Addlington, who hadn’t taken her chair in the most graceful manner. He hoped neither would interfere. He wanted to do this on his own, and their suspicions wouldn’t help.

“I’ve made good progress at fitting back into Hogwarts, I think,” he told Aurora, who nodded. “I’ve been attending the same classes I attended before the rebellion began. Those include NEWT Transfiguration, NEWT Defense Against the Dark Arts, and NEWT Potions.”

“I have a question,” said a wizard down the table suddenly. Harry turned to look at him. He was a man with white hair, but a young face. Harry vaguely remembered that he was their token Muggleborn wizard on the board, and that he called himself Shadow. “Is it truly fair for you to be in the NEWT Potions class, Harry? After all, Professor Snape teaches that class, and yet he’s your guardian, and everyone knows how he favors Slytherins.” His eyes were burning holes as they fixed on Snape.

“I think it would be less fair if Professor Snape tutored me outside the class, sir,” Harry said. “That would imply special treatment, and privileges that I don’t want to receive.”

“There are others who could give you Potions lessons.” Shadow flapped a hand, obviously considering his objection unimportant. “Horace Slughorn, for example. Didn’t he take over the Potions Master post a short time ago?”

“He did, sir,” Harry said, wondering where this was going. “And he acted as Head of Slytherin House, at the request of the Headmistress.”
“I think he would be a better teacher for you, by far.” By now, Shadow’s face carried deep lines of anger. “At least that way we would know that a Death Eater was not in charge of teaching the future vates how to make delicate poisons and explosive concoctions.”

Harry sensed Snape’s rage like tendrils yanking across his skin. “I am a former Death Eater,” said Snape, each word a crack of black ice. “I served as a spy for the Light, and was exonerated when I came to trial.”

“Yes.” Shadow leaned forward across the table, arms folded. “By the word of Albus Dumbledore, the very man who abused and tormented the child you now serve as guardian to. Was that that way it was? Passing Harry from one master to another, so that he might never escape the controlling web of Dumbledore’s influence?”

“Shadow!” Aurora said sharply. “I will not have this. Professor Snape does speak the truth. He was exonerated.” She turned away from the Muggleborn wizard with a small shake of her head and fixed her eyes on Harry, ignoring Snape’s huffing breath. “However, he does raise a legitimate point, Harry. Do you feel that Professor Snape treats you fairly? Would you feel more comfortable in separate Potions lessons?”

“I can only repeat what I said before, Madam Whitestag.” Harry worked to keep his own fury out of his voice. Shadow obviously hated Death Eaters. Harry couldn’t see this as an attack on Snape. He would probably attack Hawthorn or Adalrico the same way. “I think that would imply a mark of privilege that I wish to avoid. I want to be ordinary, insofar as I can be. I want the other students to see that the professors treat me, well, like them. I did receive a punishment of extra lines this week, from Professor Belluspersona, for being late to her Transfiguration class. She is teaching me the way I wish to be taught. And as for Professor Snape—” Harry swallowed. He couldn’t say that Snape had never rewarded him unfairly in class; he had done plenty of that in Harry’s first year, when he tried to separate him from Connor. “He may have done so in the past, but he and I are both trying to move beyond that point.”

Aurora sighed, a small, delicate sound of disappointment. “I understand, Harry. But it does make for an awkward situation, always, when a professor has children at the school.” She might have gone on, but a loud slap of parchment being set down interrupted her. Harry caught sight of a genuinely annoyed expression on her face as she looked down the table. “Yes, Mr. Gildgrace, what is it?”

“If I might,” said Marvin, the halfblood wizard Harry remembered disliking, and being pressured into allowing on the board. Aurora had pointed out, quite rightly, that they had too few non-pureblood candidates to dismiss one, and if Marvin said he was not prejudiced against goblins and centaurs, Harry had no reason to distrust him. “I have made a study of how many Dark wizards have sworn to the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, as compared to the number of Light wizards who have, and the numbers are still pitifully few.” He faced Harry. “Why have you not made an effort to recruit more Light allies, Mr. Pott—vates?”

“I am in negotiations right now to do this,” said Harry, glad he was able to say something positive. “I am speaking with the children of several prominent Light families at Hogwarts, who were driven from any chance of allying with me by the child abuse accusations against Albus Dumbledore. I think I will quickly have a longer list of allies to present to you.”

Marvin sniffed and squinted down at his parchment. “I must say, vates, that some of your allies are impressive. The Rosier-Henlin family, for example. Even if gained through not quite…legitimate means, they do have good reputations. It is their Declaration that is the problem, not that they’ve been accused of crimes.”

Narcissa sat up across the table. “And what would you consider legitimate means, Mr. Gildgrace?” she asked sweetly.

“Why, if Harry had approached them himself, of course,” said Marvin, glancing at her. “Instead, it seems that he used someone else to dance for him. Someone with a good many political connections, and excellent powers of persuasion, but still a second party. I can say that that won’t work with most Light wizards. They need to see the real product, as it were.” He gave Harry a faint smile. “Meet you face-to-face, Harry. Many of them do believe that’s the only way to truly judge someone.”

Harry nodded. “I understand.”

“I was the person who approached his Dark allies,” said Narcissa quietly.

Marvin raised his eyebrows. “I was not accusing you, Mrs. Malfoy, but that is interesting to know for certain.” He scribbled a quick note down on his parchment. “I do believe, though, Mrs. Malfoy, that the Light-allied wizards would object to your doing it again, for—well, the reasons I told you.” He peered at her apologetically. “And the name of Malfoy is no longer exactly untainted in their eyes, if it has ever been, given your husband’s recent break from Harry.”
“I am not my husband.” Narcissa had never looked cooler or more elegant, Harry thought, as she sat there and calmly refuted every assumption Marvin threw at her. “I have chosen to follow my son and his joined partner, and I do not regret that.”

“And you’ve chosen to become part of this board.” Marvin nodded. “I approve of all of that, Mrs. Malfoy. I hope you don’t think I’m being hostile. I just wanted to make the point that Harry needs more Light allies, and he won’t be able to rely on you to secure them.”

Narcissa gave a minute bow of her head and sat back, but Harry could see the narrowing of her eyes. Now she was wondering how deep Marvin’s knowledge of her ran, and how he knew that she had been the one to dance for him to the Rosier-Henlin family and others. And where he had obtained this information in the first place, of course. It would make her a little warier before moving.

Of course, if what he’s saying is true, then it’s better we know this now, so that we don’t offend any of the Light wizards, Harry thought.

“I hope not all those allies will be purebloods,” Lisa Addlington offered from the end of the table. “Thanks to the Grand Unified Theory, we know that they are not the only chosen children of magic, now. Or I hope we do.” She gave a superior look along the table, and Harry felt Draco stir beside him.

“Of course not all of them will be purebloods,” he said, with a bored expression on his face. “But that doesn’t mean that the purebloods in the Alliance of Sun and Shadow should be disregarded, or assigned a lower place than they one they’ve achieved.”

“I don’t recall addressing you, Mr. Malfoy.” Lisa’s own eyes were narrow. “You’re neither on the monitoring board nor under the supervision of it. I have to wonder why you accompanied Harry, today. Are the Dark purebloods so desperate for influence that they must have eyes everywhere?”

“I came because he’s my lover, my partner in a joining ritual, and my equal in every area of life,” said Draco, and his voice had tightened. “Will you tell me to leave him alone because of that, Addlington?”

“For someone who prides himself on courtesy, you forget titles easily.” Lisa tossed her head, and Harry saw Draco’s disgust increase exponentially. “I would prefer to be addressed by Mrs. Addlington, and not solely by my husband’s last name. I need not shelter in his shadow.”

Draco started to retort, and Harry placed a hand gently on his arm. “I agree that I need more Light allies, and more non-pureblood allies,” he said. “Can you suggest a good place for me to start, Mrs. Addlington?”

Lisa smiled at him. “Of course I can.” She took a piece of parchment from her pocket, and Harry whispered a Summoning Charm that brought it to him. Opening it, he saw a list of names. “They begin with some halfblood cousins of mine,” Lisa added, “but not everyone on that list is a relative of mine, I assure you.”

Harry nodded, scanning the list rapidly. He recognized a few of the last names from Hogwarts, and thought he might start working from them. “Thank you, Mrs. Addlington,” he said, folding the parchment and tucking it into a pocket of his robes. He faced Aurora again. If he could conduct a conversation mainly with her, then it might ease the temptation for Draco, or Snape, to snipe or be sniped at. “The monitoring board was supposed to instruct me on certain Light pureblood rituals and customs, I know,” he said. “Whom did you have in mind for a teacher, Madam Whitestag?”

“I was expecting to split the task equally between myself and Madam Marchbanks,” said Aurora, blinking as if she hadn’t expected the question. “We would certainly not wish you to go uninstructed, Harry. Though I am undeclared myself, I do know the customs of the Light better than those of the Dark. And of course Madam Marchbanks quite literally has more than a century of experience.” She gave the older witch a smile that Harry noticed she didn’t return.

Harry looked carefully at Madam Marchbanks. She was frowning at several of the Light wizards along the table, as if she wanted to object to them but couldn’t quite find the words to do so. “Madam?” he asked, and she looked back at him. “Do you agree to instruct me, along with Madam Whitestag?”

She nodded at him. “I can meet with you twice a month,” she said. “Or I can send you post with questions and lists of instructions in the rituals. Or I can send you books.”

“If you can manage it, I would prefer all three of those options,” said Harry, and was gratified to see a look of surprise on Aurora’s face. A moment later, she smiled at him. Harry dipped his head, his own smile breaking out. She’ll see now that I really do want to cooperate with them. “The meetings may be the hardest to arrange, but I will try to shift my schedule to accommodate
Aurora glanced casually up and down the table. “Are there any other questions that anyone else wished to ask the vates? I am sure that most of us can agree that the measures Harry has taken to acquire more Light allies and learn the Light rituals are adequate for now, and that he may remain in the classes he currently occupies in Hogwarts.” She bent over a piece of parchment in front of her, scribbling rapidly on it. Harry assumed it was a private checklist of some kind, perhaps the minutes of the meeting or a reminder of what she hoped to accomplish with each one.

“I do have a suggestion,” said Shadow, and leaned forward again. “I would like to visit one of the Potions classes during which Professor Snape teaches the vates. Or, at least, I think someone from the monitoring board should visit them, though I can’t imagine why either Professor Snape or Harry would object to my presence.” He flashed a sneer at Snape, which produced the retort Harry had expected.

“If you believe that I will allow someone intent on upsetting my son into my classroom for the sole purpose of upsetting him—“

“Shadow does not intend to upset Harry, Professor,” said Aurora sharply. “We can assign a different observer, if he troubles you so much. And—forgive me, but I did not know that you had claimed formal adoption of Harry. That is certainly a change in his status that the monitoring board should have been informed of.” She looked at Harry, who was forced to shake his head.

“I am Professor Snape’s ward still, Madam,” he said. “He is my legal guardian. But he does call me son, and I consider him a father.” He felt his face burn as the monitoring board stared at him in silence, even the Dark wizards. It was the first time he had ever said something like this in public.

“Congratulations to you both,” said Hawthorn, sounding sincere about it. His other Dark allies were quick to add their praise, Harry noted, far better than the weak applause that Lisa Addlington gave, and which was the only response he noted at all from the Light wizards.

“And of course the notion of sending an observer into Professor Snape’s Potions classes is perfectly ridiculous,” Hawthorn went on, blithely. “He would not accomplish his purpose. Both Professor Snape and his son would act differently in front of an observer, and he would not be able to see what a normal day for them is like. That is nothing to say what other students of the class would do.”

“We could send someone under an Invisibility Charm,” Lisa suggested.

“It’s called a Disillusionment Charm, you uneducated—“

“Draco,” Harry hissed under his breath. He glanced at his boyfriend’s narrowed eyes and flared nostrils, and shook his head. He had not realized how strongly Draco was prejudiced against anyone who supported the Grand Unified Theory. I must never leave him and Hermione alone together for any length of time. “I apologize, Mrs. Addlington,” he added, while Lisa looked on, silently scandalized. “That wasn’t what we intended by my partner’s attendance here today.” He clamped his hand on Draco’s arm and gave it a little shake.

Draco gave him a cool glance, then turned around and nodded stiffly to Lisa. “Sorry, Madam.” Still not the name that she had asked to be called by, Harry noted.

Harry sighed and faced Aurora, only to find that she’d slid the parchment she was writing on across the table to him. Neither Snape, glaring at everyone indiscriminately, nor Draco, glaring at Lisa, seemed to have noted. Harry read it quickly, upside-down.

May I speak privately with you after this?

Harry caught Aurora’s eye and nodded. He couldn’t blame her for wanting that, given the disruptions and petty arguments of the meeting. She sat back, relaxing, and smiled at him, which made him more sure that he’d done the right thing. It would not be a bad thing to be on friendly terms with the main power of the monitoring board, Harry thought. For better or worse, many of the Light wizards would follow her.

And for better or worse, Draco and Snape will follow me.

When he thought of how they’d behaved today—well, how Draco had behaved today, at least; the argument with Shadow was not nearly as much Snape’s fault—Harry felt his cheeks burn. And so he spoke up now, as there was a temporary lull in the conversation.
“I do consider Professor Snape my father,” he said firmly, “and I will not condone visits to his class that might cast doubt on his guardianship.” He stood with a glance up and down the table. “Does anyone else have anything else to ask me?”

No one else did. Draco was standing as if he would drag Harry from the room, though, so Harry went on speaking. “Then, Madam Whitestag, I can ask you what I wanted to ask you. May we speak privately for a moment?”

Draco turned his head, eyes intent and brow furrowed, but since Harry had said he was the one with the question, those were the only gestures he made. Harry shook his head, and Draco sighed. He seemed to know he hadn’t made a good showing today, though, and didn’t protest further.

Snape was more vocal. “I would like to be present for any conversation between Harry and another person,” he said.

Harry touched his arm, and left his hand there until Snape looked, reluctantly, down at him. “Please, Severus,” Harry murmured, remembering the name this time. “This isn’t about a legal matter.” He would leave if it turned out to be. “I want to do this.”

Snape stared back into his eyes, and Harry let a few of his Occlumency barriers fall. He had to repress his impatience to do it. Why are both of them being so protective of me? They won’t even believe that I can decide, on my own, to cooperate with the monitoring board, or to speak with one person? What do they think she’ll do, secretly turn into a Light Lady and pin me to the wall?

Perhaps Snape sensed the impatience, or the thoughts behind it, because he gave a slight nod and stepped aside. Harry sighed with relief, added, “Thank you for coming,” to the rest of the monitoring board, and then followed Aurora out into the Atrium.

He cast a privacy ward around them before they began talking, and checked himself for tracking spells. He loved Draco and Snape, but he wouldn’t put it past them to spy on his and Aurora’s conversation.

“What did you want to speak with me about, Madam Whitestag?” he asked.

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Aurora considered him for a moment. Harry looked calmly back at her, his eyes intent and shining. And Aurora had to smile, because it was painfully obvious, now, that Harry really did want the freedom of will and debate that he had said he did; it was overprotective allies, and perhaps Dark wizards determined to secure their personal power and their position close to him, who had made him seem otherwise. He had rebelled against the Ministry because they had given him no other choice, not because he was in love with violence or getting his own way.

Her strategy had changed even from the beginning of the meeting, when she realized that few of Harry’s Dark allies would speak in this meeting of the monitoring board; they were still learning the names of those involved and seeing how they reacted. The elaborate traps and baffles they had laid were nearly useless in such a situation. But Harry was growing as exasperated by the behavior of his allies as he was by the behavior of Shadow and Marvin. Aurora hoped still to win a victory that would make giving up the presence of a few Light wizards on the board worth it.

“Harry,” she said, and clasped her hands in front of her. “I am sorry, but I don’t think the board will work as it stands.”

She saw his face waver into concern. “Why not, Madam?” he asked, and ran a hand through his hair. It seemed to be his standard nervous gesture. “I know that Draco and Snape had arguments with the board members today, but—”

“While I’m not excusing the behavior of your allies, I need to apologize for the behavior of mine,” Aurora interrupted quietly. “I had no idea they would be this hostile. And insinuations and rumors and glances can do even more to hurt than outright insults. I am concerned with what Marvin implied about Mrs. Malfoy, for example.”

Harry shrugged. “It is true that she danced and gathered Dark allies for me, Madam. But I will be more than willing to contact Light families myself.”

How did he draw so powerful a woman, so young? But Aurora suspected that had much to do with Draco Malfoy’s close place at Harry’s side, so she wasn’t as concerned. It was not a trick Harry could duplicate with anyone else. “I am glad,” she said. “But I would not wish future meetings to be as unproductive as this one. I wish an environment where we can speak and interact comfortably. I am willing to dismiss Shadow and Marvin from the board, if you think it would help.”

Harry’s face was troubled. He opened his mouth, then shut it and shook his head. Aurora waited. At last he said, “But we would have to find more Light wizards to replace them, wouldn’t we? And in the meantime, the work of the monitoring board couldn’t
“That is true.” Aurora tilted her head. “Except—"

“Yes?”

