

Title: I Am Also Thy Brother
http://lightningwave.livejournal.com/161598.html
By Lighting on the Wave
Summary: AU, part 7 of Sacrifices. In the wake of death and disaster, Harry struggles to be everything he is: leader, lover, son, brother. Yet what will survive the war diminishes every day he does not find and destroy a Horcrux.
Notes: Welcome to the seventh, and last, story in the Sacrifices Arc, the sequel to A Song In Time of Revolution. This is by far the darkest, and there are long stretches absent of any sort of fluff, with lots of scenes that may be triggering for people. And lots and lots of characters don’t survive this one. Feel free to stop reading at any time.
The titles of this story and a good many of its chapters come from Swinburne’s poem “Hymn to Proserpine,” one of the most glorious and tragic poems ever written (in my opinion, of course).

Chapter One: Last and Darkest

Harry woke in the night to the sound of sobbing.

He sat up slowly, fumbling at his glasses, his sleep-fogged mind trying to understand how someone else had arrived in his and Draco’s bedroom. The tug of a heavy arm around his midriff proved that Draco was still asleep, and shouldn’t have been standing in the darkness beside his bed and crying. Neither did he stir when Harry moved, though, which he thought unusual, until he remembered that Draco had gone to sleep wearing the Dreamer’s Crown. He would be caught up in his lucid dreams and the choices he made in them until morning.

“Lumos,” Harry whispered, holding up his left hand. Pale yellow light sparked through the darkness, revealing one of the last faces he would ever have expected.

“Professor Trelawney?” he asked, staring.
She stared back at him, with the expression of a wrecked woman. Her hair hung loose in frizzing curls around her face, and her eyes showed the effects of too many sleepless nights and too many cups of sherry. Remembering what had happened last night—in fact, he believed he’d be thinking of it on his deathbed—Harry shifted cautiously backwards. He had reason to fear people not sleeping well as he thought few other wizards in the world did.

“I tried to resist it,” Professor Trelawney whispered, and her head shook as though it were a balloon tied to the end of a stick. “I tried. But it brought me here. It won’t let me leave the room until I do what it wants.” She folded her arms around her torso and bowed her head, while Harry looked in several different directions, trying to see the magic she meant. “It wants to be said,” Trelawney whispered.

The splinters of ice that Harry had felt lodged in his heart for a day now seemed to extend outward.

“A prophecy,” he said, and his own voice sounded hollow. Well. I knew there was one coming. I just didn’t know it was now.

“Yes.” Trelawney stared at him with wrecked eyes again, glittering behind her glasses. “I have to be a Seer and know what I said now, for only the second time in my life. Will you listen?”

The pain in her face testified to how long she’d tried to resist this. Harry didn’t want to know the prophecy, but there was too much pain in the world that he could not ease right now, and this suffering, he could. Besides, he had to know it. It might, if he could figure it out, provide valuable clues to how the future war with Voldemort went.

It was strange, when he thought back on it later, that he hadn’t ever dreamed the prophecy wouldn’t concern the war with Voldemort. Of course it had to. That was the central reality of his life right now.

He gripped Trelawney’s hand and nodded to her, once.

She gave a little whimper of relief and spoke quietly, shakily. Harry heard the words anyway. He thought she could have whispered them in a catacomb and he would have heard them. The prophecy wanted to be said, but even more than that, Harry thought, it wanted to be heard. And the thunder that filled the room as the professor spoke proved that this was a true prophecy, the fourth she’d made in her life, the last and the darkest.

“At the end of all things,
Prophecies run out.
It is on humans to take wings
And makes themselves human past the doubt.

“The first thing is the smallest thing,
But the center of many hearts still.
But, oh, savior, watch for the sting,
For the smallest things may kill.

“The second, no one can afford
To ignore the curse that seems a wall.
But that curse is true, and from the Lord,
And its only destruction is a fall.

“The third, amid the shining roses,
Waits for hearts to inevitably harden.
But there will be others’ important choices
Within night’s poisoned garden.

“The fourth, in the old hatred curled
Has found its way to move and end.
Beware, for when you most wish to hide from the world,
You’ll be taken by one who’s a friend.

“So much pain running without a halter,
More than is traded every day in gold.
Yet remember that even prophecies falter,
And it is up to human hands to hold

“And cling together at the end of all things.
Prophecies will, inevitably, run out.
It is on humans to take up wings,
And makes themselves human past the doubt.”

Trelawney’s head sagged back, and her mouth fell open and slack, as though she had sung something wonderful. Harry swallowed, and his skin prickled as he felt eyes on him. He glanced to the side.

A sleek black dog sat in the corner of the room, wreathed with what looked like a golden-green bridle. Harry had seen a similar vision once before: in the Department of Mysteries, when the Stone tried to turn time against him. The dog’s eyes were rich, deep, expectant—the eyes of Lady Death, the eyes of the Grim that waited on Regulus Black’s arm in place of the Dark Mark and had enabled him to resist the call from Voldemort.

The dog tilted back her head and gave voice to a soundless howl. At the same instant, the thunder stopped rolling around them, and Trelawney vanished from the room. The dog watched Harry a moment more, then collapsed into shadow and faded, too.

Harry was left alone in the company of his own rushing breath and a deeply sleeping Draco.

No. Not just those. I still have my mind.

And Harry knew that he had to make a decision. Now, when he would be almost alone except for the sworn companion he had to take with him, was the best time to make it.

He scribbled a note for Draco and left it on the table beside the bed. Then he slipped out into the Slytherin common room. He’d intended to cross to the seventh-year boys’ room and wake Owen Rosier-Henlin up, but he paused when he saw Owen sitting in the middle of the common room. He rose to his feet when he saw Harry and gave him a soft smile.

“Couldn’t sleep,” he said, by way of explanation. “And knew you would want company.” He touched his left arm, which bore the lightning bolt shape of his swearing to Harry. “Upwards?”


Owen looked startled for a moment. “I thought the Headmistress had sealed that off.”
She very well might have, Harry thought distractedly. He knew McGonagall had been awake since early that morning, firmly
telling the other professors that Hogwarts would stay open until at least the end of the term, and that she trusted Severus Snape to
behave himself until she was up and walking around the hospital wing. But Harry hadn’t been aware of whatever other decrees
she might have made. The day had been—long, telling the Bulstrodes, Narcissa, Draco, and the Weasleys of what he had seen,
and doing what he could to comfort them against their losses to death or Voldemort, and also doing what he could to comfort
Snape.

“As close as we can get, then,” he said, and set off towards the common room door. “I need to feel fresh air on my face, and I
don’t think that I dare go outside the wards right now.”

He could feel Owen’s startled, thoughtful glance on his shoulder blades. It wasn’t long before that Harry would have resented
having a guardian, resented the idea that he shouldn’t leave the wards, and sneaked off on his own just to prove that he could.
Owen would be wondering what had changed him.

Last night did, Harry answered, though not aloud. Voldemort can reach most anywhere, and not many other people than me have
a hope of standing up to him. I have to think of my own safety more than I have. I can’t go flying on my broom to think, and the
Astronomy Tower is still well within the wards.

There are decisions I need to make.

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It had begun with a flare in the Floo connection, which he kept open night and day now, and someone he hadn’t recognized at
first shouting, “Sir! Sir! Elder Juniper! Minister Scrimgeour is dead!”

It had turned out to be one of the Aurors who had started moving closer to him after Scrimgeour’s mindless debacle with
Cupressus Apollonis. Accusing a prominent Light wizard of child abuse when nothing of the sort had been happening would, of
course, lose the Minister followers. He hadn’t seemed to care about that before he made his move, though.

Struggling into his dressing gown, Erasmus Juniper demanded the story over again, and received it. The Minister’s still body. The
death of Percy Weasley, his closest companion. How the Aurors standing outside the door had heard nothing, but had gone in to
find three bodies, including that of the young woman who had helped the Minister against the Dark Lord Falco Parkinson,
sprawled on the floor. The broken wall, and the hovering Dark Mark.

The Thorn Bitch’s work. You-Know-Who’s work.

But Erasmus knew a different name for it, and when he’d snapped an order to the Auror to back out of the Floo connection so he
could come through, it was humming in his head.

The Dark’s work.

Times had changed. This was the full-blown beginning of the Second War, not that pitiful contest between Lords two years ago.
The magical world needed to remember the lessons of the First War, and it needed a strong leader who would work for the Light,
which was the Dark’s opponent.

Erasmus Juniper knew he was that leader.

He moved fast, because it was necessary. He listened to the Aurors’ stories. He viewed the bodies for himself, wincing at the
destruction of Percy Weasley’s, and ordered the victims’ families to be notified. He stooped over Rufus, who had died looking
oddly peaceful, and made a private vow that none of the others heard.

“You left them in my care. I’m going to take care of them, I promise. As one Light-sworn wizard to another, I promise.” And if I
take better care of them than you did, well, that is only to be expected. The world has just become simpler than it was when you
were Minister. Whilst you had to move cautiously, I may move openly, and I will not use or bargain with the Dark as you did.

He had ordered the Wizengamot to be gathered. Technically, he didn’t have the authority to do so, but the people around him
cried out for some kind of authority, perfectly legitimate or not. They hurried to do as he had commanded, and the news of the
Minister’s death spread throughout the Ministry. Erasmus passed many people crying as he made his way to Courtroom Ten. And
why not? Rufus had been disliked, but almost always for political reasons. As a person, people had liked him.
Erasmus shook his head. It was that likeability that had killed him. Despite the third body on the floor in his office and its lack of a Dark Mark, he was sure that the young woman who called herself the Liberator had provided the key to Rufus’s destruction. Perhaps she had been a witting pawn, perhaps not, but somehow she had let Indigena Yaxley into the Ministry. What Britain needed now was a Minister who would never allow such a thing.

There were other things he would never allow, either. During the First War, the Aurors had been briefly granted permission to use the Unforgivables legally, which had led to endless torture of innocents when the Aurors had a grudge against them or were drunk on power. Erasmus would not order such measures, ever. He would do what was right, not what was expedient.

Courtroom Ten slowly filled. Most of the eyes Erasmus looked into shimmered with tears, or terror, or both. There were a few exceptions, like Griselda Marchbanks, but not many. They had all heard the news now; those who might not have heard it before they arrived knew it the moment they stepped into the courtroom. Their world was leaderless, sent reeling. Something had to be done.

Erasmus would be the man to do it—not because he was politically ambitious, but because he was the best wizard for the position, and he knew it.

“Wizards and witches of the Wizengamot,” he said, drawing their attention immediately, “what you have heard is true. Minister Rufus Scrimgeour has been assassinated, killed by the hand of Indigena Yaxley, the Thorn Bitch working in You-Know-Who’s service. She entered the Ministry, by means as yet unknown, and slew everyone in his office, then broke free again.”

Loud murmurs and complaints made it impossible to continue for a moment. Erasmus waited, one arm curled around his hip. He was wearing, under his formal cloak, the robe with the depiction of the firebird on it, the oldest symbol of organized Light. The stitched talon curved around his hip. He thought he could feel gathering warmth from it, as though the old Light approved of his measures.

“I grieve for the death of Rufus, as all of you do,” he went on, lifting his voice. “But there is no time to spare. We must act, to prevent panic and its attendant plagues from sweeping the whole of Britain. This is a war against the Dark, and the Light must rise.”

“I suppose you have a plan for that?” Griselda asked, her voice creaky and soft but able to make itself heard nonetheless, her eyes on him.

Erasmus nodded to her. She was one of the few opponents who might be able to convince the others to elect her Acting Minister, if he allowed her time. He did not intend to allow her that time. Griselda would be a disaster, through no fault of her own. She had obligations to the goblins that would make her hesitant to do some of what must be done for fear she would be held personally accountable for any injuries to them. And she was too close to the vates.

Erasmus’s mouth tightened as he thought of the vates. More news was coming in, though he had not heard all of it before he summoned the Wizengamot, talking about an attack at Hogwarts. Nothing was said of the vates being dead, but Erasmus was sure that he and his Death Eaters were tied to this somehow.