“Technically,” Aurora said, “Griselda and I count as Light witches on the board, too, so it is already overweighted. I am not declared, of course, but most people treat me as though I am, and most of my morals and my closest associations are with the Light. I would be willing to dismiss Shadow and Marvin, and count Griselda and myself as two of the eleven needed to balance the Dark allies. If you would accept this, of course. I am sure that I can convince my allies to accept it.”

She held her breath, and tried not to make it look as if she were doing so. She had taken a gamble, but if she understood Harry as she hoped, it would win her something much larger.

Harry sighed. “But you and Griselda are supposed to be neutral,” he said. “Or, at least, you balance each other out. I counted Madam Marchbanks as a friend before the board began, and you as an opponent.” Aurora was pleased that he did not say “enemy.” “If you dismiss two of the Light wizards, I should dismiss two of the Dark ones.”

“But I doubt many of them would take that well,” Aurora said mildly. In truth, she wanted to retain Harry’s Dark allies as long as she could, until she could draw them and see who must be countered, who could be ignored, and who could be useful. Like it or not, she was now in the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, and these were the core of what she had to work with. So long as she did not violate the oaths to cause fear in others, and thought about her actions, she believed she could get along with them. “I am willing to give up Marvin and Shadow, Harry. They work well with other Light wizards, but not with Dark ones. I am sorry. I should have studied them more closely before I presented them as candidates for the monitoring board.”

Harry stirred unhappily. Finally, he said, “I could—I could leave Draco and Snape at Hogwarts when I meet with the board in the future, Madam. As a good faith gesture. I think we should try at least one meeting without any of the ones who caused the most controversy today.”

Yes. Aurora had what she wanted. She knew she was lucky to have distracted Snape and Malfoy as much as she had today. They were meeting with the full board for the first time, and in the future they would be warier and more alert for threats to Harry. One meeting without them would be a blessing for her cause. “I am glad that you think so, Harry,” she said. “And what about Mrs. Addlington? Should—"

“No.” Harry’s face tightened with exasperation. “Most of the problems there originated with Draco, and I will ask him to apologize to her, Madam.” He lifted his head and stared intently into her eyes, reminding Aurora that he was a Legimens. “I want to work with you,” he whispered. “I mean it, Madam. Please. Please let me do this.”

Aurora nodded, slowly. The reluctance she felt was real. Harry needed to be played on the line like a fish right now. Draw in him too tight, ask him to make too many sacrifices, and either he or his allies would balk. She would rather move slowly than risk everything to get what she wanted a little faster. “All right, Harry. You can tell Professor Snape and young Mr. Malfoy that they can attend the third meeting, if you wish.”

“Thank you,” said Harry. “And don’t worry, Madam. I will make them understand. Shadow provoked Professor Snape, but Draco’s behavior was inexcusable.”

Aurora smiled, and let the light of it shine out of her eyes. “And how are you, Harry? Are you sleeping well? Eating well? Have you taken any time for yourself in the last few days?”

Oddly, that was a mistake; she saw it as soon as she asked. Harry’s eyes shuttered, and he gave her the look of some wild animal shying from a trap. His voice was clipped when he spoke. “I eat three meals a day, Madam, and sleep eight hours each night, and I take as much time for myself as I need.”

Aurora sighed. “I reminded you of something evil, didn’t I? I did not mean to. I am sorry, Harry.”

He relaxed bit by bit, and now looked abashed. “I’m sorry, Madam Whitestag. But I do have to put up with that kind of questioning from Professor Snape, and Draco, and the Seer we have in residence.”

Does he? And Aurora grasped another piece of the puzzle that was Harry vates. “Then I will ask nothing more,” she said. “I want the monitoring board to be what you need, Harry. And if others are attending to your physical and emotional needs—"
“You can help me with my political and intellectual ones.” Harry stood straight now, smiling easily. “And I need reasonable opponents right now, Madam, who are still willing to work with me.”

He is exactly what the world requires to defend us from Voldemort. Just a bit of guidance, that’s all he needs, not much. Aurora relaxed. “Then I will endeavor to be that for you, Harry, though if you continue to be so reasonable yourself, I may soon lose my opponent status,” she said, and he laughed.

“Thank you,” he murmured, and dropped the privacy ward, making his way back to his guardian and lover.

Aurora watched him go with a deep sense of contentment. He might not Declare, he might not call himself a Lord, he might not even have trained as much as she would have liked him to in the means of defeating the Dark Lord, but she was starting to think that he would be a better leader than she could ever have dreamed.

And if I can play some small part in making our world safe, then I will consider that enough. Nothing can even make up for the loss of my children, just as nothing can ever make up for Harry’s childhood. What we must be content with is the aftermath, the future, the moving-forward.

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Chapter Forty-Eight: Tea and a Cup of Philosophy

Harry kept the set of his shoulders as relaxed as he could, considering that Snape had just herded both him and Draco into his private quarters and shut the door behind them. He hadn’t had a chance to speak to Connor and ask who had won the Gryffindor-Slytherin game, though from the glimpse he’d caught of his brother’s beaming face, he suspected he knew. The new Slytherin Seeker was good, and probably faster than Connor since he was smaller, but Harry had watched him, and he simply couldn’t match the skill Connor showed in making swift turns, hovering, and diving in such a way that his opponent’s eyes would miss him.

“Please sit down,” Snape said, in a voice that Harry hadn’t heard from him in a long time. In fact, as he turned to face Snape, warily, he was fairly sure that he hadn’t heard it before. But he took a seat on the couch, and Draco sat down beside him, still fuming. Harry had asked him to apologize to Lisa as they left the Ministry, and had received an incredulous stare, along with a snapped comment that his one apology to her already counted.

“I’m sitting down, sir,” he told Snape. “What’s wrong?”

Snape ignored him for a moment, waving his wand to conjure teacups and a tray, and then nodding to cabinets in the far corner of the room. They unlocked themselves, and a crock of milk and a pot of tea surged out of them, floating over to the tray. Harry stirred uneasily. “You’ve become skilled in Transfiguration since I was last here, sir,” he ventured.

“This is tea that I brewed, not conjured,” said Snape, not looking at him.

Harry relaxed. He would gladly drink it either way, but he was happiest to hear that it hadn’t come from reliance on house elf labor, which would have made it impossible for him to drink. He waited for Snape to pour cups for him and Draco, since that seemed to be what he wanted, and then sipped. The tea was hot and sweet enough just as it was. He would never understand why Draco wanted so much milk in his.

“I should not have let myself be distracted like that, into arguing with a man who has reason to hate me,” said Snape, in a voice of deep calm. “However, my distraction came from a legitimate source, Harry. I was using Legilimency to read what I could of their thoughts, without alerting them to the fact. Since many of them do know I can do so, I had to catch their eyes in short glimpses and learn what I could from those.”

Harry felt his hand tighten on the teacup so quickly that it was a miracle it didn’t shatter. Carefully, he set it down on the broad, flat arm of the couch and sat up. Draco leaned against him, heavily, as if to prevent him from standing. Harry didn’t try. He intended to stay right here and confront Snape about what he had done.

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Snape turned to face him, taking a seat on the chair. Harry watched him carefully. The lines of his face were locked in a brooding mask, but that was hardly unusual. Did he have a dream last night that shook him? He should have told me. I would have been glad to leave him at Hogwarts today.

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“These people are supposed to be our allies, sir.” He kept his voice to one that could cut glass, away from insults. He could hardly treat Snape with less courtesy than he’d given to Aurora. “If they find out what you have done, they will have reason to demand
that I not bring you to any meeting of the monitoring board, not just the next one.”

“You didn’t tell us about that,” said Draco.

Yes, and this isn’t the moment or way I would have chosen for telling you, either. But the damage was done, and Harry wouldn’t take it back, or only spring the bargain with Aurora on them when they prepared to go to the next meeting of the monitoring board. “Madam Whitestag offered to dismiss Marvin Gildgrace and Shadow from the board, and let her own presence and Madam Marchbanks’s make the Light rejoice,” said Harry. He had to shove a load of emotions into the Occlumency pools, and shook his head as they seemed to bubble under the strain. His barriers never had been the same since the ritual on Halloween. “In return, I agreed to leave both of you behind for the next meeting.”

“And isn’t this the exact same tactic you told me would make you wary of her?” Draco pounced the moment Harry stopped speaking. “You said, ‘If she really wanted to weaken me, she would try to separate the two of you from me.’”

Harry opened his mouth, then shut it. He clenched his hand on the couch arm for a moment, nearly upsetting his teacup, and said, picking his words carefully, “I don’t think she meant it like that—"

“She did,” said Snape. “That was a well-coordinated attack. Shadow came for me, Mrs. Addlington for Draco. I think she meant Gildgrace to draw Narcissa, but he did not succeed. Madam Marchbanks was too distracted and distressed by what happened around her to be aware that something was wrong, or connect the behavior of her allies into a concerted pattern aimed at us.” He breathed in silence for a long moment, his eyes locked on Harry’s. “And that is only as much as I managed to learn given the distracted way in which I looked,” he added. “I am sure there was more, hiding beneath the surface. Do you see, Harry? They are not your allies. They want to weaken you. They want to set boundaries on you that will hold you back from acting as vates, as an effective ally to the werewolves, as an effective Dark wizard.”

“I’m not a Dark wizard,” Harry pointed out. He was in too much of a daze to say anything else.

“For many Light wizards, using one Dark spell makes one a Dark wizard.” Snape sipped his tea, eyes never leaving Harry’s face. “I have even heard some of them doubt Scrimgeour’s loyalty to the Light, because he used the Ritual of Cincinnatus, when I would say that there is no wizard alive right now whom they should trust more. And your mentor is Dark, your partner is Dark, those wizards who have stood by you for years are Dark. Making an overture to the Light is not as simple as offering them political power, Harry. They will be laboring to increase it, and in this case, that means restraining you and guiding you into certain channels.” His tone took on a more personal animosity. “And you will let them do it, if you allow yourself to be separated from those who love you. I have said once before that sometimes you seem to care more about your enemies than your friends.”

Harry gave a shiver, and said nothing.

“I’d like an answer to that question, actually,” Draco said, voice bright and brittle. “Why do you offer chances to your allies that you don’t to us, Harry? Why would you not be as upset if a Light wizard who was a Legilimens read my thoughts, and Snape’s? I suspect you would make excuses for him. Why?”

Harry knew the answer to that. They were not going to like it. But then, when had they ever?

“Because the more objective someone is, the more likely he is to realize my mistakes when I make them,” said Harry quietly. He rushed on, though Draco was opening his mouth to speak. “Both of you want to protect me, I know that. But both of you might move too quickly when someone does have innocent intentions, or is only protecting their interests the way you would, were you in their place. Both of you may indulge me too often.” He turned to face Draco. “For example, you want me to dissolve the monitoring board. And then what would happen?

“It would be dissolved,” said Draco. “And you would be free again.”

Harry shook his head. “The monitoring board was the compromise that ended the rebellion and brought Gloriana Griffinsnest to trial,” he said. “At the very least, the Light wizards could take back their evidence that’s going to convict Gloriana. At worst, they could say breaking one promise means I’ll break others, and so I can’t be trusted. And then everything we’ve fought for will have collapsed.”

“Not everything,” said Draco, his eyes shining fiercely. “I don’t know about you, Harry, but my greatest battle has been to see you happy and free. And the monitoring board being gone would relieve you of yet another burden you should never have had to carry.”

“I can’t simply dissolve it,” Harry told him.
“Not even if every Light wizard on it is against you?” Snape asked the question as if it were an idle one about Potions ingredients. “Not even if you have reason to believe that your life would improve in every way if it vanished?”

“You said that Madam Marchbanks isn’t against me,” Harry reminded him. “And she’s in close friendship with the southern goblins. If they told her about this, then she would side with us, not other Light wizards.”

“The fact remains that the board is filled with snakes, and that Madam Whitestag is the deadliest of them.” Snape’s cup rang as he put it down. “You will only increase your freedom if you rid yourself of them, and a vates must be free.”

“Both of you have a different definition of my freedom than I do,” said Harry, and his own voice rang with frustration. “Both of you think of it mostly in terms of what I can do. I think of it mostly in terms of what I’m able not to do.”

“Why?” Draco demanded.

Harry gave him a flat stare. “Because I’ve had to use my magic to solve so many problems already, and I’d rather offer people a choice and the freedom to make it,” he replied. “Because I don’t actually enjoy intimidating others; in fact, I hate it. Because I’d like to see multiple alliances forming and flourishing in the wizarding world, not just the Alliance of Sun and Shadow. If absolutely nothing else, I’d want such alliances to exist so I could see what reasonable people they might recruit whom we’d miss, because they were growing up in the strongholds of our enemies. I wish that I had made an invitation to Indigena Yaxley to join me first, you know.”

“I don’t understand that.” Draco, at the moment, with his arms crossed and his brow furrowed, looked determined not to understand it.

“And that’s your choice.” Harry shook his head, and stood up. “I have to decide what I’m going to do about this. Thank you for telling me, sir.” He could not thank Snape for reading their minds, and hoped that Snape understood why. “I want to go and think. Alone,” he added, when Draco stood to accompany him.

“You should not be alone,” said Draco. “Just in case someone does manage to corner you in the grounds, Harry.”

Harry called his magic and let it briefly cloak his shoulders in a mantle of snow. It melted almost instantly in the heat of Snape’s fire, but he thought he’d made his point. Harry spoke it anyway. “If I can’t be safe with my magic within Hogwarts’s wards, then I’m not safe anywhere, Draco, and certainly not in bed in your arms.”

He turned and walked out of the room, feeling their eyes on his back all the way.

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Rufus watched the wolf that stood in front of his desk. It watched him back.

The wolf’s body was made of congealed gray mist, which made it look more like a natural wolf than Rufus would have thought it could. Now and then it licked its jaws, and though the tongue was white instead of pink, that also looked natural. When he did not say anything or do anything interesting immediately, it lay down and closed its eyes, a pale, astonishing blue.

Rufus peered into his cup of tea as if it might hold the answers. Nothing but tea looked back.

*If you look into the tea, the tea looks into you*, Rufus thought, and then closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and told himself to stop this. He knew what he had to do. There really was no other choice, not if he was to hold true to the principles that had guided him here in the first place.

It was only the thought of what might come after he made this decision that was frightening him. But the rebellion had ended, and he had made a truce with the Department of Mysteries, and the monitoring board had not so far exploded in a shower of flesh and blood.

Of course, perhaps he would wake up in a few days to find that the rebellion had began again, and the Stone was sending its Unspreakables on their silent missions again, and that he was needed to help sort out pieces of Aurora Whitestag from those of a dozen other witches and wizards. And two goblins and one centaur, of course.

Rufus took one more deep breath and told himself that he could not fear the future. He had done what he could, all he could, and now he had reached the limit of his rope. Whatever he did in the future, he would have to use a different tactic.
Probably a good thing. You know you would be bored if you did one thing for too long, and your enemies would have a chance to get used to you and predict your motions.

The wolf abruptly uncurled and sprang to its feet, taking a step nearer to the desk, looking up at him. Rufus nodded at it, and let the Ritual of Cincinnatus go, laying down his control of all magic in the Ministry.

He felt the wards uncoil and unbind within his head like the cracks of whips parting. He felt his familiarity with various spells drain until he was back to being what he had been, an ordinary wizard who knew the spells as they formed and sparked within his own body, and nothing more. He felt the Ministry breathe a sigh of relief that faded halfway through. That sigh was no longer his to hear.

The wolf swelled with power as it stood there, the living embodiment of the ritual, the mold the magic had chosen to pour itself into. It looked at him with blue eyes, so contained and confined that it was sentient in those moments, and if magic could bless, Rufus would have sworn it blessed him.

He had let the ritual go before he strictly needed to. He had not forced it to demand the magic from him, and he certainly had not forced it to kill him or his companions.

The wolf turned and bounded into the walls, its personality dissipating as it went, the magic racing back into freedom. Rufus sat back and sipped at his cup of tea, and wondered when others would notice.

And if he had the time to have a bit of fun before they did.

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Harry took his broom up from the Quidditch Pitch into a singing wind. The day was not that fair, with heavy hanging clouds that would probably scatter rain down later, but the sun lent a golden undertone to the air, and Harry could admire the deep, damp contrast between gray and green, still stubbornly lingering in the Forbidden Forest.

Besides, he thought better in flight than he did on the ground.

He took the Firebolt up to three hundred feet, and settled into a lazy circle, a bit wider than the Pitch. He stared down, and for a moment his imagination was filled with memories of the times he’d plucked the Snitch here, the time in his third year when Sirius had tried to kill him, the time in second year when a Bludger had broken his arm, the time in first year when the Lestranges had come onto the Pitch and Harry had had to battle them while throwing the game for Connor—

He snorted and shook his head. I didn’t come here to brood about the past. That’s one thing I’m free not to do anymore, think nonstop about the past.

He turned so that he was lying on his back along the broom, swinging one foot to stir it in the air. He supposed he shouldn’t do that, that someone else would believe it dangerous, but for once he didn’t care.

He had to think.

Harry closed his eyes and considered the ramifications of what he’d told Draco and Snape. Dissolve the monitoring board, and he might as well break all his agreements with the Light wizards. How could they trust him again? Why should they have reason to? And Madam Whitestag, who was, at the very least, a canny leader and capable of uniting people who would ordinarily have scattered in a dozen directions—who had managed to forgive Harry enough for the death of her children to try and work with him—would be offended beyond recapture.

No matter what Snape and Draco thought, simply dissolving the monitoring board was not an option.

Harry gave a short little nod of his head. So what were the choices, then? And how was he going to make them?

One came to him almost immediately. Madam Marchbanks would not act against him, and she was clearly and closely allied to the Light—Declared for it, in fact, which Aurora was not. She could lead the monitoring board in Aurora’s place. Aurora could work with her in the capacity that she had already said she would, sending instructions and book on Light pureblood rituals to Harry, but Harry would ask her to step down from leading the board.

When she asked why, he would explain the truth, that he had realized she had set her running dogs on his allies, and he could not
trust someone who did that.

*And what will she do then?*

Harry opened his eyes and stared at the lazy stripes of cloud directly above him. He wanted to dive frantically away from them towards the ground, and use up the excess energy that thrummed through him, but he forced himself to be still and consider what he knew of Aurora.

Strong-willed. A leader. Both of those things would make her unhappy when working with the monitoring board in any diminished capacity from the one she played now.

On the other hand, she was also careful, and clever, and could look past the idea of revenge for her dead children enough to approach Harry as a political opponent, not a personal enemy. And despite the outrage Snape and Draco showed over the way she’d handled him, Harry did not really believe they would have encouraged him to approach Aurora any other way, if they had been on a board in charge of supervising her.

She was far more likely to blink at him when he announced that he wanted Madam Marchbanks to take over the board, curse the luck that had caught her out, and then work with him again. Harry hardly expected her to stop trying to step around and trick him. This time, though, he would be watching for that. He would incorporate the plans of hers he could into his own plans, and stop others.

He had gone into the meeting today stupidly trusting. But it would be equally stupid to be so distrustful that he lost the chance of converting Aurora altogether. For whatever reason, the more of himself he showed to the people around him, the more he did for them, the more they tended to like him and respond in turn. Harry did not pretend to understand it, but he had seen how Snape had changed when Harry started Occlumency training with him, and when Snape had shared his mind while he rebuilt it after Sylaran’s death. Hawthorn had told him the story of how Harry’s simple offer to brew her Wolfsbane had changed her life after she was bitten by Greyback and given her back her strength—and something similar had happened to her recently, if the way she thanked him when he came back from riding the dragon was any indication. Adalrico had grown comfortable enough with him to tell him the tale of torturing and raping Alba Starrise. Harry might not know the exact nature of the gift he seemed to have for reaching out, but he would be stupid to discount it.

And *I have enough enemies*, he thought, thinking of Lucius, thinking of the Unspeakables, thinking of Philip Willoughby and those other parents of the Dozen Who Died who would not be contented with this compromise, thinking of Falco, thinking of Voldemort. *Aurora may become one of them permanently, but first, I want to approach her and see if I can’t convince her to support me.*

Harry gave a smile he knew was faint. But, in truth, if he had to do something other than just ask Aurora to give up tactics that would threaten the alliance between them—and he doubted she would give them up, even if she said she would—he preferred this form of manipulation. Let her see him for who he was. Harry had rarely attempted to hide that, and it went badly when he did. He could hold secrets. He could lie by omission. But he could not say he was not *vates*, not at this point in time, and he could not pretend that he did not value the free wills and decisions of others. He did.

Now, of course, there was the problem of what to do about Draco and Snape, who would explode when they heard of this.

Harry sighed, clenched his hand around the broom handle, and swung himself off, turning around so that he gripped it with his knees and hung moody upside-down. That sent blood rushing to his head, but it was such a perfect expression of his emotions that he didn’t think he could resist.

*Nothing I can do but tell them truth, and explain my reasoning, and give them a chance to respond. Explanations are fine. Protests are fine.*

*But sooner or later, I have to make my own mistakes. I should have been the one to sense what Aurora was doing today. I’m a Legilimens, too, and if my stupidity prevented me from using that, or ferreting out her tactics from watching her, then that’s my own fault. Draco would hate it if I tried to protect him from every mistake, and sending Snape to Joseph meant nothing until Snape decided to heal on his own.*

*I’ve healed so much in concert with them, and benefited so much from their help, and it would be ingratitude personified to abandon them now. But acting on my own, trying to learn what I can when I don’t have someone to watch my back, is not a bad thing, either. I’ve had to do that with Rosier, and in Voldemort’s mind, and in the Forbidden Forest, and on Acies’s back. If my healing is going to function on more than one level, if I’m going to live simultaneously, then I need to heal both with Draco and Snape and apart from them.*
He disliked the conclusions that immediately jumped into his mind from that. If he were going to be honest with himself, that would mean that he had to work on healing his wrist and talking with Joseph, too, and he would have to do it not just when Draco and Snape asked but of his own free will.

Don’t want to, he whined to himself. I could still do without a left hand. I could still do without talking about Kieran’s death. They just aren’t as important as other things. He could list at least ten things more important than either of them without trying.

But he had to. And if sometimes he resented it and whined to himself in his head, at least the resentment and the whining would stay in his head. Snape and Draco should no more have to bear everything with him than they should have to help him heal in everything, or spot and guard against his every mistake.

His head pounded rather with blood, so Harry swung himself back onto his broom and ascended at a steep angle. He flew upward until the heartbeat in his ears sounded normal again, then flipped over and dropped straight towards the ground.

His muscles stretched, and his ears went from chilled to warm in a series of uncomfortable moments, and the Pitch drew nearer until it seemed to fill the entire world. Harry pulled up a moment after that, his arms straining, and zipped in a circle backwards.

He flew that way until most of his uncertainties had changed into something else, into careful, rueful determination to walk forward. Sometimes he would have given much to be as certain as Draco and Snape were, whether that was on the right political course or on what a Lord-level wizard deserved.

But certainty isn’t always for me, I suppose. And that’s all right.

He arched his back until it cracked, then landed and made his way to the Quidditch shed to put the Firebolt away.

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Connor grinned when he saw his brother wandering away from the Pitch. Harry had obviously been out flying, probably thinking about Quidditch and wishing that he could have played today. Well, Connor would be more than happy to tell him how the game went—unless, of course, Harry had another place to hurry off to and be.

Connor tried to stifle a flare of resentment as he called his brother’s name. Harry looked up and saw him. He grinned and waved with his hand.

He’s always so busy. The moments when he has time for me are so rare.

But against that, Connor could set twelve years when Harry had had no time for almost anything or anyone but him. He told the flare of resentment to shut up and go away, and then he had reached Harry and they were turning around for a moment in an effort to adjust themselves so that they walked side by side instead of in opposite directions.

Harry laughed as they figured it out, and then said, “So, how much did Gryffindor defeat Slytherin by?”

Connor arranged his face into a careful expression of neutrality. “Oh, not that much,” he said. “You still have a chance of taking the Quidditch Cup, especially if you utterly trounce Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw. And there’s a new Seeker on Ravenclaw that’s really quite good, and by the time I play him he’ll have had a chance to get better and better, so I might not defeat him at all.”

“Out with it,” said Harry mildly.

He had tried to respect Harry’s feelings as a Slytherin, he really had, Connor thought, but he simply couldn’t resist bursting into laughter. “It was six hundred and twenty points to one hundred,” he admitted. “I’m sorry, Harry. I don’t think you have a chance of taking the Quidditch Cup at all.”

“If you beat us by more than five hundred points, we don’t bloody deserve it,” said Harry, his voice thrumming with indignation. “Where was Sam looking for the Snitch? Up his own arse?”

“Actually, it was the Keeper’s fault, mostly.” Connor offered. “He just can’t keep his own goal covered, Harry. Meanwhile, Ron flew like Merlin had touched him, and I don’t think Slytherin knew what hit them there. They were used to thinking of Ron as the weak point of the team, because he was, the last time you played us.” Connor snickered, remembering the expression on the Slytherin Beaters’ faces when they started trying to direct the Bludgers to hit Ron, and he had managed to avoid them every single time. “They don’t realize that’s changed.”
“We deserved to lose,” said Harry, voice firm now. He paused a long moment, and Connor wondered what would come next. He didn’t think it could diminish his joy, whatever it was. There was a raucous party going on in Gryffindor Tower. They had won for more reasons than just Harry not being on the Slytherin team, and they all knew it. They had worked well together. Connor could barely remember the game, in fact, except for scattered moments. The Gryffindor team had fallen so smoothly into a whole that it was more an impression of silent communication, wheeling flight, and always, always knowing where a teammate was and what would happen next.

“How could it be that we won?” Harry said at last.

“Yeah?”

“How could it be that we won? I mean, we didn’t even score. I didn’t even get a chance to try. And yet, somehow, we still won. How could that be?”

Connor didn’t know what to say for a moment. He felt joy welling to the surface of his chest, to burst out his throat. But when it came, he wasn’t sure if it would be a laugh or a happy shout. It turned out rather like a mixture of the two, and apparently it rather startled Harry, as did the hug Connor grabbed him in a moment later.

“Of course, you prat,” he muttered into his ear. “And this doesn’t have to have anything to do with Parvati, or Draco. We’re brothers, Harry.”

He felt Harry relax, and hug him back. “Good,” said Harry. “And now I have to go tell Snape and Draco something that will make them very unhappy.”

“Want support?” Connor asked.

“You’d laugh at the expressions on their faces,” said Harry.

“They could use that,” Connor pointed out. Sometimes he was appalled at how little humor there was in Harry’s life. He couldn’t count Draco’s snide comments, or Snape’s sarcasm either, for that matter. They didn’t do that to make Harry feel good, they did that to destroy competition for Harry.

“Maybe they could,” said Harry. “But not this time.”

Connor stepped back and studied his brother for a moment. Harry’s jaw was set, and he moved as if he were going to jump on his broom, find Voldemort, and duel it out right now.

“Give them hell,” Connor said, and stepped out of the way.

Harry tossed him a fleeting smile as he made his way towards the dungeons.

“And then tell me about it, later!” Connor yelled after him. For once, he didn’t worry about being left behind. Harry could obviously take care of himself.

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Snape waited. He and Draco had sat in silence when Harry was gone, and Snape had wondered at that; he would have thought Draco, at least, would have ranted and paced up and down the room. But instead he preferred to sit with his arms folded on his knees and stare at the floor. Snape supposed he could hardly blame him.

His own thoughts were tending along a track inspired by Harry’s last words.

If I can’t be safe with my magic within Hogwarts’s wards, then I’m not safe anywhere, Draco, and certainly not in bed in your arms.

And there was always the chance that Harry would not be safe, no matter who accompanied him, no matter what happened, no matter who pointed out the threats to him. He had already had to go into danger numerous times, even when he knew it was dangerous. And then there were his opponents. If the Light wizards were stupid and stubborn enough to demand a monitoring board in the first place, then Snape could not discount Harry’s fear that they would be stupid and stubborn enough to revoke their
other promises if the monitoring board was dissolved.

* I said that I would try to let him go, to fail and make mistakes. He will not crumble this time as he did when he battled his mother. I do not believe that Aurora Whitestag can harm him without his active cooperation. She had that today. Do I really believe that she will have it again?*

No, Snape had to think. He’d watched Harry’s eyes when he admitted using Legilimency, and behind the resentment that that had happened at all was a stronger resentment towards Whitestag for making such tactics necessary. Now he knew. Now he was warned.

Now Snape himself was warned, and would not have to do such piecemeal Legilimency again, so he could better respond to attempts at distraction like Shadow’s.

And then there was Draco.

“Why could Mrs. Addlington bait you so easily?” he asked Draco abruptly.

Draco started. Then he looked at Snape as if he were mad and answered, “Because they so obviously wanted only to hurt Harry. Everyone but my mother and his other allies, of course,” he added dismissively. “And then she was making remarks about purebloods and the Grand Unified Theory, and I knew Harry wouldn’t say anything against her, since he accepts that load of rubbish. How could I let her remarks go by, and let her think that everyone in the room agreed with her?”

“It is not impossible that others did not want to hurt Harry,” said Snape, watching him closely. Draco had his own frustrations, that was clear, but he had let them build up to an unacceptable level today. Snape considered his own reaction to Shadow’s provocation to be unacceptable, and Draco’s response to Addlington had been far worse. “Madam Marchbanks, for example.”

“She’s Light.”

Snape snorted in spite of himself, hardly able to believe what he was saying. “That does not make her evil.”

Draco sprang to his feet and began pacing, then. “The monitoring board needs to be dissolved,” he said, in a low, passionate voice. “I’ll say that as many times as I need to. I’ll do whatever I have to to make Harry see that. It’s impossible that he doesn’t see it. He needs freedom to act on his own.”

Snape cocked his head. “Is this more about ending a danger to Harry, Draco, or winning an argument with him?”

Oh, that earned him a glare. But Draco was not Lucius, and that glare did not bring back enough memories to disconcert Snape. Snape continued, easily able to play the role of Head of House in this environment. “I think that you may wish to step back and consider your own actions before you consider his. You would not wish to be a liability to Harry, Draco.”

“I am not—”

“As you were not today?”

Draco folded his arms and turned away.

Snape rolled his eyes and wondered silently why he was always the one who needed to speak such obvious truths. “Think of yourself, Draco,” he said. “Study your own emotions and reactions as you are encouraging Harry to study his.” He paused, noting the tense set of Draco’s shoulders, and added softly, “Harry will not hate you if you Declare for Dark.”

Draco whipped around so fast that he stumbled. Snape saw his face flush in humiliation as he steadied himself. “How did you know?” he whispered.

*A lucky guess, combined with Legilimency. But Draco did not need to know that. “Because you are growing more and more entrenched in your sentiments towards the Light,” Snape said. “Because you are once again seeking to define yourself, and you cannot do that solely as Harry’s lover and partner. Because you are a Dark wizard, Draco, with an affinity for those spells, with that deep distrust of the opposite allegiance, and with a love for tactics that Harry will avoid using if possible. Tell him that you are Declaring, and he will understand.”*

“I thought—I should remain undeclared…”
“That is Harry’s path,” said Snape. “It is not the path for many other wizards. And he will not hate you if you do this.”

Draco nibbled his lip and stared at the floor. He had not expected his own defining moment to come at such a time, Snape guessed. But it was here, and he had to meet it, rather than continue denying it and driving himself into misguided attempts to live vicariously through Harry. That only made him act as he had today. Some said that Light and Dark called to the souls of those wizards suited to them. Snape doubted that, but if it could be true, then the Dark was calling Draco. And Midwinter would be here soon, the greatest time of power of the wild Dark. Its voice would resound more clearly now.

“I should,” Draco whispered. “He would want me to do what most pleases me, not what most pleases or benefits him.”

Snape nodded, and said nothing more. Draco had made the decision. He would urge himself along the path now.

A knock sounded on the door, and Harry stepped inside without waiting for an answer or an invitation. Snape’s eyebrows rose when he saw the determination written on his face.

Well. It seems that this conversation shall be interesting, indeed.

He sat forward to meet it.

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Chapter Forty-Nine: A Matter of Equality

Harry was gratified to see that Snape looked at him as if actually eager for the conversation to resume, though he was concerned about Draco’s flushed face and loosely clasped hands. Well, whatever the matter is, he must speak to me about it. I’m unable to guess what he holds back and hides, most of the time.

“I’ve thought about what you said,” he admitted. “I still don’t think I can dissolve the monitoring board. But I will ask Mrs. Whitestag to step down and let Madam Marchbanks take her place. And I do intend to tell Mrs. Whitestag why.” He held up his hand as Snape’s mouth opened, in a silent plea to let him finish. Remarkably, Snape shut his mouth and did so. “I think I can understand her. What she wants is power over me. Being sent away from me won’t help that. On the other hand, remaining near me means a chance to turn her towards me as I’ve managed to turn other people—simply by showing her what I stand for, and what I intend to do to accomplish my goals. I expect her to apologize for her wrongdoing and use more subtle versions of the tactics she already tried. Now, I’ll be watching for them, and it will be no more difficult than other political waltzes I’ve danced in the past.”

Snape raised his eyebrows, but waited for an extra moment, as if to make sure that Harry were finished. Harry nodded. Snape said, “And do you believe that you can convince Madam Marchbanks to take up the post?”

“Yes,” said Harry. “She wasn’t happy with what happened today. And you said she isn’t against me. And she is clearly Declared for Light, so no one can say I’m dismissing Mrs. Whitestag only to put one of my Dark allies in her place.”