Well, no matter. He will yield, or he will be counted as a tool of Voldemort. This is no time for personal disputes. He must work with the Ministry. We cannot afford a civil war, or a war on two fronts.

“I do,” said Erasmus. “I have built an alliance with several prominent Light wizards, and where they go, their families and allies will follow. Their members include Aurora Whitestag—whom I think most of you might have some reason to remember—Cupressus Apollonis, Terin Griffinsnest, and others.” He took the prepared scroll out of his robe pocket. “Here is the list of names. I will pass it around the courtroom so that others can see it.”

“And what is your proposal, Juniper?” Griselda asked, with that relentless, tiresome patience.

“That the Wizengamot appoint me Acting Minister, for now,” said Erasmus calmly. “That the alliance of Light wizards be allowed some power in the Ministry, enough to organize the Aurors and other Departments against this threat. That we examine the recent decrees and promises that Rufus made and see how many of them are necessary now, and how much it will cost us to keep them if they are determined to be so. That the Ministry shift to a war footing immediately. That some of those we know to be high risks be brought in for questioning.” He stood, eyes locked on Griselda’s, waiting for her to challenge some part of a proposal built all on calm reasoning.

Griselda opened her mouth, but another Wizengamot member, Linda Hooplan, overwhelmed her. “I agree,” she said, fear falling from her mouth, her eyes. “We must do something to counteract the Dark, and I agree.”
Others began to voice their agreement. Erasmus smiled slightly. He had known it would be simple, though he had anticipated more of a battle. In times of fear, groups of people would let their instincts guide them, and follow the one who seemed most prepared. Since he was the one who was most prepared, he had not had to work very hard for the appearance of it, either. There would be a few who opposed him; besides Griselda, Elizabeth Dawnborn also looked doubtful. But the rest of the Wizengamot was shouting for him, clamoring for him, more enthusiastically than they had ever done in the last days for poor Rufus.

Erasmus accepted it. He had not wanted the position thrust upon him like this; he would have preferred to come to power as Minister through a legitimate election, and to have some idea of how to deal with the vates beforehand. But no one had expected Rufus to be assassinated, and no one had expected the war to come upon them so suddenly. Erasmus had laid contingency plans for such a measure, and they were in effect now. As the only one with a set of plans, he rose easily to power.

There were no Dark wizards on the Wizengamot, or at least none stupid enough to say so in public. There were only Light and undeclared wizards, and they knew where the power flowed now.

So that was how he came, a day later, to be sitting behind the Minister’s desk, and to be writing out his second order. The first, which was not, in some ways, as urgent, and would go out in tomorrow’s Daily Prophet, was an edict outlawing use of the absorbere gift. It was the most powerful and dangerous Dark magic in Britain at the moment, and had no legitimate effects to outweigh its bad ones. Also, though, it was a test for Harry Potter. If he obeyed the edict, he would probably fall in line with the Ministry; if not, then Erasmus would know him for an enemy.

The second was more a precaution than anything else, but Erasmus knew that these people had valuable information, and also that the vates would try to keep them away from the Ministry if he could. Seizing them this way couldn’t be helped.

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Somehow, even after his mother’s description, Draco hadn’t imagined the Dreamer’s Crown would bring him to a place that looked like this.

He stood on a high hill, covered with misty grass, stalks of light that swayed slowly back and forth. The fog that crept in and out between the blades was the color of milk lit from within, and twined cold fingers around his legs. To the left one path stretched away, and to the right another one. In front of him was what Draco supposed counted as the situation he put on the Crown to lucidly dream about.

He walked slowly towards it. It showed him and Harry, facing each other, still replicas that made his skin prickle slightly with how identical they were to the real thing. His own expression was angry. Harry’s was simply closed.

From the tales, he knew what he had to do. It just wasn’t that easy to do, in the end. But, needs must.

He took a deep breath and stepped into the replica of himself.

Sound and motion absorbed him at once, and he found himself standing in a corridor of Hogwarts, not the misty meadows the Crown had brought him to. Part of his mind remained hovering behind the rest, though, able to see and judge. So when the words emerged from his mouth, he didn’t have to own up to them as being completely his. Which was rather a comfort, given what those words were.

“I don’t care!” he was shouting. “You shouldn’t have done it! You didn’t know what was out there!”

Harry simply watched him, face colder than Draco had ever seen it before. Harry usually wore a mulish expression when he’d been caught doing something wrong and didn’t want to admit to it, or an emotionless one when he’d fastened on a course of action he thought was right. This look, though, was one of exquisite, cold anger. This was a Harry who was keeping his word about not suppressing his emotions. He did hold his tongue, though, apparently waiting for the end of Draco’s tirade.

“And don’t tell me that you knew what was out there, thanks to your visions,” Draco was raging on. “You know how dangerous those sendings from Voldemort are. Any one of them could be false. Why in the name of Merlin didn’t you come and get me, Harry?”

Harry’s head lifted. The motion exposed his throat, but Draco didn’t think he had ever seen his partner look less vulnerable than he did right now. Steady rage burned in his green eyes.

“I did fetch other people,” Harry said quietly, in a voice that made the stones of the corridor frost over. “Just not you.”
The scene froze. Draco could feel the words leaping to his tongue in response, accusing Harry of not valuing him enough. This was the point where the argument turned. Either he spoke those words, or he choked them back and admitted that, yes, he’d been rather impossible to fetch at the moment Harry needed him. The right-hand road led to what would happen if he said those words, the left-hand one to what would happen if he admitted he was wrong.

Draco watched as the two figures of himself and Harry dissolved and spun away into the reaching mist. Down the right-hand road the vision sped, and he saw Harry drawing away from him, keeping more secrets, leaving Draco behind more and more often, because all he did when fetched was complain about the problems of his own life. The ending of that road was uncertain, since it reached into war, but Draco was sure it ended either with Harry dying in battle, alone, or surviving but leaving him completely, hardening himself against needing Draco when Draco served mostly as a source of stress.

Down the left-hand road the vision spread, and he saw things changing between them during the war, and not always for the better. But he could be a support at Harry’s back when Harry needed one, and a Dark wizard who could make decisions and urge tactics that a Light wizard wouldn’t, and the counterbalance—

Draco jerked his head and made a disgusted noise in his throat. Must he serve as a counterbalance to Harry’s brother?

But the left-hand road seemed to be saying he would whether he wanted it or not. Draco put his hands over his face, and let out a loud and lofty sigh.

When he peeked between his fingers, the vision was still there.

All right, then. I’m wise enough to know which I prefer. I thought I was done becoming an adult, but obviously not.

A voice answered him, low and amused. Draco wondered if it was his own voice, from the future, or the voice of the crown itself, or perhaps even the voice of a more adult Harry. It does not end until you are dead.

And the vision dissolved in turn, and Draco, his decision made, woke up.

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It was gone.

He had been right. Pulling free of Voldemort’s hold the way he had had substantially damaged his mind.

Snape leaned his head against his hands and fought down the urge to scream, to rage, to lash out. It was not easy. His concentration was truly in tatters. The art of focusing intently on one thing that he’d developed for so long—to brew potions, to come up with revenge against his enemies, to catch a student making subtle mistakes in class—was slipping from him.

He was an Occlumens. He knew his own mind. He had patrolled it the moment the initial excitement had died, with Harry back on the Tower, having told them the news of the visions he had witnessed, and all of them making their way back down to the hospital wing and Minerva.

Large parts of his memories, especially his younger ones, were missing. Wounds in his Occlumency pools meant he would have a harder time suppressing his emotions than usual, for now and a long time to come. But the biggest casualty was his concentration. That was not a surprise. Voldemort had used Snape’s intensity to his advantage when he had planted those dreams. And Snape had shredded that part of his mind in getting away.

Though he also felt lighter for the first time in years, no longer carrying some of his hatreds, he was not entirely sure if this was worth the trade. Harry needed him as a father, as a skilled Potions brewer, as a man who would not go mad if something emotionally draining happened, but could handle it calmly and efficiently. Was Snape going to be able to do that, with his mind damaged the way it was?

He stood over his cauldron of purple poison, which he would turn against Voldemort and his Death Eaters now, and let himself taste weariness. A horrid childhood, loathsome school years, an equally horrible—at least now—service of three years to Voldemort, eleven years of unshaken allegiance to Albus Dumbledore, a change to Harry’s side, and now, another change. He was continually being required to rise from his bed and rebuild his life, or endure some new and innovative torture over part of it. Could he do it again?

Yes. Again and again.
He had made a choice that was really a myriad of choices on the night Harry had rebuilt his mind and magic after the Chamber of Secrets. He had said he would choose from day to day, recast his allegiance again and again. He had made that choice, of course, much less weary of body and mind, certain he could do things that now seemed impossible or beyond him.

Yes. You can do this. You must. Again and again.

He forced himself to his feet and towards the Potions books on the far shelf of his office. He had thought he brewed a potion to cure Occlumency wounds, when in fact he had brewed a version of liquid Imperius under Voldemort’s direction. The Imperius potion could still be useful, but now he needed to trace the steps of research he had never actually performed, and create the potion that would heal his own wounds.

He would become what he had to, to survive and to aid his son.

I belong to myself. And I choose this. Again and again.

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Narcissa defied embraces.

Her son had hugged her that day. Harry had hugged her, after he had explained, as gently as he could, that Lucius was gone back to the Dark Lord. Even Regulus had hugged her, as awkwardly as possible, before stepping back and giving her a thoughtful look.

“You didn’t like that, did you?” he asked.

“No.” Narcissa didn’t bother glancing away from the fire. She sat near one of the hearths in Silver-Mirror, one that didn’t have a Floo connection, so that no one could possibly come through and disturb her on accident. “Now leave me.”

And Regulus had nodded and climbed to his own bed, leaving Narcissa, the night after the night it happened, to stare at the flames. Anyone who was in the same room with her, and not privy to her thoughts, would probably have imagined she was brooding.

She was not brooding. She would have a right to, given the family she was born into and the family she’d married into, but she was not.

She was murderously angry.

When Harry had explained the basis of the hatred Voldemort had used to snare his Death Eaters back again, Narcissa had nodded, and said she understood. But she had looked at Severus, still standing at Harry’s side, and Peter Pettigrew, pale but there. Regulus might be said to have an unfair advantage, with the mark of Lady Death on his arm in place of the Dark Mark. But the others had resisted and fought back of their own free wills, and managed to remain.

Lucius’s love for her was not strong enough for that, and the knowledge curdled like sour milk in Narcissa’s stomach.

Narcissa did not have to brood. She felt anger striking through her, keen and clear and white as the trunk of a young birch. She was not required to think of other things in order to keep from thinking of Lucius and going mad. She would think of him without going mad. She would think of him with disgust shining in her like a star.

She would face him again, of that she had no doubt. Lord Voldemort wanted to kill those Harry loved, and torment those he had taken. Of course she and Lucius would have to duel with such a dark mind behind the scenes.

She would do it gladly, and bring Lucius back or kill him.

She lifted her head, knowing her teeth flashed like a wolf’s in the firelight, and glad of it.

I do not want a husband whose love is not as strong as mine. I will not be the dependent one.

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Somehow—she was not sure how, because, really, since she was the baby of the family, she would have expected it the opposite way around—she was the one moving quietly, competently, in the background, doing what needed to be done, while everyone
else raged and cried and vowed vengeance.

And she was the one who noticed, and worried about, Ron.

Ginny wiped her hands on a towel and put the last plate down. She was good at the cleaning charms for the dishes, but not the drying charm. She turned, slowly, to stare at Ron, the only one remaining at the table in the Burrow’s kitchen. Everyone else had retreated to the drawing room, where they could talk to each other about Percy, and continue crying and raging and vowing vengeance, without being separated by the width of the table.

Her mother had not stopped crying since Ginny and Ron, returning home by Floo from Hogwarts, told her what Harry had told them. Her father had been pale and mumbling since official confirmation and condolences had come from the Ministry, via an owl with a black envelope. Bill and Charlie had arrived in the middle of the afternoon, and appeared inclined to comfort their parents half the time and half the time reminisce about Percy and his life. The twins were talking intently to each other about what they’d do to the person who’d killed him.

Ron was silent.

*Am I really the only one who noticed?* Ginny thought, studying Ron, whose face was so pale it made his freckles stand out like spots of blood on snow. He’d clutched his wand the entire time, too, and refused to meet anyone else’s eyes. Every hour that passed just saw him become stiffer and stiffer, his jaw clamped so tightly shut it had to hurt, his nostrils flaring like a wild horse’s.

Ginny knew he couldn’t be blaming himself for Percy’s death. He wasn’t that stupid, to think he could have prevented it. And he didn’t blame Harry, either, or else he would have punched Harry in the jaw the moment he told them about Percy. Ron wasn’t one to suppress his feelings.

But she didn’t know what else this was.

“Ron,” she said quietly, and sat down next to him.

He didn’t respond. It was Ginny’s belief that he honestly didn’t hear her. She reached out and threaded her fingers with his, forcing him to let go of his wand. When it rolled down the table, he startled and scrambled after it, knocking the chair down. He’d got quite big the previous summer, and even though he’d hit his seventeenth birthday and received his full complement of magic, Ginny didn’t think he’d stopped growing yet.

When he had his wand in his grip, he went right back to being a statue. Ginny, though, was tired of that. She didn’t even care about the magic that hung around him and muttered like a thunderstorm. She had lost one member of her family tonight. She wasn’t going to lose another because Ron went dashing away in some mad quest for revenge, or—or did something else. Ginny couldn’t imagine what else he might do, but she knew it would be bad.

“Ron,” she said.

He at least looked at her this time, but only to shake his head and whisper, “Go away, Ginny.”

“No.” At least he blinked at her, then, as if he couldn’t imagine that she wouldn’t obey him. Ginny stared straight back. Ron had obviously forgotten whom he was talking to. They’d been quite close as children, as the two siblings closest in age, and because the twins had each other and Percy fusses so. But they’d also fought most often. Ron had a terrible temper, one that Bill and Charlie rarely roused, Percy was afraid of, and the twins laughed off. But Ginny wasn’t afraid of Ron. She never had been.

“Ginny,” he said, and his voice was so polite and calm that she might have been fooled if she hadn’t seen the expression on his face beforehand. “Bugger. Off.”

“No.”

Now he was shaking, his magic swirling around him, dancing up and down restlessly. Ginny let out a careful breath. Fred and George were the strongest wizards in the Weasley family, and geniuses with modifying and creating spells. But Ron had a reserve of power that none of the rest of them did, connected to his temper, and since the first of March, he’d been managing curses and hexes and jinxes that had been beyond him a week before that. Fred and George could badly hurt an enemy. Ron would go on hitting back long after he should have fallen.

“Ron, listen. To. Me,” she said. “I know that you’re upset about Percy—“
Ron gave a jagged laugh and ripped his hands away. At least, he tried. Ginny braced herself on the chair, and retained a grip on one wrist. She wasn’t as strong as he was, but she was just as stubborn.

“You don’t know the half of it,” he whispered. “You don’t, so don’t dare pretend you do! Selfish git, why did he have to go and die like that?”

And suddenly, Ginny did know what this was about. The last time Ron had seen Percy, over Easter holidays, they had argued terribly, mostly because Ron’s ultimate loyalty was to his best friend Connor—and, through him, to Harry—while Percy had made a point of standing with Minister Scrimgeour even when he’d moved openly against Harry. Percy had ended up leaving the Burrow early. Ron hadn’t apologized to him.

And now Percy was dead, and there would be no chance of an apology, and it was obvious that Ron blamed himself and his temper.

“Merlin, Ron,” said Ginny, and leaned forward and hugged her brother despite his struggles. “He didn’t die blaming you. You have to believe that. He knew it was just politics. He argued with other people, and he didn’t so much make up with them as mumble something at them later and then talk like everything was normal again. You know that. Percy’s temper embarrassed him. He was your brother, and you were his, and he loved you, and he died defending the wizard he was loyal to. I promise, it’s all right. You didn’t make his last moments any more miserable.”

Ron’s magic was a stone weight on her shoulders. Ginny wondered, for a long moment, if what she said would be enough.

Then Ron uttered one great, crackling sob, and with that the dam broke.

Ginny held him as he cried, and after a time bowed her head and joined in. She felt his arms come around her in turn, and hold her close. It had been the longest day of her life. She had turned out, unexpectedly, to be the strong one who thought of food and other basic necessities when no one else did.

But even the strong ones needed to collapse sometimes. And even Ginny had done her share of arguing with Percy, and was perfectly capable of feeling that she hadn’t appreciated him enough when he was alive, and now he was gone and she would never have the chance to tell him.

So she cried, and Ron stroked her hair and whispered to her, and so they mourned their brother together.

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Millicent did not cry. It was not allowed.

She went home to her mother at once when the Headmistress gave her permission, and she told her about what Harry had seen in the vision, and Elfrida nodded and put her arms around Marian and rocked her, and there were a few tears, with Marian crying because her mother was crying.

There were no tears for Millicent. She was her father’s magical heir, and she might soon have to fight him. Besides, she knew what all the oldest codes of behavior for Dark families said, and the Bulstrodes followed the oldest ones. When a family member turned traitor to a cause the family had sworn to—as Adalrico had; the formal family oath would not let him fight Harry or Connor, but it would let him fight Harry’s other allies—the head of the family was supposed to execute that person.

Millicent was the head of the Bulstrode family in the wake of her father’s defection.

She stood with her hand on her mother’s shoulder, and stared into the fire, and gave commands in a low voice. The house elves took care of things, including setting up wards of their own strong magic around a sheltered room that would be Marian’s and Elfrida’s last retreat in times of trouble.

Millicent intended to find a stronger, more secure sanctuary. She had no doubt that Voldemort would send her father against his family, too, and Adalrico knew all the secrets of the Blackstone estate, including some that wouldn’t be revealed to Millicent until his death.

She did not cry. She told her mother and her little sister and the house elves what to do, and then went to the Floo to contact her family’s solicitor. If her death occurred, in battle or otherwise, it was necessary to designate Marian her heir, so the family properties could pass on smoothly. The family was always more important than the individual.
**Duramus**, her family’s motto was. *We endure.*

*We endure anything*, Millicent thought, as she waited for the solicitor to speak to her. *Anything. Even this.*

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The Headmistress had indeed sealed off the Astronomy Tower, with a series of wards. They weren’t linked to the school, however—Harry thought McGonagall was probably too weak from Snape’s attack, still, to call upon the might of Hogwarts for a temporary measure—but were spellwork, which all the professors had worked together to build. Harry simply took them down, waited until Owen was past them, and then put them back.

Together, they climbed the stairs Harry had pounded up in frantic concern last night, and descended again early this morning. Or was it this morning? Harry cast a *Tempus* charm, and shook his head. Not technically. It was one-o’clock in the morning on the eighth of June.

He wondered if he needed to be so precise, but he thought it would help him achieve the mindset he needed. He began to pace, back and forth, on top of the Tower, while Owen guarded the stairs and watched him, the sky, the staircase, and the other Towers more or less simultaneously.

*What do I need to do in this war?*

The answers tried to come clustering in as one great wave and overwhelm him, but Harry refused to allow them. He streamlined his mind into cool quietude, instead, glancing at the stars when he needed to see what that looked like. He had promised Henrietta he would not suppress his emotions again, but he had said nothing about suppressing thoughts. He knocked out the cold chains of logic in his mind, until he could hold them up and twist them around and admire what he saw.

*Destroy the Horcruxes. Those are the key to destroying Voldemort. I don’t yet know a way around the Unassailable Curses, which makes it hard to set up a timetable for that. Nevertheless, I need to get rid of them to have any chance at getting rid of the Dark Lord.*

*Make sure he doesn’t take me through the hatred, the way he almost did last night—the night before last. Occlumency would be the simplest way, but I made that vow to Henrietta, and I won’t go back on it. Besides, suppressing my emotions only leads to all sorts of other problems, and we cannot afford that now, for me to collapse and build myself back up. So—*

*What is it to be, then?*

Harry paced back and forth in the light of the stars to which he’d sent the phoenix song as a cry of defiance. The moon was visible this time, a faint, slowly waxing sliver.

*It will have to be pushing straight through*, Harry thought at last, reluctantly letting the realizations trickle through his head. *Not suppressing my emotions. Not hiding from whatever visions he sends me of attacks and cruelty. Not giving in to the hatred. Living with it, no matter what happens.*

*I know what kind of war it will be. Voldemort has his Death Eaters, and none of them are vulnerable, not in the way that the people I want to protect are. I have innocents, Muggles as well as wizards, and I’ll be fighting a defensive war almost exclusively. With long lines. Harry grimaced. Voldemort could strike anywhere in Britain or Ireland, and he won’t always send me a vision when he does. Even if he does send visions, to try to wear down my resistance and make me hate him, some of them will be false, or will be after the fact, so I can’t do anything to prevent the attacks.*

*My best hope is to give people in local areas the ability to defend themselves. Call on some of my allies to help in particular places—the werewolves in London to help with protecting London Muggles and wizards, for example. Give what training I can to those who will accept it, so that their curses and wards will grow stronger. Establish safehouses where the most vulnerable people can hide. Let at least some Muggles—those who already have contact with the wizarding world, like parents of Muggleborn students—know what’s happening, so they can make their way to the safehouses, take precautions, or do whatever they think is appropriate.*

He would have to be careful, he knew. If he was correct, Juniper had already taken the Ministry. He was the strongest politician in the Wizengamot after Scrimgeour, either because the people following him sincerely believed in him, or because they wanted to use him and saw him as accommodating their purposes, or because they wanted what he wanted. Harry was almost sure he and the man would clash over the defensive measures Harry wanted to employ. And talking to Muggles about the wizarding world at
all risked treading on the International Statute of Secrecy meant to separate the wizarding world and the non-magical one.

Harry was a bit surprised to find a well of indifference where he once would have been fretting about that.

This is war, and lives are more important than laws. I’ll do what I have to do. There are certain standards I’ll never break—never using compulsion, for example. But I—I’m going to have to give up some pedestals I’ve placed myself on.

Was it compulsion to use his name and reputation as the Boy-Who-Lived, a power he had still barely tapped? No. Nor was it compulsion to keep secrets instead of being totally honest, or tell judicious lies to lure in allies who were purely political, or refuse to help those who wanted some insanely dangerous concession from him while they offered something temporary or slender in return. And if he believed that people like Juniper and Aurora Whitestag were hurting the wizarding world more than they were helping it, Harry would not hesitate to scorn them and strike out on his own.

What’s changed me?

He knew the answer to that, of course.

The revelation of what Voldemort can do. I forgot you, you bastard. I underestimated you. I won’t do it again. I will become what I have to, do what I must, to survive this war and win it for others and myself, without breaking those principles dearest to me.

He knew it would not be any easier than fighting through the hatred Voldemort intended to press into his mind. For one thing, these were surely the same kinds of promises Dumbledore had made himself during the First War, and that had eaten his morals until he agreed to anything, thought of anything, scrabbled after anything, to try and preserve a scrap of what he valued.

I must not become Voldemort. I must not become Dumbledore. I must not become Juniper. I must steer a path through all of them, and one mistake has the potential to lose me everything.

Harry snarled softly, and a wave of blue phoenix fire sprang up around his shoulders and raced down his arms, intensely bright in the darkness.

If that’s what I have to do, that’s what I have to do. And I have to take precautions with my own life, and not do stupid things, and trust others to make their own decisions about fighting, and rely on other people as well as having them rely on me.

I’ve never been good at any of those.

It didn’t matter. The war demanded that he be good at them, and they were changes Harry was willing to make to accommodate the war. Those things he could not give up, he would protect and defend with all his might, but he would—not be as pleasant or as honest or as trusting as he had been. Those were virtues more appropriate to a time of peace than of war.

So I’ll bring peace back again. And think of what lies beyond the end, not just in this war. Like Connor said, show Voldemort he’s only a tiny cloud in the sky of my life. I won’t use compulsion because that means the end of any chance of my becoming a vates. I won’t sacrifice lives unless forced to make that choice or unless someone else willingly chooses to become a sacrifice, because I want as many people as possible to live and enjoy life beyond the end of the war. I won’t destroy institutions just to destroy them, because we’ll need them when he’s dead.