Draco rubbed his hands together for a moment. “I suppose you can’t get rid of the monitoring board yet,” he admitted. “I didn’t think about the larger political picture.” Harry bit his tongue to keep from saying that Draco often didn’t think about the larger political picture. “But I think setting some definite limits would be helpful. Do they expect to supervise you for a few months? Until you’re legally of age? Until they agree that you won’t do anything else irresponsible?” Draco snorted at that, and muttered something about Harry’s never convincing the monitoring board of that, if he hadn’t been able to convince Draco and Snape.

“Not a bad idea,” said Harry, surprised. What conclusions did he come to while I was gone? “And I can ask Madam Marchbanks about that more easily than I can Mrs. Whitestag. She would probably find some way to slip out of answering.”

It was obvious that Draco was still distracted, still thinking of whatever had occupied him while Harry was gone more than he was thinking of Harry’s answer. Harry waited, and waited, and waited, and still no answer was forthcoming, only the nervous washing of Draco’s hands. Harry looked to Snape, only to receive a scowl and a jerk of his head at Draco, as much to say that the tale was his partner’s to tell. Harry stood and waited as patiently as he could.

“Harry,” Draco said at last. “Would you mind if I Declared for Dark?”

“—“ Harry had to think about that for a moment, but in the end there was only one thing he could say. “Of course not, Draco,”
he said. “Is Midwinter calling you?”

Draco winced. “I don’t like the thought of that,” he said, as if Snape were no longer in the room; the tone was one Harry had only heard from him in private before. “That I would be Declaring to the same form of the wild Dark that killed Fawkes and tried to make you into a Lord.”

“The wild Dark was irritated then,” said Harry, and forced himself forward through a blur and haze of phoenix fire in his memories. “And you can’t help the time of year when you feel the call, Draco. It’s a very rare and special thing to feel at all.” He reached out and gently ran his hand up and down Draco’s arm. “I will never mind that you have Declared, and especially not your allegiance.”

Draco nodded, mute. Harry studied him for a moment, then made an educated guess that he would swear did not depend on Legilimency. “Is this part of the reason that you were so rude to Mrs. Addlington during the meeting? That you were occupied with thinking about the wild Dark, and what it would mean if you swore yourself to it?”

A second nod. Harry gathered Draco into his arms, feeling the same surge of intense protectiveness that he knew Draco had felt for him more than once. “You don’t need to keep such concerns to yourself,” he whispered into Draco’s ear. “You would yell at me if I did. I’m not going to yell at you—” he smoothed his hand up and down Draco’s spine, the better to calm him “—but I do want to know about them sooner than this in the future.”

Draco gave a little sigh and relaxed against him. Harry went on smoothing, and glanced over at Snape. His guardian’s gaze was sharp, piercing, as much to ask why Harry himself wouldn’t accept that kind of comfort more often, but he nodded, as if approving of his tactics with Draco.

Harry eased Draco back onto the couch. He found that his arms didn’t want to leave him, but he kept them on Draco’s spine and shoulders. Moving them lower would spark unfortunate thoughts, and he already had enough trouble with those since the barriers on his hormones broke during the Halloween ritual. He had no idea how Draco, or for that matter other sixteen-year-old boys, coped with being flooded with thoughts of sex all the time.

“And are we coming with you to the next meeting of the monitoring board?” Snape asked the question as if it needed to be addressed right now.

Draco abruptly stiffened against Harry, and then pulled away and turned to look at him. Harry frowned. He knew Draco didn’t have Occlumency training, and so there was no reason that he should be able to bury his emotions that well and that suddenly. That could only mean that he considered Harry’s answer more important right now than his crisis about Declaring.

Harry couldn’t look them both in the eye while he replied, so he settled for Draco. “No, you’re not.”

Draco drew his lips back, showing his teeth, and said nothing at all.

“Explain,” said Snape.

Harry reminded himself not to sound defensive. He had made this choice for perfectly good reasons. Just because he hadn’t known Draco was so twisted up around the notion of Declaring, and just because he still didn’t know why Snape appeared to be taking this so well, didn’t mean that his choice was invalid. “Because I want to go alone,” he said. “Because I promised Mrs. Whitestag that you wouldn’t be there, and showing up with both of you along would warn her at once that something was wrong, and give her time to prepare her defenses before I tell her the truth. Because, sometimes, I need to make my own mistakes, and that includes mistakes on the battlefield of politics. I want to see what tactics and enemies I can recognize without someone there to watch my back.”

Snape studied him broodingly when Harry looked again, his eyes dark with what Harry could only imagine were memories. Then he nodded as if those memories had been the things to convince him of Harry’s validity.

“I think this is a mistake,” he said. “I think you will fall badly without us.” That made Harry bristle in spite of his resolve to hold calm, but Snape didn’t give him the chance to show off his anger. “But it is a mistake that you need to make. If we force you to rely on us, then you will grow cramped. We have made you see the need to heal, and helped you heal. Now is the time that you began to step into healing that does not include us.”

“I know that, sir,” said Harry, touched beyond measure. What did he think to turn him in this direction? He might have been inside my head with me while I was riding my broom. “I already know that I’ll need to speak to Joseph on my own, and work on breaking the curses on my hand on my own. That is, I can have help from Argutus and others, but the will to guide me through
them has to be my own.”

“Where did you go to think?” Draco asked, curiosity apparently overcoming his urge to remain coldly silent.

“Up on my broom.” Harry gave him a faint smile. “I think best when I’m away from the ground. And—well.” He shrugged. “I do have to make mistakes on my own. I’m nearly an adult, and I can’t remember a time when I lived truly free of the domination of at least one other mind. First it was my mother, and Connor when she wasn’t with me. And then it was Tom Riddle. And then it was the influence of those I couldn’t abandon, like my father, and those I didn’t want to abandon, both you and Professor Snape”

He stopped when he saw Snape’s expression, touched with just a hint of rebuke. He took a deep breath and made himself say it. “Both you and Severus.” He countered the feeling that he was being informal and deserved a punishment for violating such boundaries with the reminder that Snape had wanted Harry to call him by his first name. “And all of this has been wonderful, but it’s still made my life far too simple. There’s always someone to blame for a mistake, or someone to trust when I should be relying on myself, or someone who makes me see that I need to peel back another layer of my training. Always someone to be my hands, my eyes, my ears. That started to change last year, but it didn’t go far enough, or something like today could never have happened. I should have been intelligent enough to see the meeting of the monitoring board for what it was, the way I should have been intelligent enough to recover from my grief over the Dozen Who Died, and the way I should have seen that the Sanctuary was my best option.” He nodded to Snape and then to Draco. “So far, my mistakes have mostly been mistakes of omission. I want to change them to mistakes of commission, if only as practice for the war.”

“Commendable, Harry.” Snape’s voice was soft, and full of a strange sound. Harry could only compare it to waves breaking on rocks, because he didn’t think he’d ever heard an emotion like it before. And then he looked at Snape and saw that his eyes were shining with pride, the kind of pride that Narcissa might have in Draco when he did something particularly fine.

Harry ducked his head, feeling his cheeks burn with a wild flush. I don’t deserve that. Many other children figured out how to grow up a long time ago, or they just feel it and have no need to verbalize it.

Then he took a deep breath, and told the guilt to shove off. Why shouldn’t I feel that I deserve this? Professor Snape loves me and is proud of me. I can accept it and glory in it the way any child would glory in a parent’s approval.

“Thank you, Severus,” he said, proud of himself in turn for remembering the name. He looked at Draco. “Can you see what I mean, Draco? Why I need to attend the next meeting of the monitoring board alone?”

Draco sighed and looked down at his clasped hands. Harry didn’t like the sigh. He would have preferred a yell. He put a hand under Draco’s chin and lifted his head again so that they could meet eye-to-eye.

At last, Draco gave a quick little nod, though his gaze still didn’t give away as much as Harry would like. Harry smiled and stood, wrapping an arm around his boyfriend’s shoulders. He had the urge to escort him back to their bedroom in Slytherin and simply spoil him.

“Thank you, both of you,” he said, and waited only for Snape’s nod before slipping away with Draco.

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Draco lay on his stomach on their bed, and felt more than heard Harry murmuring, the words falling into his hair and trickling along his ears like moisture.

“You silly prat, why couldn’t you tell me?” His hand dug into Draco’s shoulders, easing away the tension with a skill Draco hadn’t known he had. Well, he supposed, there was nothing to keep Harry from observing other people, and learning what they knew. “You could have,” Harry whispered. “You could have. The wild Dark isn’t just the incarnation of it that killed Fawkes. It’s also the white deer that ran away from us at Walpurgis, and it’s the Dark that Voldemort tried to chain, and it’s the Dark that danced around me when I went to my first Walpurgis, and took me into it, and broke me apart, and put me back together. It’s too large to be just one thing. Of course I’m not going to be upset if you Declare for it, Draco, any more than I was at Connor Declaring for Light.”

Draco didn’t think he could relax if Harry was going to compare him to his brother. He managed to wrestle up on one elbow, only to drive Harry’s fingers into an unexpectedly tender place on his shoulder with the movement. He threw back his head, gasping, and Harry leaned down and captured his lips in a kiss.

The angle was awkward, and made Draco’s neck ache. He found that he didn’t care. He turned over, looping his arms around Harry’s shoulders and dragging him down to him. Harry hummed under his breath, but then reared up and managed to make it a
sound of protest.

“Draco, don’t you—”

“Not right now,” Draco murmured.

Harry nodded, and then slid away from him before Draco could make him stay in one place and kiss him. Draco felt a warm hand on his hip, and then Harry muttered again, not his name this time, and his trousers and pants vanished.

And then Harry’s mouth was surrounding him, and Draco gasped, because this wasn’t like the wild, intense coupling they had shared on the Halloween ritual. This was fuzzier, and made his eyes blur, and mingled with the steady call he had been hearing on the edge of his perceptions for a month now, and had tried to deny was the wild Dark each time.

When he closed his eyes, the call billowed around him like a storm, sweeping him up into high, shining cold, while at the same time the sweetness and warmth of Harry’s mouth kept him anchored to the earth below. Draco’s back melted, and he seemed to have wings. But he also definitely had a body that was not melting, but growing harder and harder, both in terms of his erection and in terms of the movements he was making. He had no idea how Harry was handling it, because, once again, he seemed to have no idea where his hands were, where the rest of his body was—

The call sounded in his head like a thunderclap at the same moment he came. Draco sagged back against the pillows, exhausted, and knew his decision was made. Harry gently drew back. Draco heard more spells, all of them quiet enough not to disturb him; they cleaned him up, and Vanished his shirt, and settled him under the covers. Harry’s hand brushed through his hair, and Draco turned his head so that he could kiss the palm.

“I’m going to Declare,” he whispered.

“On Midwinter?” Harry’s voice matched his for quietude, as if they would disturb something sacred by speaking of the Declaring ritual any more loudly.

“Yes,” Draco said, because he wasn’t sure his head would move if he tried to nod. “And Harry, I love you.”

“That, I knew.” Harry’s lips brushed along his cheek like his hand, and then Draco found himself spilling into the first genuinely unbroken sleep he’d had in more than a week. He had nothing to feel sorry for, and Declaring would satisfy the needs of his soul without changing his relationship with Harry.

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Harry leaned on the wall of the dungeon corridor and shivered. He knew he had to do this. He couldn’t have half of honesty and not the other half. He couldn’t bask in the approving looks from Draco and Snape if he only had words and not actions to inspire them.

But he didn’t want to do this. The reluctance was so strong that he almost turned back in the direction of the Slytherin common room. Harry was sure that Draco would still be sleeping, and he could join him. He imagined slipping under the covers and sliding his arms around his boyfriend, the warmth of his body, the softness and scent of his hair—

And then he reminded himself that he was standing in the middle of an open hallway, and let the thoughts subside, and knocked firmly on the door in front of him.

Joseph opened it a moment later. He paused when he saw Harry, and studied him carefully. Harry tossed his head like a nervous horse—he couldn’t quite help the gesture—but returned the gaze, and then Joseph nodded, as if either the gesture or the gaze had helped him decide.

“You’re ready to talk now, Harry,” he said, and opened the door further. “Come inside.”

Harry did. Joseph’s quarters were not as finely decorated as Vera’s had been when she stayed in Hogwarts, but of course she had not stayed in the dungeons, either. Joseph had hung his maps on the walls with charms to protect them from the damp stone. Under and beneath and over them hung banners that Harry hadn’t seen before. He squinted, but couldn’t make anything of the symbols on them. Now and then he thought he saw something that looked like the crest of a Hogwarts House, but he doubted it was, and the next moment the familiar figure had blended back into a sea of chaos.

“Here we are.” Joseph nodded, and Harry turned away from the confusion of the walls to see that a table stood in the center of the
room, with a chair on either side of it. Harry took the one nearest the door, and Joseph smiled faintly at him and took the other. He leaned forward, eyes intent. “Suppose that we start with you telling me what you would like to talk about, Harry.”

“I reckon we should begin with Kieran’s death,” said Harry reluctantly. “If only because you seemed concerned over it, and I don’t understand why you were.”

Joseph leaned back in his chair. “What would you say if someone else told you he’d been suicidal, Harry, if only for a few moments?”

Harry swallowed. “I would be concerned about him.”

“And?”

“I’m not like everyone else.” Harry clenched his hand in front of him, feeling shards of emotion poke at him like broken bones. At that moment, he really did wish the Breaking of Boundaries ritual had repaired all the walls it ripped down. “And it really was only a few moments,” he added. “I wouldn’t commit suicide unless—”

Damn. He hadn’t meant to say that last word.

Joseph raised his eyebrows, and said absolutely nothing.

Harry looked aside. “Unless I caused the world more trouble alive than dead,” he said softly. “There might come a time when it’s necessary. I’ve always known that. If Voldemort made me into a weapon somehow, if he managed to possess me, or if I went mad and became a Dark Lord, then I would want to be dead. I wouldn’t want to give my friends the burden and grief of dealing with me.”

“Why would you have killed yourself when Kieran died?” Joseph asked.

_That question I can answer._ “I made a promise to protect him,” Harry said simply. “I know now that nothing could have kept him away from Loki, not once Loki invoked that vengeance ritual, but I didn’t know that then. I should have made wards or spells or preparations of _some_ kind that would defend him. The same thing happened when the children in the Life-Web died. There should have been some way for me to save them.”

“Some things are impossible,” Joseph said. “Do you realize that, Harry?” He sounded slightly bemused. Harry supposed it wasn’t something he had to explain to most people he talked to.

“And I’m supposed to be the answer to impossibilities,” Harry snapped. “I’m _supposed_ to be able to do things that other people can’t. That’s what having Lord-level power means. Instead of casting Dark spells that torture people or manipulate them into doing what I want, I happen to prefer saving and healing. And people become used to thinking of me as able to do any healing and saving that needs to be done. So when I do run up against something I can’t change, I start aching.”

“Suicide is still a rather extreme response to that kind of failure,” Joseph noted. “Especially since it would prevent you from saving or healing anyone else in the future.”

Harry hissed in spite of himself, and wished he had ears to lay back. _Lingering poison from the dreams of Voldemort, my arse._ My Animagus form is a lynx, and the sooner Peter accepts that, the better and faster he can train me. “I know it is,” he said.

“Harry?”

He folded his arms and scowled at the floor.

“Harry?”

“I don’t—I don’t want to be the kind of person who doesn’t keep his promises,” Harry said to the floor. “I don’t want to be the kind of person who hurts his friends. I don’t want to be the kind of person who wounds the world the way that Voldemort does, the way that Dumbledore did.”

“And?”

“To avoid becoming that kind of person—if I thought there was no way I could benefit anyone by remaining alive, but would only hurt them—then I would kill myself, yes.” Harry raised his head and stared at Joseph. ‘That’s the way I _am_. And I know that you’re probably going to say suicide is a selfish act, but I’m talking about extremes, rather like the situation with Kieran or the Life-Web. No, I’m speaking about something even more extreme than they are, because I could still benefit Draco and Snape, if
no one else, by remaining alive then. If there ever comes a point where it would be more selfish to live than to die, then of course I’m going to die.”

Joseph sat in silence for long enough that Harry began to hope he didn’t know how to deal with this, and would let him go for right now. He hadn’t put his conviction in quite those words before, but of course it was true. How could it not be? He might set safeguards on himself, like the monitoring board; he might have people who loved him for himself, like Draco and Snape. He was much more healed than he had been five years ago. He knew what love for people besides Connor was. He knew that what his parents had done to him was abuse.

But he still did not know how to value his life simply because it was life. Harry was hoping fervently now that it was the kind of knowledge he would never learn. What mattered was how he lived, not that he lived. In the end, when all the other guards were gone, the final judge of his impact on the world had to be himself. And if he did nothing but scar it, how could he justify staying alive?

“And for others?” Joseph asked.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Harry said pleasantly.

“If you thought your brother was only scarring the world by remaining alive,” Joseph said, “would you tell him to kill himself?”

“Of course not,” said Harry, recoiling at the thought. “I don’t think he ever could arrive at that point. Besides, even if he did consider suicide, he would have to make the decision on his own. I couldn’t interfere with his free will like that.”

Joseph stared at him in silence a moment longer. Then he said, “You have most unusual views on life and death, Harry.”

“But that’s a good thing, right?” Harry persisted. “If suicide is a fundamentally selfish decision, then it’s good that I’m showing some selfishness, isn’t it?”

Joseph put his head in his arms and sighed. Harry watched him, a bit irritated. It seemed that when he did arrive at and believe in whatever conclusions they wanted to foist on him, there was always another set of them waiting just beyond, and then they were angry because Harry didn’t believe in them yet.

At last, Joseph said, “And if your Malfoy considered suicide?”

Harry flinched.

“You don’t want him to, do you?” Joseph leaned forward. “And yet you can sit here and tell me that you would judge your life as if it were a toll exacted on or paid to the world, and if you found it only exacted, you would cut it short.” His voice simmered with a passion that Harry didn’t understand.

Harry swallowed a few times. Then he said, “Yes, it would hurt. Merlin, it would hurt.” The mere thought of Draco with his wand aimed at himself, or a knife in his hand, made Harry’s skin crawl up his spine trying to get away. “But it would still be his decision. I would argue with him if I thought he was under the Imperius Curse or otherwise influenced from the outside, and I would need loads of proof that he wasn’t. If it were under his own free will, then I would have to stand aside. I would have to. I would hate it, but I would have to.”

Surprisingly, Joseph smiled. “At least, there, you do see yourself and others in the same light,” he murmured. Then he leaned forward again. “And now I wanted to ask you about what you think might make your life worth living, beyond the pleasure that you receive from helping and healing others.”

Harry sighed. “This is going to be about how things taste again, isn’t it?”

******

Harry waited patiently outside the castle for Connor to come back from Care of Magical Creatures. It was an unusually beautiful day for mid-November, the rush of clouds across the sky polishing it to the color of diamond, and the sun lingering as if reluctant to abandon the world, even though the clouds were racing to meet it. Harry could smell frost in the wind, and he wondered, absently, if the blessing Remus had spoken for him would soon come true after all, snow and pine needles.

He heard laughter on the edge of his perceptions, mad, exultant laughter. He ignored it. The wild Dark could call Draco all it wanted, and he was already preparing for the ritual that he would hold on Midwinter. But that didn’t mean Harry had to listen to
it. He told the laughter to go away.

In a few days, Harry thought, leaning back to breathe in the wind, it would be a year since his parents’ trial. He shook his head. He could not even have imagined that he would feel this way a year later, after the broken mess he’d been then. But at the time, he didn’t think he had really conceived of living beyond the few days in which the trial would take place. He had thought too much of rescuing James and Lily, and not enough of what would happen afterwards.

“Harry!”

There was his brother. Harry put the unhappy thoughts away, and rose to his feet with a smile. Then he raised his eyebrows, and wondered if not telling his brother that he wanted to play a Seekers’ game with him was the best idea after all. Parvati trailed behind Connor, not exactly beside him, but close enough that Harry could entertain the idea of them having a conversation.

“Connor,” he said, and nodded to Parvati. She looked at him with haunted eyes for a moment, then shook her head and walked past him into the castle. Harry forced himself to drop those thoughts, too, just like the broken memories of his parents’ trial. In the past few days, he hoped, his Occlumency barriers had finally started to recover from Halloween. He would be grateful when they were back to full strength, and he could control his own mind in the way to which he’d become accustomed. “I thought we’d fly together, if you had no objection.”

“No, you can’t.” Connor grinned at him. “It’s a move that Ron and I developed, one you’ve never even heard of.”

“I can counter it,” said Harry, feeling a rush of simple happiness that didn’t have its origin, for once, in anything complicated he had done to help the world. His brother’s grin brought back too many memories of flying together in Godric’s Hollow. Harry had held himself back, yes, so that neither his parents nor his brother had ever guessed his true skill on a broom, but that had become second nature by the time he was eight or nine, and then he had enjoyed the games by riding on top of his instincts, and having fun. He was curious to see if he could recapture the feeling now that it wouldn’t have that quiet, simmering satisfaction of knowing he was obeying Lily underneath it.

“No, you can’t.” Connor rolled his eyes. “It’s a move that Ron and I developed, one you’ve never even heard of.”

“And Ron isn’t here right now,” Harry pointed out.

Connor narrowed his eyes then. “That doesn’t matter. I’m going to defeat you anyway.”

Harry snorted, and they made for the Quidditch shed, arguing on the way.

******

Connor was determined, this time. The game on Saturday had been wonderful, productive, brilliant. The Gryffindor team had never flown like that before, but they were already planning the next time they would fly like that.

But Connor would still have felt better about it if they had flown like that and beaten Harry at the same time. The Slytherin team without him had floundered so badly that there wasn’t as much satisfaction in defeating them. As Harry had said, the Slytherins had lost so badly that they didn’t really deserve the Quidditch Cup.

And now Harry had offered him the chance to show what he could really do, opposite his brother on a broom.

Connor picked up his own broom, the Nimbus, with a tingle of excitement that seemed to pass through his hands and communicate itself to the wood. He could hear Katie Bell’s voice in his head if he listened, the lecture she’d given them during their last practice before the game proper.

“A lot of people will tell you that flying is like dueling, but they don’t mean the same thing by it that I do. They mean it’s a matter of life or death if you happen to fall off your broomstick or something else goes wrong in the air. But what it really should be like is that quickness and cleverness counts. A weaker wizard can win a duel with a stronger one because he thinks of a spell faster, or he uses a minor hex in a way that an opponent who only uses the Unforgivables would disdain. It’s the same thing in Quidditch. Your opponent could have the better broom, and you could still win. In fact, I think we all know that’s possible.”

Her glance had stabbed Connor. He’d done his best to stand straight and tall, and nod to Katie. They’d known by then, of course, that they wouldn’t be playing Harry on Saturday, but Connor had also known that Katie thought him capable of beating his brother if he were playing. Harry’s Firebolt shouldn’t be allowed to make that much difference, and neither should his battle training. This was Quidditch, and Connor was good at Quidditch. There was no reason for him to lose just because Harry was the
Seeker on the opposite team.

Harry had his broom in hand by now, and had faced the back of the shed. “Accio Snitch,” he murmured. Connor felt the twang of several unlocking spells undone, and then the Snitch came zipping through the darkness of the shed and floated around his head.

Connor snickered. “Should you have done that?” he asked.

“Oh, it’ll give the monitoring board one more thing to yell at me about, and that will make them happy,” Harry shrugged and slung his leg over his Firebolt. “Come on.” He raced out the door of the Quidditch shed before Connor could respond, or even ask why the monitoring board should care about minor school infractions, the Snitch following him as if attached to a lead.

With a surge of determination, Connor hopped on the Nimbus and rode out the door, too, though he came perilously close to scraping a shoulder on the wood. But if Harry could do it, then he could. Will counted for a lot.

Yes, said an inconvenient voice from somewhere inside him. Will was what held Harry back when he could easily have defeated you in your games as children.

Connor told the inconvenient voice to shut up. Sometimes he thought like that, and it galled him. It reminded him too much of the way things had been. He wouldn’t live like that again, mindlessly relying on Harry’s fondness for him to let him win games or do anything else important. If he was going to defeat Harry, he was going to do it on his merits.

Harry was circling above the Pitch, waiting for him, when Connor made his way out of the shed. Harry nodded to him, and then released his hold on the Snitch. The tiny golden ball streaked away immediately, twinkling once before fading. Connor smiled. The cloudy nature of the day would make it harder for them to find it, since there was little sun to shine on it.

His brother lay along the Firebolt, his eyes scanning ahead. Connor started wheeling in the opposite direction, breathing deeply to send himself into the half-trance most useful for locating the Snitch. He tried to reach out, to think like it did, to put himself in its place, and know where he would go to evade the clumsy, grabbing hands of the waiting Seekers.

He lost track of what Harry was doing, but that didn’t matter. What mattered was the sudden flash beneath him, and the way he began diving before the command to dive entered his head. Good, that was good. If he were going to defeat Harry on quickness alone, then he would have to think with his muscles, even before he thought with his brain.

A glimpse of movement from the side startled him and broke his trance. He jerked his head around to see Harry diving in a long, steep curve, flying with only his knees locked on the broom, his hand extended impatiently forward. The Snitch darted to the side at the last moment, and Harry cursed as it escaped.

I don’t want to win just because he only has one hand, either, Connor thought, and called, even as he kept a desperate eye out for the Snitch, “Do you want me to tie a hand behind my back, Harry, to make it a bit easier for you?”

Harry rolled his eyes at him as if that weren’t worthy of an answer, and Connor supposed it really wasn’t. He turned his glide into another circle, watching hawk-eyed, certain that he would spot the Snitch in a moment.

But he didn’t, and moments turned into minutes, and minutes turned into what felt like a quarter of an hour or a half hour. Connor shivered as the wind cut through his clothes. They wore only ordinary robes, not Quidditch gear, other than the gloves. At the moment when they reached the Quidditch shed, it hadn’t seemed possible to take the time to dress properly. Now, Connor was wishing that that had happened, much as he was wishing that the Snitch would appear.

Harry swooped past him, into a long, elegant wave of a dive that pointed him abruptly straight at the ground. Connor had one moment, just one, to decide if this was a feint designed to throw him off or the real thing.

He saw Harry’s head, the way it was bent, and the way his neck muscles twitched, and the way his hand had already left the broomstick again, as though he could not bear to keep it flat, and thought, Real.

He followed hard on Harry’s heels, but just beneath him, so that the Nimbus wasn’t so much chasing the Firebolt as shadowing it. He snapped his head up and down like a bird searching for worms, hoping to see a streak of light out of the corner of one eye.

The wind shrieked in his ears, and then he saw the Snitch, doing a lazy spiral halfway between him and the ground. Connor let out a shrick of triumph. Harry’s dive had been a feint after all, but it had led him in the right direction. He plummeted, chasing it.

Then he saw a shadow drift past him, and realized Harry had gone beneath the Snitch and was now rising to catch it.
Connor’s heart pounded hard as he aimed from above while Harry aimed from below. Either of them could be foiled in a moment by the Snitch darting off to the side, but it hovered there as if waiting for them. He could feel the gold in his hand, and taste eagerness in his mouth. His fingers twitched. He was going to capture it. He would make this work. It would work. He was going to make this work.

He fell, yielding control of his broomstick entirely to the wind. The Snitch glowed, and didn’t seem inclined to move. Connor’s hand shot out, his fingers curved like claws.

And Harry swept past in a blaze of speed and took it away.

Connor cursed, and then had something else to curse about as the wind made the Nimbus buck, very nearly sending him into the Keeper’s goal. He locked his legs desperately on the broom and turned sideways, into the wind, letting it bear him up and over, and then kicked out of it. The Nimbus spun twice, then righted itself. Connor sighed and turned to look at Harry.

He felt some of his resentment and desperation melt at the sight of his brother. Harry’s mouth was open with laughter, his eyes bright with it. And he was waving the Snitch around as if it weren’t just a Snitch, but the answer to defeating Voldemort. Connor thought he could give up a little satisfaction, for that.

“I beat you,” Harry crowed across the distance between them, and Connor reconsidered.

“Luck,” he said. “Not skill. And your broom is faster.”

“Speed is skill, in Quidditch.” Harry patted the Firebolt without letting go of the Snitch, then grinned at him. “Want another one?”

Abruptly, his head jerked to the side, and he frowned. Connor looked warily around the Pitch. When Harry looked like that, Death Eaters tended to appear out of nowhere. “What is it?” he asked.

“Someone just came onto the school grounds,” Harry said distantly, staring at nothing Connor could see. “Someone powerful. Not Voldemort, or I would have recognized him. Not Falco, either. But I don’t see what other powerful wizard could—“

“Harry!”

Connor glanced down. He recognized the wizard standing at the edge of the Quidditch Pitch: Thomas Rhangnara. He waved and cupped his hands around his mouth. Connor couldn’t tell if he was simply a naturally loud shouter, or if he had used some spell to enhance his voice, but Connor heard him as if he were up on a broom beside them.

“Jing-Xi is here,” Rhangnara called. Connor looked at his brother, and wondered why Harry had turned pale at the name. “With the Headmistress’s permission, of course. She would like to meet you.”

Harry swallowed audibly, and called back, “Just a moment, Thomas!” He took his broom down in lazy loops that, while the preferred method for landing, were not what he normally used, being too slow. Connor caught up with him on the way down and snagged the Firebolt’s bristles, making Harry look at him.

“Who is he talking about?” he asked.

Harry swallowed again. “Chinese Light Lady,” he said. “One of the researchers who helped Thomas with the Grand Unified Theory. She said that she would be interested in meeting me. I just—I don’t—I’ve never met someone with Lord-level power who wasn’t trying to kill me or manipulate me before. I don’t know if there’s some special etiquette I’m supposed to use around her, or not.” His hand scratched the back of his neck, and Connor had to catch the Snitch as it flew away.

“If she wants to criticize you, tell her to save the world first,” said Connor firmly, and pushed his brother on the back. “Do you want me to go with you?”

“Jing-Xi wants to see you alone,” Rhangnara called, answering that question.

Harry gave him a sickly smile, and then dived. Connor followed, wondering why he was so nervous. It wasn’t as though Harry had known what laws and courtesies normally bound Lords and Ladies, and had mucked around actively violating them. No one had ever bothered to tell him what those laws and courtesies were.

And if she helped Rhangnara, surely she’s reasonable.
Harry didn’t know what to expect as he halted outside the room that had been Sirius’s office during the years he helped with the Gryffindor Quidditch team. He could feel Jing-Xi’s power beating beyond the door, but he wasn’t close enough yet to tell just what it felt like—or even whether she might have barriers up to spare him some of the overwhelming effect or not. He didn’t know what to say, what to do, what kind of etiquette might govern someone in a situation like this.

He forced himself to take a few deep breaths and push his emotions into the Occlumency pools. The barriers held. They would have to hold. He knocked on the door, and felt the power turn its attention towards him. Or, no, not the power, the mind. Harry wondered if perhaps that was normal. He felt his own magic and Voldemort’s as something separate from them. Dumbledore’s power, he hadn’t felt often enough, and with Falco, both his magic and his mind were so inhuman that it was hard to comprehend them. But perhaps the magic was supposed to represent the Lord’s or Lady’s personality, rather than just a facet of that personality.

He had no idea.

“Come in,” said a pleasant voice with shades of several accents. Harry cautiously pushed the door open.

Jing-Xi was sitting on a chair in front of the fireplace, which she had Flooed through when she received McGonagall’s permission to come to Hogwarts. She wore a garment half-gown and half-robe, of bright, pale green mixed with gold. Her hair was long and black and straight, and drifted around her like waving tendrils in deep seawater. Her eyes were dark and bright, and fixed on him at once, expectantly.

But it was her magic that Harry was most interested in. He would have been able to tell she was Declared for Light with no previous warning, he thought. Her magic curled around him, nudging at him with lively curiosity, but showed no inclination to venture in where unwelcome. Now and then it formed into the image of a cat or a winged horse, shadows that foamed around Jing-Xi and collapsed in on themselves.

“Hello, Harry,” Jing-Xi said.

Harry met her eyes uncertainly. His right shoulder sagged under a sudden weight, and he realized the bird had landed on him. He glanced at it and saw that it was swishing its lizard tail, scarlet eyes fixed on the Light Lady.

“Hello,” he said, because it seemed polite, and the bird wasn’t on the point of attacking her, anyway. “I’m sorry, but I don’t know what kind of greetings I’m supposed to offer.”

Jing-Xi rose. Harry was startled to realize how tall she was; she had seemed small in comparison to the puddle of her gown and her floating hair, but she stood nearly the height of Bill Weasley. She dipped her head to him in grave courtesy, then held out a hand. “Clasp my wrist,” she instructed, when Harry continued to hover uncertainly. “Then allow your magic to flow over mine. That is the customary way of greeting among those of our power.” Her eyes were still bright with something too gentle to be pity.

“And it is not a surprise that no one ever taught you that, considering what I know of your history.”

Harry felt his face heat up, but he could hardly deny that he had been abused, or that he had never encountered someone like Jing-Xi on equal grounds. He clasped her wrist, and tried to relax the barriers on his magic enough so that she could understand what he was like without drowning.

He realized, quickly, when the flow of her power came back to him, that she wasn’t worried about drowning, and neither should he be. This sea of magic was entirely separate from his, and not just because it was Light. Jing-Xi didn’t want to hurt or control him. Harry hadn’t realized how much of a difference that would make. He felt as if he were gazing into a mirror of light and surging water, while a patient hand scribed words on the glass so that he could read them.

Jing-Xi didn't want to hurt him. She was interested in Harry’s unique circumstances, including the age at which he’d come to his power and the fact that he was the magical heir of another Lord, which had happened before, but not very often. She wanted to know more about what he was like as vates, and she wanted to see Britain’s one sane Lord, as she considered him, take a stable place in the magical community. Those last two were concerns anyone of Lord-level power might have had, but the first two were flavored with a delving, driving, focused version of Thomas’s thirst for knowledge. She wanted to know because she wanted to see how those things mattered to Harry, not just because they might affect her in the future.