Harry smiled faintly. He thought he had made the choices he could make, with the road he had in sight. If he had to make others as he went along, he would do so.

He spun and went back towards the stairs with Owen on his heels, opening and shutting the wards behind them. The moment they were back in the main school, Harry could hear a commotion, people bolting down the halls, someone shouting. He frowned and started towards the hospital wing.

Madam Pomfrey was there, of course, hovering with her wand out over McGonagall. The Headmistress was arguing with her about getting out of bed, but she turned around and changed her tone the moment she saw Harry.

“Harry,” she said precisely. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t stop them. I would have raised the school’s wards against them, but—“

“You could have done that if you wanted a heart attack!” yelled Madam Pomfrey, looking more flustered than Harry had ever seen her. Harry supposed she might have finally found a patient who flustered her more than he did.

“Please explain what happened, Headmistress,” Harry said calmly, his eyes fastened on hers.
“Ministry Aurors came through the Floo,” McGonagall said, after studying him for a long moment. She was pale, but her voice was clear. “They took Poppy as a hostage, and by implication, me, I suppose. They had warrants for the arrest of Severus Snape, Peter Pettigrew, and Regulus Black. I’m sorry, Harry. They’ve taken them to Tullianum as suspected spies for Voldemort.”

Chapter Two: Their Wills Be As Steel

“I see, Headmistress,” Harry said, calm as the wind before a storm. “Thank you for telling me.”

Minerva put one elbow beneath her to urge her body up, hating how weak she was, even now. A night to recover should have done more than this. “Harry,” she said softly, knowing her efforts were probably useless, but feeling she should say this anyway. “Do nothing unwise.”

“Oh, Headmistress, I wouldn’t dream of it.” Harry’s eyes, meeting hers, were guileless as a first-year’s. That would have stood no chance of fooling her even if he’d made an effort to modify his tone of voice to less than sickly sweet. “I think enough unwise things have been done in the last hour. Don’t you agree?”

She drew breath to respond, and then fell silent as she felt the magic in the room gather and blow through a change. Harry’s brow flickered with true lightning to match the lightning bolt scar. Through the windows of the hospital wing came the sudden scream of thunder, where before the night had been calm. Poppy let out a little exclamation and moved over to shut the windows with swift taps of her wand. Minerva was sure that that motion carrying her further from Harry was only coincidence in the way she was sure the Aurors had only chosen Severus, Peter, and Regulus to question by coincidence.

“Harry,” Minerva murmured. Her heart labored unnecessarily hard. This was Harry, a student—a child—she had come to know well over the years. “I meant what I said.”

His eyes blinked, then focused on her. “So did I,” he said, and it was unnerving how his face remained so calm while outside the wind picked up and wailed. Perhaps its voice was speaking for him, though, Minerva thought, expressing all the anger that could not come from his mouth. “I will not go alone to the Ministry. I will not assassinate Minister Juniper and cause us all trouble and havoc again. But I will get my father back, and Peter and Regulus, too. They’ve been through enough. Even if the Ministry treats them with utmost politeness, they don’t deserve this, too.”

Minerva stared. She didn’t think she had ever heard Harry refer to Severus as his father like that, without hesitation or flinching or consciousness of who might overhear the name. He turned and strode towards the doors of the hospital wing without giving her the chance to comment, either. The Rosier-Henlin boy, who had been hovering in the corridor, caught up with him and said something of which Minerva could only make out the word “Draco.” Harry shook his head and gave a clipped response, and the other boy nodded and kept at his heels. He was Harry’s sworn companion, Minerva remembered. He had heard the declaration that Harry would not go to the Ministry alone. He would insure Harry kept that promise, if his own word did not.

“I could Stun him and keep him here, quietly,” Poppy said, coming up beside her.

Minerva snorted and glanced at the matron from a corner of her eye. “Do you really think you could, Poppy? Answer me truthfully now.”

“No.” Poppy sighed and patted at her graying hair with her wand. “No, damn it, I can’t.” Minerva expected it when she turned fiercely on her. “And you! You are to lie still and quiet! What did you mean, sitting up like that and reaching for the wards when the Aurors came through the Floo?”

Minerva ground her teeth. Poppy tended to treat every patient in the hospital wing like a recalcitrant first-year Gryffindor, unless they did exactly as she said. That only two of those descriptions applied to Minerva made her all the more resentful. “I meant to keep them from harming anyone under my care, Poppy—”

“You are meant to lie still and quiet,” Poppy repeated, and abruptly charmed her bed to lie flat. Before Minerva could sit up again in startled outrage, Poppy cast a binding spell, and then an alarm that would tell her if Minerva moved. Since her wand was on the bedside table, Minerva could only ineffectually glare.

“We are not going to lose our Headmistress,” Poppy answered her gaze, as if that made up for the indignity, and walked towards the back of the hospital wing, probably to fetch another foul-tasting potion.
Minerva closed her eyes. She hated her weak heart. A witch should still be strong and active in her seventies, not tied to a bed, even if the ropes were invisible.

Her only chance was to recover as quickly as she could. The world outside the hospital wing needed her too badly to let her lounge around in bed.

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Harry’s mind raced smoothly through the steps he would have to take as he went back to the dungeons with Owen. He was glad that this crisis had come after he’d made his decision and not before. If it had come before, then he might well have wavered and tried to let Juniper have his free will, twisted and hurtful of others as that free will was. Or he would have remembered that he didn’t want a war on two fronts and been prepared to let the Ministry get away with almost anything.

But now—

He still didn’t want a war on two fronts, and neither did the Ministry. Therefore, they shouldn’t have taken Snape, Peter, and Regulus away. And someone else’s free will ended when he tried to kill or imprison another person who had committed no crime. Harry had defended the Hogwarts students against Voldemort and his Death Eaters, not letting them have their free will simply to kill them.

This was another case where he would not let anything happen to people he loved and had sworn to protect.

He lengthened his stride as they passed the stairs that led to the Hufflepuff rooms. “Owen,” he said over his shoulder. His sworn companion inclined his head to show he was listening. “Fetch Syrinx, if you would.”

“No need,” said a soft voice from near the top of the stairs, and Syrinx Gloryflower appeared. Her eyes were wide and clear and an unnaturally bright green; if she ever looked tired, she must do it in the moments when she was away from him. “I am here.” She touched her left arm when Harry raised his eyebrow. “The scar felt when you had need of me, sir, and pulled me.”

It still made Harry uneasy to hear a girl his own age call him “sir,” but titles had fallen to the bottom of his list of things worth arguing about.

“How else would you recommend?” he asked Owen bluntly.

“Where are we going?” Syrinx asked, and Harry told her the situation in a few terse sentences while Owen bowed his head in thought. She nodded, her eyes growing wider and clearer and more serene.

“It depends on your goal, my l—Harry,” said Owen, looking up again. “Do you want simply to free your father and his friends, or do it in a way that avoids open conflict with the Ministry?”

“Freeing them is the first priority,” said Harry. “Everything else is secondary. Including avoiding or inciting war with the Ministry.” He saw Syrinx’s eyes fire, but of course they would. She was in training to be a war witch, and she preferred conflict to words. “I will try words first. There is no need, as the Headmistress says, to be unwise.” He heard the storm scream outside, and he barely suppressed the impulse to lift his head and scream back to it. “But I will need those who won’t hesitate to fight beside me against the Ministry if something goes wrong.”

Owen nodded. “Then I would recommend Alastor Moody, the werewolf Camellia, and Narcissa Malfoy.”

“I won’t disturb Narcissa,” said Harry, crushing down his immediate impulse to complain about the length of time it would take his allies to get here, and what might happen to Peter, Regulus, and Snape in the meantime. Yes, it will take a few minutes to Apparate here. But I will not go unguarded. I promised I wouldn’t. “She’s grieving. And are you sure about Moody? He worked for the Ministry for decades.”

“I can judge loyalty,” said Owen quietly. “He’s loyal to you, Harry. You give him something to fight for. And the Ministry was never a good fit for him, except maybe during the First War. He’s too wild, and his standards of justice are his own. Summon him.”

“And if you won’t call Mrs. Malfoy,” Syrinx put in unexpectedly, “call Nymphadora Tonks. She knows the Ministry, and I don’t think she’ll look kindly on what they just did.”

“Thank you, both,” Harry murmured, and then turned to use the communication spell. Camellia would have to have someone...
Apparate her, since she was Muggle, but she lived with several werewolves who were witches and wizards, and it was a long way from the full of the moon. All three allies were excellent candidates, he thought, now that Owen and Syrinx had mentioned them.

Do you see? whispered a part of his conscience that he rarely listened to. It is better to consult with others when you can. It gives you a context for your own decisions. It stabilizes the way you react. And it is wiser and more adult than simply running off to the Ministry on your own.

It does hurt more, though, Harry responded, and then heard Moody’s voice through the flare of phoenix song, and turned to explaining again.

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Aurora lifted her head, uneasy. Erasmus had called for her a few hours ago, after he was convinced that he was secure in his power, and she had not left the Minister’s office since. They’d spent time looking through paperwork, discussing those laws and funding requests Scrimgeour had been considering when he died, and there was nothing in any of them to cause her the feelings she experienced now.

She looked up and out the enchanted window. Of course, since the Ministry was underground, the window wasn’t real, but it was charmed, currently, to show a view of Muggle London at night, and probably would be for quite a long time. Erasmus believed in looking reality in the face as much as possible.

The night had been calm and clear when she last looked, riding under the last light of the slowly waxing moon. And now—

“Erasmus, look,” she whispered, gripping his arm.

He looked, just as clouds rushed together in the middle of the sky. Lightning seared over the buildings like a Muggle torch magnified to elephantine size. It spat once, and then a steady rain began to fall. Aurora found the rain more terrible than the thunder, somehow. It spoke of cold, unwavering vengeance, and slow floods, not uncontrolled strikes like the lightning did.

“Is this a Dark attack?” Erasmus asked, not moving his arm from her grasp.

“No He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named,” Aurora said, finding a name and a face, now, for the magic that she could feel boiling throughout London and heading towards the front door of the Ministry. “That’s Harry.”

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Erasmus was prepared by the time Harry and his—troupe, was perhaps the best name, given that no other single word could possibly encompass the two teenagers, two former Aurors, and werewolf who followed him—came to his office. One of the Aurors, one who had remained loyal to the Ministry, had questioned him on what to do, and Erasmus had told him to let them in. This was the most perfect test for the vates, really, to see what would happen when he was face-to-face with the Minister he had to accept would take Rufus’s place.

On their own, Mad-Eye Moody and the werewolf, who was snarling softly and not attempting to conceal her amber eyes or her teeth at all, might have been intimidating enough. Nymphadora Tonks and the other two children were trying, but they could not quite manage it.

Harry outshone them all.

He paced through the office door in wild silence, his eyes finding Erasmus and not wavering. Their deep green was not, as the Daily Prophet had often and ridiculously described them, the color of the Killing Curse. Instead, Erasmus thought, they were the color of a stalking tiger’s eyes. And Harry obviously believed that he had prey in front of him. His magic quietly piled through the door after him and filled the office from end to end. He would never have dared that with Rufus.

Erasmus decided he would let the boy speak first. What he said should be revealing. So he sat, and studied them, and listened to the werewolf’s snarl with a shudder of distaste, and clamped down on Aurora’s arm when she would have stood or spoken.

“Let them out,” Harry said.

Blunt. Lacking eloquence. Erasmus lifted his head and his eyebrows in the same moment, to show that he was not afraid. “I assume this is about the servants of You-Know-Who?” he asked.
“Voldemort,” said Harry.

Erasmus couldn’t help it; he flinched. He had seen the victims of the spells Voldemort had woven to make his name so feared. He saw Harry note the flinch, and his eyes changed again. Now they were hawk-like, staring and imperious, and the small, contemptuous smile that curled his mouth was that of a strong man faced with weakness.

Erasmus shook the impression off. He was not afraid. The boy must learn that he could not get his way all the time simply because he was a powerful wizard. “I took them into custody on hearing of the attack on Hogwarts,” he said calmly. “We need to understand how this Dark magic that apparently possesses the minds of its victims and causes them to nearly kill Headmistresses works. I promise, they will be well-treated. I appreciate that Severus Snape was able to stop short of the kill.” Though I would wager McGonagall had more to do with that than he did. “I only want to ask them questions in an environment where we will not be interrupted.”

“You could have done that at Hogwarts,” said Harry, who was, really, dreadfully unwilling to compromise. “Behind a privacy ward.” He shifted, and Erasmus was startled and disconcerted to see that the two adolescents behind him, a tall, dark-haired boy and a golden-haired girl who looked as if she had a good Light pedigree, mimicked him without thought. He has sworn companions? That, I had not heard. “There was no need to bring them to Tullianum.”

“It was a precaution only.” Erasmus softened his voice as much as possible. The magic felt like claws resting against his face, ready to rasp and take off skin. The boy had anger and to spare, given the storm outside and that sensation. Erasmus would avoid upsetting him if he could, but the truth remained that the boy had to learn to face reality. “As I said, we still do not know all the details, but we hope to learn them. If they had been traitors and servants of You-Know-Who, we would have to isolate them from others. If they are not, there is no harm done. We are questioning them now—”

Harry stiffened. The claws on Erasmus’s face dug in until he knew they could shear down and open his jugular. Outside, the lightning flashed several times. Beside him, Aurora sat still as still.

“Questioning them, you said.” Harry’s voice was calm and flat. Given the magic, Erasmus could have found his control terrifying —would have found it so, if he would let himself feel such emotions around a boy so young.

“Yes,” Erasmus said.

“How?”

If fear was permissible for a Minister with so much on his shoulders, Erasmus would have felt fear then. The boy had taken a step forward, and his green eyes seemed to swallow up the world, and his soft voice was only a further terror.

“We are not barbarians,” said Erasmus. He knew why the boy was so upset, but he was allowed to be resentful at the implications of Harry’s anger. “We do not torture our prisoners. We are merely using Veritaserum.”

“And were they given a choice in the taking of it?” Harry asked, cocking his head.

“Such choices are usually suspended in a time of war,” said Erasmus. “As this is.” He became aware that he was leaning away from Harry, and he forced himself to sit up straight, though he still maintained the grip on Aurora’s arm. She had had—unfortunate—tensions with Harry, and might say something even now unless he made it clear that she should not. “I am acting within the letter and the spirit of Ministry law, vates, I assure you.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Erasmus raised an eyebrow high, irritated at last. “I am an Elder of the Wizengamot, child. I do know Ministry law and edicts better than you do.” He knew that the claws against his face might grow sharper, but some things had to be said. He would continue to do what was right, not what was expedient.

Harry simply stared at him.

“Do you have any evidence to the contrary?” Erasmus demanded. “Have you seen into the cells where we are questioning them, to know that our Aurors are abusing their authority?”

“Now that,” said Harry, “is a good idea.”

The floor turned transparent, images of shining stone overlaid on air. Erasmus found himself staring straight down as floor after
floor changed, and then they could see into the underground recesses of Tullianum, the blank, bare walls somewhere between gray and yellow in color. Harry’s magic, unsurprisingly, had taken them straight to the Death Eaters.

The view changed and swooped, making Erasmus’s stomach heave and his mind rebel. Given the angle they were looking at, they should have been gazing down at the heads of the Aurors and their prisoners. But Harry had changed everything, and now they were looking at them straight on. And the Aurors could see them as well; Rippleworth actually dropped a vial of Veritaserum, which rang on the stone. Erasmus watched tiny drops of clear liquid escape between shards of glass, and tried to contain his anger.

This cell held Severus Snape, understandably surrounded by five Aurors holding their wands, since he was the most dangerous Death Eater, and had almost killed the Headmistress. His head lolled, his face slack with the effects of the truth potion. Erasmus did not need to look at Harry to feel how intensely his concentration focused on the man who was, if rumor must be supported, not only guardian but like a father to Harry.

“Was he given a choice about taking the potion?” Harry asked. Erasmus started to answer that he had instructed the Aurors to explain what refusing Veritaserum in such a situation would do, but it was Rippleworth who answered, his voice as high and frightened as a much younger man’s.

“I—we told him that he had nothing to fear if he really wasn’t guilty. He still would have refused, so—“ And then he stuttered to a stop, though more, Erasmus thought, because someone in the room had cast Silencio on him than because it was his choice.

Long moments passed in which Erasmus thought his own heartbeat irregularly loud. Then he realized it was the magic’s heartbeat, surging back and forth a few pulses behind the thunder that continued to rage outside the windows.

Their vision of the cell moved a few times, showing, clearly, red finger-marks on either side of Snape’s face, where the Aurors had probably gripped it and held his nose in order to force him to swallow.

“I see,” Harry said.

Erasmus glanced at him. He intended it to be a quick look, so that he might turn back and reassure his Aurors they had done nothing wrong—they needed to know the truth about what had happened at Hogwarts, and if Snape had been innocent, he really need have nothing to fear from the Veritaserum—but he found himself transfixed by Harry’s eyes. The flare in them this time was deepest, purest rage.

“I am taking them now;” Harry said. Still calm. But the magic pressed closer and closer, reminding Erasmus of a chained dragon, and the sworn companions the boy had acquired in defiance of all law and custom were shifting from foot to foot as if they longed to charge. “They have done nothing wrong, and their rights have been violated—“ that word was a whipcrack “—by the Ministry. If you are unsatisfied, I will give you my memories of what happened at the school to place in a Pensieve, and I am sure Headmistress McGonagall will be pleased to do the same thing. But you will not keep them here any longer.”

“Harry,” said Erasmus, hoping a personal appeal might calm him. “Think, boy. We do not need a war on two fronts.”

That small, contemptuous smile curled Harry’s mouth again. “I agree,” he said. “You do not need one. Therefore, you would be well-advised to release Severus Snape, Peter Pettigrew, and Regulus Black into my custody immediately.”

Erasmus stared at him for a moment, then shook his head. “We cannot divide the wizarding world,” he said. “Not now. There has been no panic so far only because our people are reeling in shock, still. The Minister has been assassinated. Death Eaters are at work again. The Dark Mark has been seen. All these are signs of the war to come. We cannot—we must not have a civil war on top of them. You must work with us.” He touched the text of the edict he’d been planning to send to the Daily Prophet in the morning. “The first step is in stopping use of the absorbere gift. It is Dark magic, too dangerous to use.”

Harry’s eyes half-lidded. Erasmus felt a surge of anger mixed with fear. He cannot turn against this. He cannot! We cannot divide our forces.

“Too dangerous not to use,” Harry said softly, and he was almost purring. That was the rumble of a great cat, though, Erasmus thought, not the comforting purr of a Kneazle. “Voldemort is an absorbere. Do you really think he cares what the Ministry says about use of that gift?”
“At least you will not use it,” Erasmus countered. “You will not be like him. We must not lose all our standards in this war as we did in the first one.”

“It seems to me that you have already lost them,” said Harry. “Forcing prisoners to take Veritaserum.”

“No one forced—“

“Those say otherwise, Juniper.” Harry nodded to the red finger-marks on Snape’s face again. “And I have had enough of this. I will fight Voldemort on my own if need be, but I will not allow the Ministry to take anyone I love from me. I have had enough of that from the Dark Lord.” His eyes swooped for a moment into shadows that made Erasmus tense and Mad-Eye Moody grip his wand. The werewolf edged forward with an eager snarl. Harry didn’t seem to hear it. “Answer me clearly now, Erasmus Juniper. Are you my enemy or my friend?”

“I am your Minister,” said Erasmus. He could feel despair welling up, but the Minister was no more allowed to succumb to despair than he was to fear. The stupid child. Did he not understand the division he would cause if he turned against the Ministry? Did he not realize Erasmus was the only one who could lead them in this war and stood a chance of winning it, but that that chance would be much reduced if Harry acted like a wild or Dark wizard?

“Wrong answer,” Harry said, voice delicate as the first flower after winter. “Sir.”

His magic rose around him, thick, solid as the limbs of a beast, growing, and plunged down into Tullianum. Erasmus caught glimpses of it moving through other visions, but the one he had the best view of was the snatching of Severus Snape. A howling whirlwind scooped him up and bore him through suddenly appearing, and as suddenly closing, tunnels in the stone. In moments he and Pettigrew and Black stood in the office, blinking—or lolling their heads, in the case of Snape, who was unconscious.

Harry, when Erasmus looked at him again, had black, serrated wings coming out of his back, and his eyes were as dark as Darkness.

“I would ask for your help,” Harry said, “but that is clearly impossible. I would ask that you not interfere, at least, with my own war effort, but I see that is also impossible; you are too convinced of your own rectitude and unable to listen to the voices accusing you of hypocrisy. As long as I can, I will ignore you. Understand, Juniper, if you are in my way, and if you represent a serious hindrance to my efforts to keep others safe, I will destroy you.”

It was said so calmly that, by the time Erasmus fully absorbed the impact of the words, Harry was already moving. He flung up his arms, flapped the bladed wings once, and wrapped the former Death Eaters and the five people who had come with him in individual whirlwinds. Then a ninth one took him, and whipped him around in a circle, and together they vanished from the Ministry, gone via some method that did not disturb the anti-Apparition wards.

Erasmus was sure the green of the boy’s eyes lingered after time, staring at him, and the invisible claws razed a thin line of blood down his cheek before departing. The storm fell unnaturally silent in the same moment.

Erasmus lifted his hand, in that silence, and touched his cheek. Then he turned to Aurora. She gave him a slight nod, and Erasmus wondered if she were really thinking what he was. The boy had given him a bit to think about, including whether it had been right to force Veritaserum onto even suspected Death Eaters, but his disrespect for the Ministry outweighed any benefit he might have offered.

“Well,” he said. “It seems he must be brought to heel.”

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He’d felt it begin even as he fell into the grip of the intense, icy rage that had sustained him in the Ministry office. He’d felt Voldemort’s grip, reaching out, snagging on the edges of his soul, trying to coax the rage into hatred, and the hatred into a hold that he could use to drag Harry to him.

Harry had fought two battles, one public, one private, but he’d managed to steer the hatred back into fury by the time they Apparated home from the Ministry. It had cost him, though. He collapsed to his knees on the Hogsmeade road, his breath rushing in and out of his lungs so hard it hurt, sweat damping his jumper and making his fringe more like seaweed than hair.

“Harry?” Regulus’s hand was on his shoulder, which Harry thought half-wrong. He’d just rescued Regulus, so he was the one who should sit back and let himself be taken care of, instead of trying to comfort Harry.
Then he remembered his decision on top of the Tower again. I said I would rely on others as well as letting them rely on me.

“I’m all right, Regulus,” he said softly, glancing up. But Owen leaned over him then, and his expression was so anxious that Harry frowned. “What is it?”

“Your scar’s bleeding,” said Owen.

“Voldemort reached out to me,” Harry admitted, rising to his feet. “When he felt the emotions. He’ll always be trying to take me, if he can. If I’d hated Juniper enough, he would have made another attempt.”

Owen stared at him, horrified. “How are you going to live with that?” he finally demanded.

Harry blinked at him. Really, what kind of question is that to ask? “The same way I lived with it just now,” he said. “Fight him off. I can’t do anything else.”

“You’ll have to strengthen your Occlumency,” said Snape, who really had no business speaking, given that Harry’s magic was the only thing holding him on his feet. His voice was still slurred from the Veritaserum, but regaining strength and sharpness. “To close the link between your scar and his mind.”

“I’m not sure it will work,” Harry said honestly, moving towards his guardian and casting one of the spells he’d learned while studying medical magic, which located hidden wounds. He found a few bruises along Snape’s ribs, and had to breathe slowly to calm the impulse to break out into swearing. “This is based on a mark from Voldemort and the amount of hatred in a person’s soul, not the connection that he and I had before.”

“You will still try,” Snape said, snapping his head up to stare at him. Harry smiled, then reached up and gently caressed his face, smoothing away the red finger-marks with the touch of his magic.

“Are you well?” he whispered.