The communion ended, and Harry blinked and stepped back. He studied Jing-Xi’s face, trying to figure out what she might have seen about him. Her eyes had gone wide; he didn’t know if that should gratify him or not. She definitely didn’t look bored, or as if
the answers to her questions had been horrible.

“Sit down, please, Harry,” she said, and resumed her own seat, settling herself with a shake of her head that sent her hair drifting in new directions. It didn’t go very far, Harry noted; an invisible net seemed to scoop it up and bring it back close to her head. Jing-Xi saw him watching it, and smiled.

“You like this spell?” she asked. “I cannot claim credit for it, I fear. It was a gift from Stormgale.”

“Stormgale?” Harry echoed blankly as he sat down on the other chair. She spoke as if he should know who that was, but though he now felt he knew Jing-Xi herself better, the name was still unfamiliar. And the way that Jing-Xi studied him now made him wonder if he had violated another unwritten rule. It took all his effort to sit still.

“Kanerva Stormgale,” said Jing-Xi slowly. “The Dark Lady of Finland. I had assumed you knew her. It was partly her power you would have faced when you battled the wild Dark last Midwinter.”

Harry shook his head, but not so much in denial of the acquaintance as in wonder. “Did she want to destroy the British Isles?”

“Yes,” said Jing-Xi. “Actually.” She gave a smile that looked half-sad to Harry. “It takes a special kind of Lady to give herself to the Dark and not lose her sanity completely,” she murmured. “Stormgale’s sanity did not survive the transition. She wishes for the wild Dark to destroy the world; she will help it along herself, but she does not actively take a part in harming others as Tom Riddle does. That might help somebody along the way, such as by gratifying the enemies of the people she killed. What she would rather do is gift the wild Dark with power and hope it can overcome the Light. Her specialty is winter, the wind and the ice and the storm, and someday she will go so deeply into them that she will never come back. She was very irritated when you defeated the wild Dark.” Jing-Xi tapped a finger against her teeth, with an audible ringing sound that made Harry jump. “That could be why she’s never contacted you, come to think of it. She and I have a friendship of sorts, but physical closeness to another Lord or Lady means nothing to her. What means something is finding somewhat of a kindred spirit. So far as I can tell, I am the only one she has ever sensed.”

“Would I have to worry about her attacking the British Isles?” Harry asked anxiously. Just what I need, a mad Dark Lady on top of Falco and Voldemort.

“I don’t believe so,” said Jing-Xi calmly. “As I said, she is selfish. She has no sworn companions. She does not want to share her life with anyone except randomly and rarely. In her own way, she obeys the Pact.”

“What Pact?” Harry could hear the capital letter, but he had no idea what Jing-Xi meant.

“The Pact among the Lords and Ladies in the world,” said Jing-Xi. “For the most part, Harry, we do not want war. We know that we could destroy too much of the world between us. The Dark Lords and Ladies don’t want that to happen because they would no longer have lands and people left to rule over, and the Light Lords and Ladies don’t want that to happen for the obvious reason. Voldemort is an exception. So was Grindelwald. And then of course there are the two Lords in Australia, but they confine their struggles to one another, and keep the Muggles from noticing anything all by themselves.” Jing-Xi shrugged. “So, though we kept an eye on Voldemort when he returned to Britain and announced himself twenty-six years ago, we did not do anything to interfere. His native opposition, the Light Lord Albus Dumbledore, must handle him, unless he actually extended his efforts at conquest into another international wizarding community.”

“He has, though,” said Harry, wondering what in the world the Pact would mean to him as vates. He was not about to refrain from trying to free a magical creature species simply because they lived in Africa or Asia instead of Britain, or, for that matter, if they lived in the rest of Europe. “He’s recruited Death Eaters from other countries.”

“That doesn’t answer the definition of conquest under the Pact,” said Jing-Xi. “He must actually have attacked wizards in those countries, provably—the Dark Lord himself, in this case, and not his Death Eaters or people who may have been acting on his orders.”

Harry nodded slowly. He didn’t entirely like the sound of that, but, presumably, their agreement had endured for so long because it worked. “And because I’m vates, and webs are melting now because of my presence in the world?” he asked. “How does that fit in under the Pact?”

“It doesn’t,” said Jing-Xi. “The Pact is only a few centuries old, and was made without a vates in mind. It has been much longer since someone came as far as you did, Harry, and then she fell to using compulsion.” For a moment, Jing-Xi closed her eyes, and shook her head. “I have read her diaries,” she murmured. “She did remarkable things. And then she tried too hard to demonstrate her control of magic, and grew more interested in that than in serving and freeing others, and she was using compulsion inside a
month. She Declared not long after.”

Harry shuddered a bit. “I will not let that happen to me,” he said.

Jing-Xi regarded him thoughtfully. “I see that you don’t want to let it happen to you,” she answered. “But, at the same time, you must understand that many of the Lords and Ladies aren’t happy with you, Harry.”

Harry snorted. “Well, you told me that I don’t fit under the Pact. But I had no idea what it was, either, or how to obey it.”

Jing-Xi leaned forward and squeezed his hand. “That’s why I’m here to help you,” she said. “You are unique—the magical heir of another Lord, a vates, the youngest Lord-level wizard in history, someone who refuses to Declare. The others don’t know what to make of you and would cause problems because of their uncertainty, or they would sit around dithering before they would move, or they wouldn’t move at all, like Stormgale. They are willing to leave the problems of reaching out to you up to me. And I don’t mind it, Harry,” she added, before Harry could open his mouth. “You are young. That is the reason for your ignorance, which you cannot help. Any mistakes that you have made so far are excusable, because of that. And because you are Lord-level, not a Lord, there are some things you will never do the same as the rest of us. I want to help you come to terms with the Pact—that is necessary, since the others would be sworn to rise against you if you refused to obey it and started freeing magical species in a country other than Britain—but also retain enough of what makes you yourself that you do not surrender what you are doing. What you are doing is necessary to the world.” She squeezed his hand. “I firmly believe that.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, my Lady—”

“Jing-Xi, please. We address each other by first names most of the time, Harry.”

Harry nodded. “How old were you when your power manifested?”

Jing-Xi laughed. The illusion of a wave broke over her head and then faded. “That is a hard question to answer, Harry. My magic simply never stopped growing. I should have been able to tell how strong I was at twenty, but not even my parents could answer that. And then I was stronger still at thirty, and a Lady-level witch at forty.” She gave him a wistful smile. “My nearest neighbors are the Lords in Australia, and Stormgale, of course, contacts me only when she wishes to, and I rarely see my dearest friends, the Light Ladies who live in America and Mexico, thanks to their constant work. I would appreciate teaching you, if only to have a connection to, and a friendship with, another equal of mine.”

“I’m not exactly equal, my l—Jing-Xi,” Harry pointed out. He could tell she was a bit stronger than he was.

“You are equal in all the ways that matter, Harry.” Jing-Xi squeezed his hand again. “At this level, one must stop comparing and accept what comes, because there are precious few of us in the world.”

Harry felt his shoulders slump in relaxation. “So you don’t mind that I may have broken the courtesies between us, or violated the Pact without knowing what it was,” he murmured.

“No.” Jing-Xi stood. “I cannot stay long this time, but I need not teach you everything all at once, either. Do I have your permission to come back and approach you again, Harry vates?”

Surprised at the sudden formality, Harry blinked. “Why would you need my permission?”

“You are, essentially, Lord of the British Isles,” said Jing-Xi. “Voldemort is mad, and Falco Parkinson abdicated responsibility by retreating from the world for so long a stretch of time. And I would normally never step onto another Lord’s territory without his invitation.”

Harry kissed the back of her hand. “You are assuredly welcome, my lady.” His heart was thumping hard, in wonder and joy that he might actually understand something about what he was. The bird on his shoulder had vanished already. It approved of Jing-Xi, Harry sensed, and would not try to harm her.

“Thank you, Harry.” Jing-Xi smiled at him. “Declared or not, I find a congenial spirit in you. I think we will work well together.” Her smile widened. “Perhaps I might even persuade Stormgale to meet you, at one point in the future.”

After the thoughts of suicide and a carefully restrained present that had haunted him this week, Harry thought, it was odd to think of a future unmarred by the presence of Voldemort, a future where he might be what he actually wanted to be.

It was even stranger to think that there was someone as powerful as he was who could help him in reaching that future.
“It would be a pleasure to meet her,” he said, and gave Jing-Xi a bow, and if there was anything wrong with how deeply he bowed, she didn’t correct him.

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Intermission: Now Comes The Night

Snape kept his eyes down as he listened to Regulus pacing in the next room. His hands never stopped moving, grinding the precise combination of crushed petals and leaves for the next step of the potion. The Glorious Fire potion was supposed to be difficult. In reality, Snape knew, the main difficulty lay in having patience with the liquid and how it needed to boil long enough to make it. Most brewers could not wait hours, watching like a lizard on a rock, and still apply the next infusion of leaves at the precise moment.

That moment arrived. Snape dropped in the leaves and stirred the potion with his glass stirring rod. The potion trembled, and then a tendril of white spread through the liquid, moving outward from the center, extending itself in gentle ripples until it was mostly pale with just a drop of blue in the corner, like a staring eye. Snape considered it. Not as thick as he would have preferred it to be, meaning the flames would not burn for more than an hour, but it would do. He moved to gather a cloth; the potion would need to be strained, a last step to remove any impurities, and something else that impatient brewers often forgot.

"Severus?"

He did not drop the cloth. He did not drop the stirring rod. He did not turn around. He only said, "Black," with as little welcome in his voice as the lizard watching on the wall might have given a snake.

"I need to talk to you."

*That is not new,* Snape thought, as he turned back to the cauldron and dipped the fine mesh into the potion. It clung, dripping, and Snape wrung it out with counterclockwise motions of his hands, slow and subtle, his gaze fixed on the size of the splashes the drops made when they hit the liquid in the cauldron, not on Regulus. What Regulus said would not be anything he wished to hear.

"So speak," said Snape, when some moments had passed in silence and he was certain at least an eighth of the potion had been properly strained. The thinner liquid was crowding to the top of the cauldron, floating above the thicker potion. It reminded Snape of the foam on a mug. And then he blinked, and the memories were safely tucked away, and it reminded him of nothing at all.

"I-" 

And Regulus fell silent. He had been doing that often of late, Snape thought, as he picked up a vial and filled it with the thinner, cream-like Glorious Fire. It was not Snape's fault that he could not finish his sentences.

Regulus *did* seem to have a secret, from the way he stammered and hinted and flushed of late. Had Snape not known better, he would have said Regulus was working for the Order of the Phoenix, even as he was. But Regulus never spent long periods of time alone; he sought out Snape and had stunted conversations instead. Snape thought it much more likely he had a lover somewhere, or was convinced he had "sullied" himself by casting an unusual Dark Arts spell in the raid last week, and did not want to admit it.

"Yes?" Snape asked, when the silence had stretched long enough to pluck on his nerves like fingers, and looked up.

"Do you-" Regulus made a vague gesture at the Riddle house, and, Snape supposed, the other Death Eaters who were somewhere in it. "Do you ever feel like you're not part of them?" he whispered. "That you don't belong?"

Snape's eyes did not narrow, because he willed them not to. Regulus knew better than anyone the differences between Snape and the rest of the Dark Lord's followers. He had been the one to pluck at the beauty and grace in Snape, to force him to see himself as different from those buried under a rightful flood-tide of hatred and contempt, to make him go to Dumbledore. That Snape had not shared any of these conclusions with Regulus was irrelevant. The man knew his differences.

Which could only mean that he was talking about his own.

And Snape did not want to hear Regulus talking about that. Regulus was not *that* good an actor. In truth, Snape thought, he had joined the Death Eaters because his parents wanted *one* son who followed the Dark properly, and he was tolerated mostly because
he was the heir of an undeniably pureblood family. Where someone like Snape, a halfblood, would have to work hard to prove himself, Regulus's heritage spoke for him. But he did not have that stable a position, and he could tip from it if he dared too much.

To hear Regulus questioning himself, trying to hatch a conscience that he had not so far indulged, was to have a vision of Regulus's future death when his acting skills ran out, as they inevitably must.

And so came the moment Snape had known would come, when he must conceal his changed allegiances from his-

Well. His. Trying to give a name to Regulus and what Regulus had done to him was beyond his abilities.

"I never feel that way," he said, and stripped his voice of tone, of emotion, of inflection that could possibly be taken as encouraging a confession. "I feel only that I must belong, and if I do not succeed in one spell or battle tactic, I will try another." His hand rested on the cauldron. "My potions are my belonging. You know what would happen if I failed with the Glorious Fire, or any other concoction that our Lord asked me to brew."

It was a warning, as clear as he could give without actually speaking it aloud, of what would happen to Regulus if he stepped outside the boundaries of his Lord's tolerance. And given that Regulus did not have even the leniency that Snape's "devotion" to Voldemort and his skill at potions had earned him, he would fall faster and further than could happen to Snape.

Regulus's face closed, and he nodded once. "You're right. Of course. My condolences for your lost time, Severus." He turned and shut the door behind him.

Snape stared at the place where he had been, and tried to soothe the small voice that whispered this had been a mistake. It had been a mistake for Regulus to start thinking. He was not intelligent enough to survive if he did that.

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"Morsmordre!"

Peter Pettigrew shivered as the snake and skull blossomed on his arm like a cancer. Snape, standing at his Lord's side- he had been the one to capture the Muggle Pettigrew had killed, and so he had a place of honor for the initiation- glared into his old enemy's eyes.

Pettigrew bowed his head. Of course, he would know now that Snape was a Legimens, and he would want to avoid having his every secret read out of him. Snape took a deep breath, a slow one so as to avoid making his robes shudder and reveal his weakness, and locked his hatred in the back of his mind.

So Pettigrew had been among his tormentors at Hogwarts. What did it matter? They were all in the darkness here. And Snape stood higher in the Dark Lord's favor than this quivering, cringing coward could ever hope to do. And while he knew that he had become extremely important to Albus Dumbledore, even as he used the spying to forge his own path through the night, Pettigrew had only the very thin satisfaction of knowing his own fear had made him a traitor to his friends.

But it did not work. The impulse to attack was still there. Snape could not even decide which torture he would use, should Pettigrew suddenly be handed to him; there were too many poisons, too many painful spells, and he would use each one with the knowledge that he really wanted James Potter or Sirius Black to be writhing in front of him. But their pet would do. He would do very well.

"Severus, stay."

Snape fell into a kneel beside the throne as the other Death Eaters left, Pettigrew among them now, scurrying along with his head lowered and his shoulders hunched. He felt Voldemort's hand slide along his skin, lingering to trace the outsides of his eyesockets. He did not flinch at the touch. Long practice was the most of that, but his own rage and hatred had their part to play.

"You are displeased that I have accepted this one into my service, Severus," the Dark Lord whispered.

"It is not my place to say that, my lord," said Snape. A breath. "He is yours, and I will not touch him." A breath. "I hated him, I hate him still, but I should have left such feelings behind when I entered the darkness and gave my loyalty to you." A breath.

"You should have," Voldemort said. "And I should punish you for threatening our poor, frightened Peter simply by your glare, and making his arm tremble a bit when I was casting the Dark Mark."
"Punish me, my lord," Snape said. He would use the pain the same way he always did, to steady his body and clear his mind, and remind himself of who he was and why he was fighting. "My own disloyalty shames me."

Voldemort was silent for a time. Snape wondered if he meant to use nonverbal spells. It wasn't a common tactic for him, since he wanted his victims and his enemies to be able to anticipate what he was doing, and make it that much sweeter for him.

Then the Dark Lord said, "No, Severus. Not this time, I do not think. I will ask that you watch Peter instead. A traitor may betray twice. If you see one step out of line, if you see one twitch of the little rat's tail that I have not ordered, then you will report to me at once."

Snape felt an enormous peace sweep over him, soothing his hatred with the coolness of foam. Intellectually, of course, he knew this was a tactic the Dark Lord often used, setting his own followers to spy on one another, compete for his favor, and channel their aggressive energy into overthrowing each other instead of him.

Emotionally, he did not care. He at last had one of the Marauders within his grasp. And should Pettigrew twitch his tail not to Voldemort's orders, then Snape would perform the torture fully, happily, gladly, and in such a way as to convince any doubters of what he really was- because, with Pettigrew, he would be a Death Eater, not Dumbledore's spy.

"Thank you, my lord," he whispered.

There was a look in Regulus's eyes, later, that said he might have lingered by the door of the room and overheard. There was a look in Snape's eyes that warned him not to try interrogation.

Regulus never did.

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Severus!

Groggy, disoriented, Snape woke. He had been awake for more than two days, first brewing, then confirming that the new variation of the Black Plague spores Adalrico Bulstrode had tried really left none of their victims alive, then slipping away to report to the Order of the Phoenix, and then engaging in a "mock duel" with Rabastan. Rabastan would have been just as happy to kill him, Snape knew, and he could return only small curses that were practically love taps, since showing his full strength would have confirmed his hatred for the man, and confirmed that emotion as a weakness. It was no wonder he had collapsed into bed the moment he could.