“Yes. I told them the truth about the attack on Hogwarts, and they had not had time to ask more than a few embarrassing personal questions.”

From the look in Snape’s eyes, Harry was not sure he believed that, but he was forced to accept it as truth with the Veritaserum still in his blood. Besides, rest was the most important thing for Snape right now. “All right, sir,” he said, and nodded to Regulus, Peter, Owen, and Syrinx. “Thank you for coming,” he added, to Moody, Camellia, and Tonks. “Someone is waiting to transport you back to London, Camellia?”

“Yes.” The werewolf’s eyes shone fiercely, lack of moonlight or not. “I am only disappointed that I got to bite no one.”

Harry snorted. “It wouldn’t have done any good this far from the full moon.”

“It would have frightened them.”

Harry simply nodded. He still didn’t like frightening or intimidating other people—it was too close to what the oaths of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow said he was not to do—but it worked far better than bloodshed. It was what he had had to do to Juniper, after all.

“Thank you again,” he repeated, and Moody and Tonks gave him faint smiles and turned away. Harry watched them go, shaking his head slightly. They seemed happy to have been included, though they hadn’t been able to fire curses, either. It was strange, how little it took to content some of his allies.

Camellia lingered. “You have no message for the packs, vates?”

Harry hesitated, then sighed and gave in. “I would like them to watch out,” he said. “I think Voldemort will start attacks on London wizards and Muggles soon. The werewolf packs are the best source of information I have to keep watch over them and warn me if something happens, and of course you’re powerful in battle.”

Camellia snapped her jaws together and bowed her head slightly, eyes and teeth agleam. “It shall be done, vates.” She turned and loped off. Harry could see a shape moving a few steps down the Hogsmeade road; starlight revealed it as Trumpetflower, a witch and member of the pack who had taken his phoenix song call for Camellia and Apparated her. A moment later, Camellia took her arm, and they were gone.
Harry guided Snape, gently floating, up to the doors of the castle, while examining Peter and Regulus with both magic and questions. Peter seemed shaken, but physically fine. Regulus studied Harry back with an intense, narrow-eyed gaze that Harry didn’t like.

“What?” he asked finally.

“There has never been any Black heir with the magical power you have,” Regulus murmured, “and never any who dared stand up to the Ministry as effectively and thoroughly as you’ve done.” His teeth, in turn, flashed in a smile. “I was simply thinking how it would make my parents stir if they knew. A halfblood, and a legal heir and not a blood child at that, accomplishing what all of them could not.”

Harry snorted. “Your mother already likes me,” he said, thinking of the portrait of Mrs. Black that hung in the hall of Grimmauld Place, and then turned to Syrinx. “Would you go to the hospital wing and the Headmistress, Syrinx, please? Tell her I’ve fetched everyone back and am making sure they’re settled comfortably. I’ll come and speak with her if she wants me to, but I’d much rather wait until morning.”

“I’m sure she’ll let you,” Syrinx said, touched his shoulder with her hand like a butterfly’s motion, and then ran ahead to the castle.

After that, Harry’s main task was convincing Snape to stay in his quarters; Peter and Regulus were adult enough to go to their beds and begin sleeping the Veritaserum off. Harry, at last, cheated and asked Snape if he was tired, to which he had to give a truthful answer. Harry gave him a Calming Draught, laid him flat, and even fluffed the pillows, just to complete the outrage.

All the while, his mind hummed along another track. He could not be entirely certain his proposal was welcome, but if it were, it would give him some rest and peace of mind as well as another family—perhaps.

So he finished putting Snape to bed, and then wrote his letter. The climb to the Owlery was long, but Hedwig fluttered over to him the second he came through the door, settling expectantly on his shoulder and nipping at his ear. Harry stroked her for a long moment, bathing in the warmth and scent of her, before he spun his arm and launched her out the window into a sky now free of storm.

He gazed after her for a moment. The darkness was faintly tinged with dawn. Draco would probably be waking from his unbreakable sleep soon, and would want to know what had happened while he was under the influence of the Dreamer’s Crown.

Harry only hoped it wouldn’t provoke an argument, that they’d gone to the Ministry without Harry using his magic to snap the dream.

Keep going.

He yawned, dragged a knuckle across his eyes, and then went back to the dungeons and his bed. He might as well snatch the hour or so of sleep he would have before Draco awakened and he had things to do.

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It was awful, Connor thought. Solemn and awful.

He walked quietly beside Ron through the private graveyard the wizards of Ottery St. Catchpole had used for generations to bury their dead. It was a tiny plot of land, but it was theirs in ways that had nothing to do with money. Ron had told Connor that he didn’t think it could be sold.

And probably not, Connor thought. There was place magic here—or at least he imagined so, from having heard Harry’s descriptions of Woodhouse. It paced slowly around them, now and then forming into a solid dust cloud of a creature that looked rather like a camel. It nodded a heavy head at them, and then broke apart and went back to pacing the graveyard.

The headstones in every direction were for the most part plain, with only names and dates, though here and there a poem was carved. Each had a cluster of small red-orange flowers growing near it, probably tended by the place magic. Connor paused when he caught sight of the matched stones that proclaimed the resting places of Fabian and Gideon Prewett, Molly Weasley’s twin brothers. They’d been great heroes of the First War, and it had taken five Death Eaters to bring them down.

One of whom, Connor thought with a little sigh, was Lucius Malfoy. And now his son is at Percy’s funeral.
He gave a half-incredulous glance to the side. It was a miracle, he thought, that Molly Weasley had agreed to let Draco come. But when Harry had asked if he could attend the funeral and give Percy a tribute, Molly had told him to bring whoever he liked. And she had not done anything more than stare when Harry showed up with Draco on one side and Snape on the other.

Draco was behaving himself, at least, Connor thought. He gave quiet, polite condolences to the elder Weasleys, nodded to Bill and Charlie, and kept well out of the way of the twins, Ron, and Ginny. Ron refused to look at him, but that was to be expected.

Percy’s coffin lay near the open hole in the grass, ready to be lowered. Only the top third was open, concealing what Ron had told Connor in confidence was the absolute ruin of his lower body, thanks to Indigena Yaxley’s thorns. His family filed quietly past, putting in tokens of the love and affection they’d borne for Percy. A baby blanket from Mrs. Weasley’s hand, a pair of glasses from Mr. Weasley’s, a carved fish from Bill, a Ministry pamphlet from Charlie’s. The twins put in something carefully wrapped in parchment, which they let no one see, and then lingered beside the grave, staring at Percy, for longer than anyone else.

Connor waited, and walked forward with Ron and Ginny. Ginny also cradled something wrapped in parchment, which she refused to look up from. Ron had his old wand, the one that had snapped in second year. “He tried to fix it for me,” he said simply when he saw Connor looking.

Connor nodded.

He hadn’t known Percy well, but he did remember the evening he’d come down from his room in his third year, close to tears of frustration from trying to work out the proper movements of Venus and Mars for Astronomy, and Percy had leapt at the chance to help him. Now knowing what he knew about that year—that Percy had been under pressure from Dumbledore to become a spy at the Ministry—Connor thought Percy had wanted a distraction more than anything else, but it didn’t matter. He’d still worked with Connor, patiently, until Connor got it right. And Connor had drawn out a representation of that same equation again, and he tucked it under Percy’s left shoulder, next to Ron’s wand.

Harry came forward alone, and Draco and Snape faded into the background with careful propriety. Harry put something that briefly caught the sun and flashed gold into the coffin. Connor blinked, wondering what it had been.

Then he stepped back and lifted his voice in the phoenix song.

As the song continued, rising and falling in majestic sliding notes along the scales, Connor felt the urge to close his eyes. And visions of Percy rose in his mind when he did. Percy bent over a book in the Gryffindor common room, lower lip caught between his teeth, lamps gleaming on his glasses. Percy in a corridor in third year, telling Harry in a hushed voice the true state of affairs between him and Dumbledore. Percy behind a desk in Scrimgeour’s office, eyes wide as he absorbed his new world, where Connor had never personally seen him. Percy closing in behind Scrimgeour, arms full of paperwork but eyes fierce, ready to protect his leader to the death.

As he had.

And then came the vision of that which Harry had seen five nights ago, with, mercifully, phoenix flames overriding the image of Yaxley’s thorns piercing Percy. There was only the fire, the rising symbol of phoenix or firebird, the symbol of Light.

Harry’s song died softly back into a pool of honor, and then warbled and faded away. Connor opened his eyes to see him standing with his head bowed, shivering.

How many requiems will he have to sing, before it’s all done? Connor thought, and shivered himself, and went forward and took his brother in his arms.

Harry made a soft little sound, then clung to him. They walked slowly to the back of the graveyard as Mr. and Mrs. Weasley worked the spells to lower the coffin into the earth. Connor didn’t look over his shoulder. This was a private moment for the family, the lowering, though anyone else they permitted might attend the other ceremonies.

Draco met them near the fence, and tried to take Harry away from Connor. Connor subjected him to a glare and hung on. Draco raised an eyebrow, then nodded and leaned on the fence. Snape hovered next to him, gaze simultaneously on Harry and darting
around looking for danger.

“They’re planting the stone,” Draco said suddenly, and Connor knew he could turn around again if he wanted to.

So he did, and saw the great puff of dust that seemed to form when the stone landed, touching the left and the right sides of it with flame, planting the red-orange flowers that endured here for reasons that Connor didn’t know but which Ron could probably tell him. He resolved to ask, later.

Harry gave a final, soft trill, and so Percy Weasley was buried.

Intermission: Welcome, Beloved Nephew

Indigena sighed and shook herself out from the Apparition, tempted to bid the embrace of the earth around her welcome as she would a sister. She had spent six days negotiating with the vampire hive, trying to make them understand what her Lord wanted from them. It would not have been so difficult—vampires were reasonably intelligent Dark creatures and had worked with humans before—if they hadn’t kept forgetting that she wasn’t meant as food. And then none of them could draw sustenance from her, even when Indigena stood still and let them bite, because what ran in her veins now was more like sap than blood. Three days had been taken up with the queen testing her, via both drones and workers, to see what would happen when vampires of certain ages and sexes bit her.

So tiresome. But she had made the alliance her Lord had desired, and finally won permission to return home.

She was not so happy to think that, in a short time, that alliance would swing into effect, and strike at Harry. But her personal liking for Harry had little to do with it. This was war. Her Lord had asked her to help him negotiate with the vampires. She had done so. She felt vaguely sorry for Harry. On the other hand, if he had done the sensible thing and come to join her Lord, they wouldn’t be fighting. Harry was the Dark Lord’s magical heir, and he’d been treated appallingly badly by the side of the Light he was supposedly fighting for. Most powerful wizards would see the sense in coming to the side that would let them exercise their magic best, because, for most, their allegiance was first to their magic and second to everything else.

Harry had never been an ordinary powerful wizard, and Indigena knew that. But it was still irritating, after a long day of standing still so fangs could puncture her spongy flesh.

“Come.”

Indigena raised an eyebrow. Lucius had entered the Apparition chamber. His eyes were blank, but he looked like himself otherwise. Indigena wondered if her Lord’s control over him had deepened, or if he was simply not very successful at fighting said control.

“What is it?” she asked, as she fell into step beside him.

“There is a new arrival our Lord believes will please you,” said Lucius, not meeting her eyes. Lord Voldemort had made sure none of them could. It was a mark of respect and honor, but it also made Indigena feel lonely. Not for the first time, she wished her plan hadn’t required the killing of Rufus Scrimgeour. At least he was a reasonably intelligent person who had read her words with intensity and feeling.

“Who?” she asked now. She had known her Lord could pursue other Death Eaters, as long as they bore the Dark Mark and had hatred in their souls, but she was not aware of any whose presence she greatly desired.

“There,” said Lucius. They had reached the throne room, and he nodded ahead of him. Indigena followed his gaze, and her breath caught in her throat.

She recognized the young man kneeling before her Lord. Of course she did. How could she not? This was Feldspar Yaxley, the son of her sister Peridot, who had served the Dark Lord during the First War and then run away, refusing to even acknowledge that he had been a Death Eater. His honor debt had obligated Indigena to go into service and take the Dark Mark on her own arm when Voldemort came to her family.

And now he had been called back. Of course he had. Feldspar was full of childish hatreds he had never shed.

Indigena felt her mouth stretching in a smile as she crossed the distance between them in a few heartbeats. If she could not have
the pleasure of conversing with an equal or serving a Lord she genuinely liked, at least she could have the pleasure of tormenting the person who’d been responsible for her predicament.

“Ah, Indigena,” said her Lord, the snake turning its eyes to follow her. She saw Feldspar stiffen at the sound of her name. “I believe you owe a certain kind of debt to my newest servant.”

“I do indeed,” said Indigena, and then Feldspar turned to stare up at her, swallowing sickly. He had green eyes like his mother, and the same lack of good sense in them. They were circled by thick shadows. It cheered Indigena, a little, to know he had been suffering the same nightmares the others had. He deserved it far more than Lucius or Hawthorn Parkinson had. Not only was he a traitor, like them, he was also an idiot, and Indigena found stupidity unforgivable.

Then he made it worse. He tried to smile.

“Hullo, aunt,” he chirped, as if they had just parted at teatime the other day. “How have you been?”

“Killing things,” said Indigena. “Specifically, assassinating the Minister.”

Feldspar’s chin quivered, but he tried to keep up with the game, for a moment. “Ah, y-yes, I h-heard about that.” He attempted a smile. He shouldn’t have. It looked worse than nothing on his face. “Was it fun?”

“It was not,” said Indigena, and glanced at her Lord. “May I take him into another room, my Lord, and explain the rules of things to him?”

Her Lord waved a hand, the snake dancing faster and faster with amusement. Indigena smiled and walked past Feldspar, motioning for him to follow. When it seemed that he might not, she shot out one of her thorns and snagged it through his hair. Then he had to follow closely and quickly, unless he wanted to stumble along in undignified misery.

In the prisoner’s chamber, she released him and spun, using another tendril to knock him into the wall. Feldspar fell back with a yelp his mother would be ashamed to hear, and then sat down on his arse. Indigena curled her lip, fighting the urge to lash out and let her thorns or her rose have him. That death would be too quick, and nor did she want to physically torture him as she had Rosier, unless she was doing it at her Lord’s order to test some new species of plant. She would mentally torture and taunt him instead, by telling him the truth. That was much better.

“Do you know,” said Indigena softly, “that you are indirectly responsible for the Minister’s assassination and my Lord’s Second War?”

“I am n-not!” Feldspar’s face was flushed. He was good at defending his perspective when he believed himself in the right, Indigena thought clinically. She would give him that. Such a shame he could not think of his honor in the same way as his martyr complex.

“You are,” Indigena goaded him. “If you had not fled, I would never have been compelled to join our Lord in order to fulfill the honor debt. I would not have aided him in several of his battles within the last year and a half, and I am not ashamed to say that my presence made a difference many times. I would not have broken into Tullianum to free the Death Eaters hidden there; my Lord would have had to find someone else to do that, and a hard time he would have of it—“

“And little good that did!” Feldspar spat, clenching his fists. “They all d-died, didn’t they? On the Midsummer battlefield?”

“Why, yes, they did,” said Indigena, and smiled at him. “So you are responsible for their deaths as well.”

He spluttered. Indigena paid no attention. Her nephew might have had the sense to be proud of his—accomplishments—if he were really a Dark wizard. But though he had taken the Mark, it was for boyish reasons, and he had not fulfilled the requirements of the position of Death Eater as he should have. Indigena Yaxley had found Bellatrix Lestrange personally disgusting, but her honor had been impeccable. She had gone to Azkaban for her Lord and never denied what she was. Feldspar had run, when he knew honor required him to give up his freedom or his life, and hidden in the arms of a too-indulgent mother.

Indigena sighed at the thought of her sister Peridot. One sister I have relentless as the sea, and one that changes at every wind that blows. I suppose I am the golden mean. However, no one asked me if I wanted to be. And we should never have let Peridot shelter him from this.

“You are responsible for everything since then,” Indigena repeated patiently. “Our Lord’s recovery of strength, and the Minister’s death.” She paused, studying Feldspar, wondering if what he most feared had changed since she saw him last. She had refused
contact with him for years, so her own honor would not be tainted. “Chaos,” she whispered.

“No,” he whimpered. “Oh, no.”

“Oh yes,” Indigena pointed out, and leaned back against the wall, one root tethering her there. The earth poured strength into her, held her upright, made her feel at home. “I know that you wanted a quiet life, Feldspar, with peace all around you and nothing to bother you. And, thanks to your own actions, you will never have that again. Either you go to death among the Death Eaters or you—” She paused, then snorted. “There is no other choice, really.”

Her sister’s son was a coward; whatever little strength or pride or honor he’d had had been spent in the First War, within days of joining their Lord. And now he knew he was going to die in this second one, probably all the faster for being so weak.

Indigena waited patiently until he finished vomiting, then said, “My Lord will not let you go. Death is your only freedom.” She let her left hand rest on his head in a parody of a blessing. Her thorny rose, the same one that had killed Scrimgeour, strained to sink its thorns into him, but Indigena resisted the temptation. “No, let him look full in the face of what he earned for himself. “Welcome, beloved nephew.”

She spun, and strode back towards the throne room. Her Lord would have work for her, so this diversion could not take too long. She was his lieutenant now, and that meant she was in charge of negotiating with people other than the vampires, and writing letters to those wizards who might support him.

She passed Hawthorn on the way, sleeping exhausted on a pile of blankets in a corridor. She’d fought their Lord’s control again, apparently, and he had cast her back into the deepest toils of hatred as a punishment. Indigena, heart aching with pity, knelt down and smoothed her hair.

Hawthorn opened an amber eye, and looked at her, and snarled weakly. Hatred flamed in her gaze. The stronger the loathing grew, Indigena knew, the more she would belong to their Lord. And with Indigena and Lucius near, the murder of her daughter and her betrayal and imprisonment in Tullianum would continually rebound on her mind.

“I hate you,” Hawthorn whispered.


Honor will have its due, she thought, meeting Hawthorn’s gaze and thinking of all the traitors, past and present, who had come home to her Lord or would in the future. They may try to flee from it, but they cannot run forever.

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Chapter Three: The Future All Afire

It was a good thing Draco wasn’t wearing the Dreamer’s Crown tonight, he thought. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have awakened even when Harry abruptly began trying to claw his face off.

“Harry!” he snapped, and rolled over on top of him, pinning his hands to the bed. They were about the same size by now, but he was still heavier than Harry was. With a little effort, he managed to arrange things so that Harry’s hands were trapped by his knees. Then he sat back and stared. “What in the name of Merlin—”

And then he saw Harry’s scar open and red, a running wound, and his mouth open in a scream that let no sound pass his lips, and his heart lurched, and he dropped straight down, chest to chest. For a moment, fear threatened to overwhelm him. *Voldemort’s trying to possess Harry again, he’s hurting him—*

Fear wouldn’t do, though. Harry needed him, and that meant he couldn’t collapse into someone else’s arms and wait for the rescue to commence. He needed to be the strong one, and he knew what he could do.

Draco took a deep breath, then tilted Harry’s head up. Harry’s eyes were shut so tightly that Draco couldn’t see a hint of either pupil or iris. But he didn’t strictly need line-of-sight contact for this any more.

He let go and bounded into Harry’s mind, his possession gift spreading around him in a net that would hopefully be enough to counter whatever he found there.

It wasn’t, though.
Visions spun and dizzied him, people dying, flames exploding, shrill screams ringing out, and *pain*, such pain that Draco wanted to collapse screaming himself. But he didn’t. He clung to the slender thread of knowledge that it was Harry seeing this, not him, and that he had to pull him out of it somehow, before one or both of them were lost. If it went on like this, it would be both; Harry would die, trapped in his own mind, and Draco would follow him into death.

He worked furiously, diving through the shards of the vision, seeking the dreamer under the dream. He found traces of Harry here and there, recognizing them by the familiar feeling of his emotions—guilt and regret and self-loathing were particularly prominent, but he found some anger, too, and some fear—and dragged them back towards the surface. Halfway there, Harry joined him in a surge, recovering consciousness enough to help. Draco let go with a relieved gasp, and then jumped straight out of his head, back into his own body.

He opened his eyes to meet Harry’s, and stared. Those eyes looked like Owen had told him, in confidence, they’d looked in the Ministry: so mad with rage that Draco was instantly glad not to be on the opposing side. Reluctantly, he had to respect Minister Juniper a bit more, that he hadn’t backed down the moment he was confronted with this.

“What is it?” Draco asked quietly.

“Two-pronged attack,” Harry said back, efficiently throwing himself out of bed and pulling his robes on. Argutus, who’d been curled on top of his trunk, thumped to the floor as the lid flew back and the clothes came flying to Harry, but Harry didn’t answer his sleepy hiss. “One in Muggle London.” He lifted his head and stared towards the spot in the dungeon wall where a window would have been if they’d been aboveground. “One in the Forbidden Forest.”

Draco jerked.

“The wards are weaker against nonhuman attackers, since the Forest has so many nonhumans living in it and the wards have to make space for them,” Harry murmured. “And that’s what he has. Vampires,” he added, at Draco’s confused expression.

“But he must have offered them fantastic sums—” Draco began, confused. Vampires were proud and individualistic creatures who couldn’t be persuaded with anything so simple as an offer of blood. They often had their own standards of what was moral or beautiful or right or an acceptable risk, and would argue with any wizard negotiators until they met that price. It was no wonder the Ministry had such trouble controlling them; the Ministry worked by sameness, and vampires refused to be the same. Unless—

“Shit,” Draco said, in a voice that his mother would have called unnecessarily loud. “Harry, he doesn’t have a—”

“A hive,” said Harry, seemingly intent on interrupting Draco’s words as well as his thoughts. “Yes he does, Draco.”

Draco cursed again, though this time he didn’t even remember what he said, and scrambled to pull on his own clothes.

Wizards dealt with vampires individually because of their standards, and because of what happened when they were together in one place. Allow a hundred or so vampires to gather, and suddenly they started taking on roles that were more reminiscent of an ant colony than a group of humans. The females became workers, increasingly aggressive against anything that was not a vampire. The males became drones, likely to rape anything they could get their hands on as well as drain it of blood.

And if enough of them stayed together for a year or more, they would raise up a queen, and she would want to establish a nest, and that meant the end of civilization for roughly a hundred miles in every direction from her home base.

“What?” Draco said abruptly, lifting his head, his own eagerness to deny this was real coming into play. “Do you know these visions are happening? I mean, Voldemort might have sent them to distract you, or just hurt you.” It hadn’t escaped his notice that Harry was moving more carefully than usual. The spells and other damage the dream victims had taken was affecting him.

“I’m going to look at the Forest,” said Harry calmly. “Easy enough to see from here. And as for London—” He tapped his wrist, and spoke into the blaze of phoenix song that followed. “Remus?”

Draco scowled. His feelings towards the traitorous werewolf were not much more charitable than Snape’s, but Harry had at least retained him as a contact, and right now a blurred, sleepy voice was answering him.

“Harry?”

“Voldemort is attacking in Muggle London,” Harry said calmly. “Or, at least, so my scar claims.”
“Where?” Lupin’s voice was sharper now. Draco supposed werewolves would have to be good at waking up easily, so that they could run when wizard-led hunts came after them. He still wished that Harry could have called upon one of the other packs, but perhaps Hawk’s pack was more central to London, or some such nonsense. Draco didn’t know much about werewolf geography. Nor did he care to.

“I’m not sure,” said Harry. “That’s why I need you to pass the message. And, Remus—it’s a vampire hive.”

A low growl was the only answer. Draco gave a reluctant nod. If someone had to fight vampires, werewolves were the best choice, he supposed. Their beasts made them immune to the charm and compulsion that vampires usually used on their victims; the wolf threw off that kind of control, being a creature of compulsion itself. And werewolves had a strength that matched or surpassed that of a vampire. They would hardly hold still for the bite.

And, said part of Draco’s old education, if they die in battle, they won’t cost the wider wizarding community as much.