But it was a wonder that the Dark Lord had called to him mind-to-mind, a technique that even a very skilled Legilimens didn't often practice. Snape stumbled to his feet, made sure he had a robe on, and then hurried out of his room and towards the throne room, where he knew instinctively the Dark Lord was, thanks to the call throbbing in his mind like a sore tooth.

Severus!

Snape ran. His mind was clearing of fog as he tucked the weariness in his Occlumency pools, and he knew something was wrong.

He entered the room. He had no warning, nothing more than Bellatrix's snarled "Crucio!" Then he was on the floor, spasming with pain, and the Dark Lord was bending over him, flaying his shields away, looking for evidence of- Snape didn't know what.

He had been prepared for this, of course. The secrets he needed to protect the most, including his true loyalties, were already sunken to the bottom of his mind like stones. The rest was foam and water and light, and free for Voldemort's taking. Those claws raked through his mind, taking indeed, scraping and stirring and seeking.

Then his Lord drew back with a snarl, and, somewhere beyond his screams, Snape heard him say, "That is enough, Bella. He did not know."

Reluctantly, or so it seemed to Snape, Bellatrix let him go. He sat up, gasping with pain, but controlling himself as soon as possible. There were other people here, masked and moving restlessly, and he did not know who they were. He could not reveal weakness in front of them.

"My Lord," he whispered, and winced. He had bitten through his lower lip in his attempts to control the screams, and blood made his words sound slurred. He waited a moment, spelled it away wandlessly, and spoke more coherently. "What has happened?"
"Regulus Black has turned against me," said Voldemort, precisely and implacably. "I wished to know if you had joined him in his treachery, Severus." His scarlet eyes narrowed. "But you did not," he said. "You are still my most loyal servant."

Snape sat still. They did not have Regulus yet, he thought, or he would be here and screaming. He might have fled. But he would not keep ahead of the hunters for long, especially since he would probably go to one of the Black houses. Snape knew much about Regulus, Regulus was his his in an odd way, but Regulus was not that intelligent. And the Black houses were warded. He probably felt safe there.

And he even would have been, had not Bellatrix, born a Black, also served the Dark Lord.

The darkness came for Snape then, for the first time, true night, lapping him and swelling around him, as he saw what was going to happen- something horrible he had not caused and could not stop without revealing himself, or, at the very least, losing his position as Voldemort’s trusted second-in-command.

Regulus would not live past this.

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Chapter Fifty: White Wolf, White Moon

“But I don’t understand why you wanted to talk to me.”

Harry drew out his breath carefully, not wanting it to sound like a sigh. He had encountered unexpected difficulty in talking to Michael. The unhappy stares at the back of his neck had grown more frequent, and Harry had overheard Michael and Owen arguing more than once, with the words “duty” and “sworn companion” prominently mentioned. He had thought that Michael had grown tired of his service but was too proud, or too honorable, to break his oath. Harry had determined releasing him would be the best thing to do in those circumstances.

Instead, Michael appeared to understand none of the hints Harry had given him. Harry was doubly glad now that he had chosen the Room of Requirement to talk to Michael. It created a private place with thick walls, and wards that would twang if anyone tried to enter. Harry had not realized how long this would last, or how direct he would have to be.

Now he leaned forward and said as gently as he could, “Michael. You aren’t happy, and I think I can guess why.”

Michael stiffened.

“You’re—entranced with Draco,” Harry continued quietly. He didn’t want to insult Michael by calling a deeper emotion an infatuation, but neither did he want to assume the other boy was in love if it was only a crush. “It must make you uncomfortable to be near me, since I’m his lover and often with him. I’m offering to release you from your oath so you don’t have to keep suffering.”

Michael looked as if he were drowning, mouth open and dark eyes blinking and flashing and fluttering with emotion after emotion. Then he shook his head, and said, “You don’t understand me at all, Harry. I doubt that you ever will, as long as you continue to be blind to what’s in front of you.”

Harry blinked in turn. “Can you tell me what you mean, Michael?”

The Room had conjured a small table and chairs for them, complete with a tea service. Michael nearly tipped the cups over the side of the table as he stood up violently, shoving himself back and scattering the chair towards the far wall of the Room with a kick. Harry used his Levitation Charm to rescue the objects, and watched Michael’s back thoughtfully as he paced up and down.

“I did underestimate his fascination with Draco after all, it seemed.

“I don’t understand how you can just ignore him,” Michael continued, in a low, intense voice. “Isn’t it obvious that he wants to be admired for how beautiful he is, how he carries himself, the smile he gives when he’s perfected an insult?” For a moment, he stood, staring into space, and then whirled around and glared at Harry. “And you don’t give him a moment of physical admiration. You’ll compliment his intelligence and his will and his bravery until the world ends, but his beauty slips right past you.”

Harry thought about that. “I suppose it does,” he said. “I wasn’t taught to think of people in terms of beauty, and that influences the way I do think of them. On the other hand, Draco has never come begging, hat in hand, for this physical admiration that you seem to think he needs.”
“He shouldn’t have to beg.” Michael folded his arms, wincing a bit. Harry suspected the lightning bolt scar on his left forearm was twanging at him. This was close to behavior that most Lords would frown on, even though it wasn’t outright disobedience or hatred of the Lord. “You should notice. You should give him what he wants—all of what he wants. He shouldn’t even have to ask. If he were my partner, I would do my best to love and spoil him.”

“That aren’t the same thing,” Harry pointed out.

“I know they aren’t.” Michael took a step forward. “And that’s the whole point, Harry. I want to remain near you, under oath, because someone has to watch out for Draco’s interests. If no one does, then he’s too apt to tumble back into a depression, and start acting as if your own problems are the only ones that matter. They aren’t, you know. His matter, too, and if you don’t start paying attention to him, you might open your eyes some morning and find that he isn’t there at all.”

Harry wondered if he should feel jealousy over those words, or worry. Instead, he felt his lips widening in an amused smile. “That’s ridiculous,” he said.

“Is it?” Michael’s voice was low and deep and smug. “Are you sure about that, Harry? You’ve never noticed half of what he needs. Are you so sure that you’re what he wants out of life?”

“He was the one who chose this joining ritual to use with me,” said Harry. “Three years, it lasts. Plenty of time for us to think about other potential partners. And he became the magical heir to his family simply so he could use this particular ritual. We’re committed to each other, yes, Michael.”

“Well, the point was that he might think,” Michael responded insistently. “Don’t tell me you haven’t thought of that, Harry. He can love you and still tire of you. You require infinitely more work than most other potential partners. Wouldn’t he grow weary of healing you at some point and want more out of life?”

“I have thought sometimes that he might,” said Harry. “But he hasn’t told me so himself.”

“And you haven’t asked him.” Michael was holding his head the way Harry thought the white stag at Walpurgis might have held it before the hunters. “I thought so. You’re afraid of what he might tell you, aren’t you?”

Harry leaned back and considered the other boy carefully. He was unsure what to feel. Draco hadn’t said anything to Harry about tiring of him, or needing more admiration than Harry provided. On the other hand, that didn’t mean he didn’t want to. But Michael had every motive to say it was true even if it wasn’t, because he might want Draco for himself.

In the silence, Michael started scratching at the lightning bolt scar on his arm, his expression one of irritation gradually deepening into pain.

“I’ll talk to Draco about it,” Harry said at last. “But what happens if he does want to stay with me, and the admiration that you mention isn’t as important to him as other aspects of our bond?”

“Then I still want to stay close,” said Michael. “He might change his mind.”

Harry sighed under his breath, and stood. “Thank you for talking to me about this, at least,” he said. “But I don’t think he’s going to change his mind.”

“You don’t know that.”

There was nothing Harry could say to that, not when he had seen himself persist in stubborn hope long past the time when his relationship with his parents could have been mended. He nodded at Michael and left the Room of Requirement.

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“So I thought I would ask you,” Harry finished, and then sat back and looked at him expectantly.

Draco stared at him. Harry had pulled him away from preparations for the Declaring ritual that he would hold on Midwinter, and Draco’s head still buzzed with incantations for cold, with the smell of snow, with the thoughts of what was going to happen when he cast his wand on the ground and took that first step forward into the endless dark. By contrast, this matter was so mundane, and so obviously beyond Harry’s understanding, that it was taking him some time to return to the world and deal with it.

Harry shifted in his chair, and tapped his foot on the floor. “I’ll understand if you don’t want to talk about it right now, Draco, or
if you do need more than what I can provide,” he said quietly. “I’ve always understood that.”

“You have not,” said Draco, and rubbed his forehead, dismissing thoughts of snowflakes firmly. It wasn’t Midwinter yet, and he still had more than a month before it would be. “What you haven’t understood is that someone could want to be with you despite your childhood and everything else. You still think of your weak points and the trouble they cause before you think of the strong ones, or the things that made me fall in love with you.” He took Harry’s hand as Harry gave him a little frown, and clapsed it. “Do you remember the list I gave you for Christmas last year, detailing all the reasons that I love you?”

Harry nodded. This close, Draco could feel that he was shaking. So he isn’t as calm as he was pretending to be. Why not? He must have known that making it seem like he didn’t care wouldn’t inspire me.

And then Draco had the answer to that one, too, and simultaneously wanted to kiss Harry for being so wonderful and slap him for being so oblivious. He thought that showing too much emotion about it would influence my decision, and he wanted me to make it of my own free will. Stupid vates.

“If I am ever tiring of you, or want to break off the joining ritual,” Draco said softly, “it won’t be an interfering sworn companion who brings the news to you. I’ll let you know, Harry. I promise.” He couldn’t stop his other hand from rising and tugging on Harry’s hair in one of the possessive gestures that he indulged in sometimes, and which Harry let him perform. “Not that I ever could,” he added, and turned his head to brush his lips against Harry’s cheek.

Harry leaned his head on Draco’s shoulder, butting like a cat, the most vulnerable gesture Draco could remember him making in months. A few moments later, he’d pulled away and relaxed entirely, smiling at Draco. “Thank you,” he murmured. “I thought so, but—I wanted to be sure.”

“Of course you did,” Draco said soothingly. At least it was an improvement over what Harry would have done months or a year ago, which was brooding on the idea until he’d worked himself into the conviction that he had to make Draco leave him for his own good. “Now go practice your Animagus training. Tell Peter that you are a lynx, and making you wait to be sure is just silly. You’re a cat, Harry.”

A faint smile, and Harry was gone. Draco sat back and folded his hands behind his head, both to stretch—he’d been hunched over a table in the library for the past five hours—and to shake his mind onto a new track. He hadn’t wanted to entertain these thoughts while Harry was around, in case he caught a glimpse of one with Legilimency and objected.

Draco had a lesson to teach a certain interfering sworn companion, who evidently thought a bit of harmless flirting meant Draco was dissatisfied with the bedding and the conversations and the rituals and everything else he shared with Harry.

Most Light families wish for a stranger to enter their house with his wand laid across his open palms. This displays the weapon in question without making him go unarmed, which usually promotes feelings of fear and distrust that are not wished for when encouraging a truce between two families.

Harry yawned and rubbed his eyes. The book Aurora had sent him on Light pureblood traditions was a tedious read, filled with passive voice and explanations for customs and rituals that Harry generally needed no explanation for, because they were either obvious from the text or similar to the Dark dances that he already knew.

And though Harry had read many sections of the book twice now, he had still not discovered an answer to several pressing questions, such as what happened if a wizard was more dangerous without a wand than with one.

He slid the book into the trunk at the foot of his bed. He could do that without waking Draco, who was sprawled in deep sleep already, his mouth open and little whistling breaths coming through his nose. Draco was sleeping better now than he had in weeks, his study during the days—regular homework taking second place to details of the Declaration ritual and his Animagus training—exhausting him to the point where he both ate and rested like a young Granian.

Argutus met Harry as he went to the loo. The Omen snake coiled around Harry’s arm and his shoulders, making the odd, tingling hiss that Harry knew meant contentment, and which he could have imitated either from Draco’s snores or from Mrs. Norris’s purrs. “Did you know that the Ravenclaws have a spell they’re working on that lets them track you?” he asked Harry.

Harry paused before the mirror. “You can’t understand English,” he reminded Argutus.

“But I am learning Latin,” Argutus said brightly. “And now I know most of the common spell-words, and I can recognize your
name. They’re talking about seeing you, and the spell produces a golden spot of light that moves around the wall of their common room. They’ve marked the wall so that it represents most of the locations in the school.” Argutus wriggled as Harry started to brush his teeth; he’d regained most of the age and growth he’d lost to the dust from the time-globe on the Hogwarts Express, and he was continually struggling for balance on Harry’s shoulders. “But they can’t perfect it yet. They keep using the wrong form of the verb. I tried to tell them that, but no one paid attention to me.”

“Remember that none of them can understand Parseltongue, either,” Harry murmured, and considered his reflection dubiously. Do I have to be worried about this? It’s just a spell. But Snape would probably say that one House in the school trying to perfect a spell like that means that others are doing the same thing, but with more violent intent behind it.

“They should try. If I can learn Latin, they can learn Parseltongue.” Argutus hung contemplatively from Harry’s neck. “Perhaps I can learn to speak Latin?”

“I don’t think that would work.”

“Why not?”

Harry didn’t know enough about vocal cords and translation spells to satisfy Argutus, so the snake was still wondering when they went to bed, and he coiled around both Harry and Draco, an extra, living blanket of warmth. Harry gathered Draco in his arms and closed his eyes. If he were lucky, then this sleep would be free of dreams.

He wasn’t lucky.

The dream started slowly. Harry seemed to float in darkness, looking down on gleams of green from a great distance. They could be trees, he thought, but they weren’t trees. He knew what they would be. He’d had this dream several times already. He waited in silent suffering for the realization, unable to verbalize it before his sleeping self knew it.

Killing Curses. They were Killing Curses. And witches and wizards were casting them at each other, moving in the middle of that great darkness on the ground, screaming in voices from which everything but terror and the desire to cause more terror had gone. Harry felt his sleeping self start and gasp in horror, but he didn’t wake up. The invisible chain on which he hung began to reel more urgently, lowering him closer and closer to the chaos.

Everywhere he looked, people died. The darkness had yielded to firelight, and the light of other curses, and the white-glitter light of magic that consumed from the inside. Wizards and witches writhed on the ground, and turned on their own relatives, and put their wands into their own eyes and cast Avada Kedavra so that they could escape the nightmare the world had turned into. Harry watched as dangerous artifacts lay in the rubble of a building that might once have been the Ministry of Magic, free to anyone who wanted to come and gather them.

And he had caused this.

That was the message of the dream, available when he wanted to look at it. His insistence on casting the stability of the wizarding world to hell and gone had done this. If he persevered, many people would suffer. If he remained still and quiet, and considered how to wield his power before he wielded it, then only a few would suffer. And wasn’t that to be preferred, all things considered?

Harry had had this dream over and again, and each time he had been unable to wake up before it ended or talk about it when he was awake. He had sensed the magic that ran over and under it like reins, binding the images to his mind and his mouth to silence. He had not put up any sort of trouble or rebellion, and the mind that drove it had grown careless lately, evidently thinking that the quiet meant Harry was considering his lessons like a good little boy.

Harry felt himself drift into a moment just before waking, when the reins started slipping from his mind.

He grabbed them and drew them tight, and his mind shook like a wild horse, and then full control over it returned to him. Harry heard a shocked gasp resound in his ears, and he caught a glimpse of a whirling white shape that might have been a sea eagle and might have been a maelstrom.

“Hello, Falco,” he said pleasantly.

The whirling white figure turned towards him. Harry saw green eyes shining with rage. He struck hard, plunging himself into them, trying to tear them out of Falco’s imagined head. On a battlefield like this, victory usually belonged to the wizard who could envision the best solutions, or understand the mental reflections of magic the best.
And Falco was no Leglimens. The magic reaching out to him was dream magic. Scrimgeour had written to Harry, detailing the information on Falco he had received from someone called the Liberator, and Harry knew this was composed of both Light and Dark. That meant Falco could most likely defend himself from other dreams, should Harry try to turn the trick back on him, but it was no guarantee that he had Occlumency shields guarding the more vulnerable parts of his mind.

Sure enough, Harry plunged past no more than the usual barriers that most wizards carried against mental attack. He found himself in a turning, twisting pattern of wind and water and light. He struck heavily left, or what was to the left in a place like this, and let a current speed him along. Now that he was within Falco’s thoughts, what would draw him were memories related to him, and hopefully not just the memories of the times Falco watched him and thought him a very naughty boy.

Harry knew what he would like to find, but he had no idea if he stood any chance of finding it.

The current slammed him straight into a barrier rather like a reef, and Harry reeled back, gasping for breath. Then he saw the memory in front of him, and he reached out and grasped it greedily.

The image enveloped him completely. Harry stood on the ridge of a hill in front of a wood that gaped with incredible green. He wasn’t sure if it was the Forbidden Forest or some place similar, but it sang with magic to him—and webs. Harry had to grit his teeth and turn his back on the trees so that he could concentrate on what the two wizards who occupied the ridge were saying.

One was Falco, his face a good deal more patient than it had ever been when Harry met him. The other was a young Albus Dumbledore. He didn’t wear robes, but a suit that made Harry think this was the late nineteenth century. At least, it might be if Dumbledore had any realistic grasp of Muggle fashions. Harry reminded himself that he didn’t know that for certain.

Falco gestured with a staff twined with flowers and vines. “Yes, I was Headmaster for only a year, Albus. And I regretted becoming the Lord of Hogwarts almost the moment I persuaded the governors to accept me.”

“Why, sir?” Harry wondered if he had ever heard Dumbledore’s voice sound respectful before this. Perhaps the time he had viewed another memory of Dumbledore with Falco, the time when the older wizard had explained that it was impossible to become a vates without sacrificing one’s magic.

“Because I discovered that obedience was almost impossible to achieve.” Falco spoke with condescending regret so thick in his voice that Harry found he would have liked to give him a right good thumping. “Sculpting a child’s mind must happen young. Without that, a child reaches the age of eleven, and comes to Hogwarts, and though you might try to teach him obedience, he’s already learned too much of the evil ways that his family encourages. He’ll think of himself before anyone else. He’ll think of goals and ambitions instead of limitations. And especially if he’s magically powerful, he’ll grasp at the future and try to rip off a piece for himself instead of asking if such change is really for the best.”

Dumbledore nodded solemnly. “And that’s why you really gave it up, sir? Because it was no good?”

“It was no good for me,” Falco corrected gently. “But I didn’t know as much about the ethics of sacrifice then as I do now. Perhaps if I were to go back and try again, I would find it more congenial. But I do not have the time or the inclination to try. I do encourage you to keep trying, Albus, not to let up on your ambitions. Someday, you will make a wonderful Headmaster of Hogwarts. But try not to let your charges indulge in too much rebellion. It ruins them.

“Come to think of it,” Falco added musingly, “perhaps the reason I never succeeded was that Hogwarts in my time carried so many predominately pureblood students—though I know many halfbloods who slipped through pretending to be pure. With Muggleborns, you might have better luck. They’re isolated in our world. When they enter, they don’t know anyone, and sometimes they’ll cling to anything that promises them a solid perch.”

“And I should never encourage disobedience from them, sir?” Dumbledore seemed a bit doubtful. “Octavian says that sometimes a bit of slack on the lead rein is good for the soul.”

“Octavian is a Malfoy,” said Falco flatly. “Of course he would say that. Just remember, Albus, the Malfoys always mean to be the ones holding the rein, not the ones on the other end of it.”

Dumbledore nodded. Harry studied him warily. He was not sure which was stranger, to see him alive again or to see his face without his long white beard.

“If a child disobeys you, then he disobeys the ethics of sacrifice that I am passing on to you,” said Falco. “A few slips may be acceptable, if you discover them early enough and then press down the net all the harder. Such a slip must never happen twice. The mistakes must always be new and fresh. And I do hope that you don’t make mistakes of your own, Albus. Unless you
disbelieve in everything I’m teaching you, of course.”

“Of course not, sir,” Dumbledore hastened to assure him.

The force of the wind and water pulled Harry out of the memory then, but he was grinning, in spite of knowing that he’d seen the seeds of his mother’s corruption planted in that memory, and his own abuse.

_I thought so. The three times that my parents defied Dumbledore, and made him one of the Dark Lords to fulfill the prophecy, could also be the three times they defied Falco. Now, of course, I just have to be sure that all their disobedience actually rested on flouting the ethics of sacrifice. Peter’s told me one incident that qualifies, when my parents ran away on the eve of the First War. Now—_

And then magic struck him full force, and shoved him tumbling into the air.

Harry found himself landed violently back into his body. He started awake with a shout that made Argutus crawl to the other end of the bed, hissing, and Draco grab him and hold him firmly.

“Harry?”

Harry didn’t answer him for a moment, scanning his own mind with a restless gaze. He couldn’t sense a trace of Falco anywhere within it. Of course, he hadn’t sensed a trace of him before, either. But the compulsion to keep silent on the subject of the dreams should be broken now, so he could go to Snape and ask for help in cleansing any lingering taint.

_if I should. Do I want to press more troubles on him when he’s struggling with his own evil dreams?_

“Harry,” Draco said, and shook him. “What was that nightmare about?”

The choice had been taken from him, Harry realized. He had to do what he could to explain the nightmares, or Draco would talk to Snape, and that would mean shouting and scolding. Really, Harry supposed, life was simpler when he did talk about his nightmares and other things he suffered.

But I can’t seem to care about them as much as others want me to. Only yesterday, Joseph had talked to him for two hours about how Harry should have some appreciation for his own life outside of what it meant to other people. He had appeared overly excited when Harry cautiously mentioned that sometimes he liked watching sunrises. Harry had kept his pity for Joseph’s excitement to himself.

“Harry!”

A fearful tone had crept into Draco’s voice. Harry shook his head and forced himself to start talking about the dreams. At least they weren’t as frightening as his visions of Voldemort—Falco was simply an amateur when it came to designing nightmares—and he had some hope of resisting them now.

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“Are you all right?” Draco asked, when his touch on Harry’s shoulder had made Harry jump for the third time that day.

Harry nodded and stuffed his hand into his robe pocket. “Of course. Just—restless.”

He knew why. Today was a typical day in late November, with perhaps a touch more of a nipping wind in the air than usual, and the first proper snowfall they’d received yet, large enough for the first-years to make balls out of and throw at one another. But tonight was the first night of November’s full moon.

Harry had felt the magic boiling in him the moment he woke. It wasn’t a power he’d encountered before, even when he was around his pack as they transformed. For one thing, it had a raw, brutal edge that infected him with wildness, instead of letting him merely sense and appreciate it. For another, it had the feeling of a great stretched cord about it, as though its end terminated somewhere far in the south and west. Harry remembered Thomas’s theory that the werewolf curse had its origin in the ancient Americas, and had crossed to Europe sometime in the last ten thousand years, and wondered.

He had made his own choice. He would let the magic of Loki’s vengeance ritual envelop him tonight, and travel with the rest of the pack to—wherever it was Loki waited. He had consulted with Camellia, and though she refused to tell him exactly what would happen, she’d reassured him it was safe. She’d even reassured Draco and Snape, who’d taken a great deal more
convincing. Harry had finally managed to hush them by pointing out that this was rather like the truce-dance, or fighting the Dark at Midwinter: something wild and dangerous he didn’t have a great deal of control over, but which should protect him as long as he stayed within carefully maintained boundaries.

Draco guided him across the grounds and into the courtyard, where Harry locked his legs and refused to go further. Being inside walls today only increased the restlessness. He turned his head, wondering if he would sense something different should he face in the direction where Loki stood right now. But the twanging pull remained the same no matter how he turned.

“I’ll give you a Calming Draught if it’ll help, Harry,” Draco murmured into his ear.

Harry shook his head and rubbed his palm on his robes to dry it of sweat. “No. I—I can do this, Draco. Whatever this is.” He gave Draco a smile. Draco looked as if he were reconsidering his decision to let Harry go.

If he reconsiders at this point, I doubt it’ll make much difference. The pull had grown taut in Harry’s nerves and spinal cord. Snape could try to hold him back, and so could McGonagall, and Draco could possess his body and try to control it. None of that would matter in such a short while.

Draco touched him again, and Harry spun, snapping his teeth. Draco retreated with his hands held up before him. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“So am I.” Harry pressed his hand to his forehead. It was still hours from the full moon. He shouldn’t be reacting like this. “I don’t understand what I—”

The pull grew so fierce and sharp that Harry turned and took several steps forward, towards the gates of Hogwarts. Howls cascaded past his ears, and in his nostrils was the smell of snow and pine needles. The odd blessing Remus had given him when they parted was meaningful now.

“It’s full moon, wherever Loki is,” Harry whispered, and then he took another step forward and departed.

It wasn’t Apparition. He flew instead of squeezing through nothingness. Harry thought it was something like his adventure with the Time-Turner from his third year. Clashing waves of impressions swept and sang over him. He heard snippets of ancient languages, and the laughter of people long dead, and the howls of wolves that no longer walked the earth. The howls quickly became the loudest sound, and pressed against his ribs like knives, and then squeezed him after all, out and down and through.

Harry opened his eyes slowly. He stood on white snow, in the center of a dim, deep forest. He turned his head, sniffing. He was a wolf, and the fur clad his limbs like a warm robe. Harry looked at it, trying to determine what color he was, but the change, or perhaps the moonlight, had stolen his ability to distinguish between shades that fine. He only knew he was dark, perhaps black, perhaps a thick gray.

The trees were giant spruces, soaring and meshing into one another, except for wide clearings here and there like the one in which the pack stood. Harry drank the smell of needles, and of snow. That was the sharpest, most prevalent scent. The world was full of tin. He sniffed, and caught different mixtures. The snow on the ground was different from the snow on the branches of the spruces.

In fact, it was different from any smell Harry had ever caught, altogether wilder and more spirited and more intense. He didn’t think he could attribute that just to his new body. He didn’t think they were in England any more. He knew they weren’t in the same century any more.

Around him stirred the pack, the members sniffing and rubbing cheeks and jowls and noses. Tails boiled the air, and nails scraped the ground, and streams of piss turned the snow a color Harry knew was yellow, though right now the scent was the most interesting thing about it. The scent told him age and sex and state of health and pack rank and proclivity far more clearly than a name could have. He sensed Camellia towards the front, and moved in her direction.

She made a wonderful sight, standing there, her shadow thrown long and defiant across the open ground. Harry had always thought a werewolf unnatural compared to a wolf, too long of leg and square of muzzle; in fact, Remus had claimed the same thing. But in this forest, Camellia looked as if she belonged. She surveyed them all, ears twitching, tail up, gaze so calm that Harry found himself relaxing. He might not know what was going to happen, but she did. He was certain of it.

And then the pack turned. Harry felt the currents of the packmind flowing around him, bypassing him. He yelped in mourning,
and then saw who had entered the clearing, and went rapt and still himself.

Loki stood there in his wolf form, pale, white enough to fuzz into invisibility where his fur collided with the moonlight. His amber eyes were two glittering points of brightness in the midst of it all. His scent proclaimed him chosen, and marked out, and no longer a part of the pack.

And it proclaimed him something else, something Harry was trying hard to deal with at the moment.

Loki turned and surged into the forest. The pack followed him, a near-soundless rush, the impact of paws on snow a great deal more silent than Harry would have thought it could be. He found himself running with them, his nostrils full of knowledge, his ribs full of bruising brushes from larger and stronger bodies, his throat full of sorrow.

This was not a chase. This was not a following to a great clearing where Loki would dance his death dance and then die, as Harry would have said when he was human.

This was a hunt.

And Loki’s scent proclaimed him prey.

He ran fast. Harry saw his shadow sweep ahead, but only for a few moments. He was gone, then, dashing across the needles like a hawk in flight, burying himself in the lees of the spruces. Had there been undergrowth in the way, Harry thought they might not have been able to follow at all.

But this forest had many wide open spaces on purpose, and a lack of undergrowth. It had been made for such hunts. Harry wondered if anyone ever used it for anything else.

Camellia howled. In moments, the pack took up the sound, baying like hounds, baying like horns, baying in full voice. Loki kept silent. Of course he did, Harry thought, even as his own timid howl mingled with the others; he'd never done this before. The stag did not speak when he was hunted. It was the wolves that did, singing salute and hail to their prey.

And farewell, farewell, farewell.

Harry dodged around trees and scrambled up slopes that would have left him tired and panting in moments as a human. Scents and sounds, more than sights, guided him, and warmth nearby let him know when one of his packmates ran close. His fur shielded him from the cold. Shadows flashed a swift death and died, judged in instants by instincts Harry hadn’t known he had and regarded as neither food nor enemy nor brother, and therefore quite useless. He ran, and tasted the joy of what the werewolf transformation could be, at least under the influence of Wolfsbane. Mind and body sang the same song, without introspection, without judgment, without second-guessing.

Save that under the wolf, somewhere, struggled the mind of a very human boy who knew what would happen when they reached the end of the hunt, and was desperate to find some way to escape it.

The magic was too old, too strong, Harry realized as they topped a ridge and scrabbled down among boulders, the spruces fading around them. It had changed him into a wolf. It had brought him, and the others, here, parting time like water. He could not resist it. And Loki had chosen this fate when he embraced vengeance. The magic had given him the ability to pass through Harry’s wards and resist Harry’s spells.

And now it would claim its price.

Harry wondered if it was perversity, custom, or individual stubbornness that had made Loki offer him the chance to participate in this, a ritual that the pack had obviously known well and he did not.

The pack’s cry burst around him again, swelling and whirling and drifting down like snow. Ahead of them, the ground broke into a deep ravine, one too wide to span by leaping. It was a place they might have cornered a stag, proud lord of the forest, whirling around to face them with stamping hooves and head lowered, antlers brought to bear.

Loki was no stag, but he was the prey. He turned, with his back to the ravine, his flanks heaving with his panting, his lolling tongue a darker slash against his pale fur. Harry saw him lift his head for all that, standing with his throat and chest bared to the teeth of the first rush.

Willing sacrifice.
The magic howled all around them, a tide heavy and thick as blood, an ancient voice that gave and then took away again. Harry felt no sentience from it, as he did from the lizard-tailed bird or the vicious power that belonged to Voldemort. This was magic that had been old when wizards were learning how to make wands, that understood only the terms of a bargain always made and always kept, a bargain that it was not possible to break once it had been enacted.

Harry knew its name then, and it was hunger.

Camellia surged forward from the edge of the pack, and whirled as she came close to Loki, her teeth shutting on the fur of his chest. Harry saw her wrench her head sideways. The white fur tore. Blood sang down his body and spattered on the snow. Loki swayed, but remained on his feet.

Camellia flung her jaws back, and chewed.

And Harry felt the sacrifice travel into her, and he understood, then, why Loki would have made a bargain like this. It was not merely to avenge the murder of his mate, though that doubtless must have been a factor.

Each bite taken would spread his blessing to the pack. Each wolf who ate of him would absorb part of his power, and since he died a willing sacrifice, the magic was doubly or triply potent. Loki had given his pack to Harry because he did not believe that he could be a good alpha to them any longer. But he had still abandoned them, in a sense, and he was making up for that abandonment now.

Harry didn’t know why this should come as a shock to him. The notion of eating an enemy and gaining of his strength had been prevalent in some human cultures, too, at some points.

But he did know that he could not be part of it. If he had been fully absorbed into the magic of the ritual, then maybe…maybe. But he was still a wizard, and not a werewolf, and so he found the strength to gain control of his legs and back away, to the very edge of the pack.

He stood there with his nose buried in the snow, shielding it as best he could from the scent of blood, while wolf after wolf went forward and took his or her turn at the feast. He was not sure when Loki died. Perhaps life would linger in him until the last bite was consumed, or until the blood and flesh and organs had been eaten and only fur and bones were left.

He became aware of a pale shape crouched close beside him. Turning, Harry saw the ghostly form of Gudrun, Loki’s mate, who had accompanied him to Kieran’s slaying.

Harry stared at her in silence. She regarded him with enormous dark-silver eyes, and then stretched out her tongue and licked his cheek, as she had when she and Loki came for Kieran. Harry felt her saliva trickle down his fur, cold even through its protection, chill as steel or death.

He wondered if the lick was her way of trying to explain to him the grand and terrible and wonderful thing happening here, too terrible and wonderful for him to grasp.

Harry closed his eyes and lay down in the snow, folding his paws beneath him and tucking his tail around his nose. He could not stop the sacrifice. Apart from the strength of the ritual’s magic, Loki had chosen this path. Harry had told Joseph that he would not prevent someone else’s freely chosen suicide, and he had meant it.

He had simply not thought he would be forced to prove it so soon.

He did not know how long it lasted, only that it seemed to last forever. The moon was setting when Camellia’s nose nudged at him and pulled him to his feet, but since it had risen before this time in England, Harry thought it might still be aloft at home.

Home. The word had never sounded so good to him.

He walked beside Camellia for a few stiff steps, and then—he could not help it—he turned to look back.

He did not see the small mangled pile that might be all that was left of Loki’s earthly remains. He saw the ghost of Gudrun, rearing, as a silvery shape flew at her, gaining form and coherence as it moved. It was Loki, a strong-chested wolf, set free from grief and life at last, nipping his mate’s shoulder to get her to play with him.

Harry watched them tumble and chase each other, a pair of pale wolves beneath the pale moon, whirling out over the ravine.
When they reached the far cliff, they hovered for a moment, noses touching, tails wagging.

Then they leaped, skimming over the boulders and the sheer drop, ascending towards the stars. They faded as they rose. Harry knew he would never see them again, or know where they went.

He bowed his head and followed the push of Camellia’s gently insistent muzzle, back towards the clearing where the magic would change him again into a wizard and bear him back to the world he understood.