Draco winced a bit and did what he could to suppress that line of thinking. He wasn’t sure he believed them any longer, those thoughts about werewolves and Mudbloods and the rest, and until he was sure, they were embarrassing to voice.

“I will inform Hawk,” Lupin said.

“Thank you, Remus,” Harry said, and cut the communication spell. Then he stood and nodded to Draco. “I’m going to the Forbidden Forest. Do you want to join me?”

Draco’s mouth dried at the thought of going among a vampire hive—this was what nightmares, not just bad stories, were made from—but he had said that he would follow Harry into battle. His possession gift might protect him from the compulsion of their eyes, and, if that didn’t work, he could wield a weapon to which not even vampires were immune. He reached for his wand, stood, and nodded. “I hope you aren’t about to dash out with only the two of us,” he said, with all the sarcasm he could use given the solemnity of the moment.

Harry shook his head. “I’m on my way to inform the Headmistress first, so that she can raise the wards. Then I’ll gather those who can and want to fight with us.” He was informing them even as they left the dungeons, Draco saw, calling through the blaze of phoenix song to see if they could arrive in time.

Owen joined them before they were fully down the stairs into the common room. Draco nodded a greeting to him, but his thoughts were elsewhere.

Before, Harry’s always been frantic if there was an attack like this on Hogwarts grounds, eager to get out there as soon as possible. I wonder what’s changed?

*******

It took an enormous effort to hold himself in check, but Harry knew it had to be done. He would gain no lives back if he moved too fast. His muscles trembled and ached with the aftereffects of the visions, still, and he was beginning to suspect that Snape was right, that he must shut down the link to Voldemort at any cost.

But he had built Occlumency shields around his scar in the last few days, and Voldemort had torn through them as if they were made of feathers.

His head was full of death, and his body was full of what it felt like to be cut apart and bitten and compelled to walk slowly towards an intruder while behind him his family watched in horror. He jumped, soaring above them and the impulse to hurry, hurry, hurry; and instead spoke to the people he knew would want to come with him: Connor, Zacharias, Peter, Ron, Ginny, and others in Hogwarts who were of the Light and could wield the spells of the Light. He spoke to Regulus, too, but this was mostly a fight for Light wizards.

Light purebloods could wield spells of fire and light with more effectiveness and power than Dark wizards could muster, their inherited allegiance brightening their blood. And this close to Midsummer, their appeals to the Light were also likely to have more power. Against vampires, those were the strongest weapons.

Others he sent towards the fight in London, explaining briefly what was happening. He expected someone, at least, to refuse. No one did.

Syrinx had joined them by the time they reached the Headmistress’s office, and Harry told McGonagall what was happening, watching her mouth tighten in a thin line. She would have wanted to join them on the battlefield, Harry knew, and they could
have used her. But there were still children in the school, as the term ended in two days, and she had to stay here and protect them—and herself. She was not completely recovered from Snape’s attack yet, Harry knew.

“I understand, Harry,” she said, when he finished. “And the wards are confirming movement in the Forest, though no enormous attacks as yet. My guess is that Voldemort sent you conjured images, not visions of what is actually happening.”

Harry nodded, a bit reassured. “Then it might be a trap, but we’ll be prepared to meet it. I think he expected me to simply rush in—”

And then his vision exploded into fiery darkness again, and he went to one knee. He could feel death shuddering all through his limbs, the fangs in his neck draining and drawing his blood, the arms clamped around his chest with a strength he could not break no matter how he struggled. He caught a blurred glimpse of hooves, and knew he was watching the death of a centaur.

*Of course,* Harry thought, himself somewhere beyond the pain, thanks to Lily’s training. *That’s why he’s sending them to the Forest.* Centaurs and vampires had a long-standing argument.

He managed to open his eyes, and jump over the fierce ache in his throat, and nod to the Headmistress. ‘They’re here,” he said quietly. “They just killed the centaur called Bone.” His voice was raspy with suppressing the urge to scream. “And it’s a hive.”

*We must pray they do not have the queen with them.*

In his head, Voldemort laughed, and flung more pain. Harry struggled to keep his feet, impatiently. He was needed in this battle, not collapsing on the floor.

******

Connor felt determined, as he came down the steps from the sixth-year boys’ room in Gryffindor Tower. His mind ran through every Light and fire spell that he could remember learning, including the ones that Snape had taught him in their dueling sessions together.

He was waiting for the fear, for the sensation that should have overtaken him the moment he knew they would be battling vampires.

There was nothing like fear inside him. The closest was the deep conviction that the vampires should not have come near Hogwarts at all—sorrow, perhaps, and a bit of pity for the hive.

He turned when he heard Ron stumbling along behind him; he had heard Harry contact him, but hadn’t been sure Ron would join in, given Percy’s death. Surely his parents wouldn’t want another of their sons to risk his life?

And then he saw Ron’s flaming eyes, and remembered that he’d turned seventeen on the first of March and technically wasn’t under his parents’ control any more, and shut his mouth and bowed his head.

“What’s Ginny?” Ron asked as they left through the portrait together. “I know Harry would call her.”

“Perhaps wondering what your mother would say?” Connor shrugged. He’d been around Molly and Arthur Weasley enough that he’d been forced to admit, reluctantly, that they weren’t perfect. *They did* treat Ginny differently than the rest of their children, and though some of it was clearly because she was the youngest, the rest was clearly because she was a girl. Ginny might wonder if it was worth going into danger when her parents would yell at her about it afterwards, as had been the case when she joined Harry’s rebellion in Woodhouse.

“She’ll be here,” Ron muttered, and then the sound of flying footsteps came from behind them. Both Ginny and Hermione were hurrying to catch up. And behind them, somewhat to Connor’s surprise, came Neville.

“Neville?” he asked gently. Ginny might not care, and he was Harry’s brother, but Neville was still underage and under the thumb of a powerful witch, his grandmother, who didn’t tend to let him do risky things.

The other boy caught his breath with a gulp and a gasp, and jerked his head as he replied, “I want to do this. They need me on the battlefield, don’t they?”

“We do,” said Ron bluntly. “Everyone we can get. It’s a vampire hive, Connor,” he added, catching his eye. “Hundreds of wizards at a time have fought them and died. I know that Harry has his magic, but that might not be enough to make a difference
if he goes against them alone. One more wand, one more body, could. And Neville’s practiced with us.”

Connor nodded. He had heard the audible strain in his brother’s voice through the communication spell, and it was true that Neville was a powerful wizard, when he allowed the emotions that mostly gave his magic its strength through.

“Very well,” he muttered. “Let’s go.” And then they were all running down the stairs as fast as they could, headed for the front doors where Harry had told them to assemble.

Harry was waiting there, with Zacharias Smith and a small contingent of other students from Hufflepuff, and even some Ravenclaws. Connor felt a small stab in the heart when he realized that Padma Patil wasn’t among them. The Patils’ parents had called both her and Parvati home a few days after Snape’s attack on McGonagall, and still hadn’t let them come back. Luna stood among the Ravenclaws looking more lost than usual, and Connor stifled the urge to go to her and pat her shoulder. He’d almost got used to Parvati’s being gone, but this was different, to be reminded of her absence via Padma’s.

But Harry was speaking now. Connor turned his attention to him, and frowned. Blood streaked Harry’s face, the trails ending at his scar. His eyes were alive, passionate with fury and other emotions, and Connor remembered the time ten nights ago when he had been all that kept Harry from surrendering to those emotions and going to Voldemort. He resolved to stick to his brother’s side and tackle him to the ground the moment he grew wings or started paying more attention to the burning of his scar than the battle.

“There’s a hive in the Forbidden Forest,” Harry said. “Drones and workers both. No sign of a queen yet.” There were moans of relief from almost everyone present; they knew what havoc a queen could cause. The only one who was silent, in fact, Connor thought, was Draco, who stood with his hand locked on Harry’s shoulder and gaze fastened on his face as if cursed there. “They’ve killed Bone and a few other centaurs. They’re killing every living thing they can reach. Some of them, like the Many hive, are fighting back, but it won’t be easy. Use as many Light and fire spells as you can, both so that you can see and so that you can kill them.”

“You don’t want to leave them alive and negotiate with them like the vates you are?” came Zacharias Smith’s drawl from the side.

Harry gave him a look that shut him up. Since he was joined by glares from Peter Pettigrew and Henrietta Bulstrode, Connor was faintly surprised that the arrogant prat didn’t go over backwards.

“Keep together,” said Harry, not bothering to answer. “The vampires will try to separate us. They’ll also use compulsion. Don’t meet their eyes. Don’t listen to their voices.” He lifted a hand, and a low wind began to blow around them, soft with music. “I’ll use this to try and keep you from hearing what they say, but I can’t promise it will work, especially if we wander apart from one another.” He raked the group with a quick glance, and then snapped orders to rearrange themselves. It was by skill level, Connor quickly saw; Zacharias was in front of Neville, and Ginny, who had survived the Midsummer battle but still knew relatively few battle spells since she was a fifth-year, went towards the back.

Harry himself, of course, took point, and Draco was right behind him, and the professors who were coming. Connor noticed one obvious absence. “Where’s Snape?” he hissed into Harry’s ear as he took the place beside Draco; Harry was wise enough to know that trying to send Connor anywhere away from him right now wouldn’t work.

“Too wounded to join us,” said Harry, and then faced the enormous doors and spoke softly to his left wrist. “We’re ready, Headmistress.”

The doors flung open, the wards fell down so they could cross from safety into danger, and Harry led them out.

******

His head hurt like fire and thunder and fury.

That was actually the worst of it, Harry thought, rather than the sensations of death and torture that Voldemort kept transferring to him, or the concern for those who followed him into battle. He was used to that kind of pain, and the wizards and witches who accompanied him outside now, young as most of them were, had freely chosen this. He had to respect that choice and concentrate on leading the fight instead of worrying about them, or he might as well give over the title to vates right there.

But the pain in his head was very hard to defeat, because it combined physical anguish from the scar and mental anguish from where Voldemort was shredding his Occlumency shields and trying to snag a hook in his soul. Yet sitting out of the battle was hardly an option, not with vampires on the run.
Do you think you will win this battle? Voldemort asked him, and then the mad laughter started up again, so loud that Harry didn’t think he had to worry about hearing a vampire’s voice.

He shook his head, forcing his concentration forward again, and felt Draco at his right and Connor at his left. Lifting his eyes, he saw they were almost to the trees. They swayed madly, though there was little wind among them this night, and Harry could hear the sounds of struggle through his ears now instead of his mind. The centaur herd had made a stand against them, and around them swarmed thestrals and Many cobras and Runespoors and other creatures of the Forest, doing what they could to stop the intruders to their home without being compelled or exsanguinated.

Stepping into the darkness without the keen senses that guided the magical creatures was madness for a human, though. Harry held out his hand, and, with only a single cynical thought for what Juniper would think of him, a supposedly Dark wizard, using Light magic, shouted, “<i>Apricus!</i>”

Light burst overhead, golden light deadening the dark, leaping from and surrounding a single intense point of white fire that Harry set to hover above the Forest. The stars paled before it, and the waxing moon combined its light with it in odd ways. Harry could have done more if he had sent all his magic into the radiance, but he dared not do that, for the sake of fighting the vampires and the sake of fighting off Voldemort, who kept circling around his soul, trying to take him.

Another burst of pain through his scar nearly sent him to the ground, but Harry thought he knew how to ignore that, now. The point was to think about what would happen if he allowed himself to collapse, and that was unthinkable, so he stayed on his feet. His head burnt like the point of light. Well, if it had to burn, it would burn.

He did derive some satisfaction from seeing a worker, compelled by hunger, dart towards them, long dark hair streaming behind her, hands raised and curved into claws. She crossed through a patch of golden light, and with a hissing sound, her skin began to dissolve. Blackness spread along it such as Harry had seen trace the edge of burnt parchment, though her skin smelled neither like roasting flesh nor like paper, but like spoiled milk. She ducked back into the shadows with a shriek. Harry knew the shriek would bring other vampires running; it was how the hive communicated.

He lifted his head, told himself that exultant dark triumph was far enough from hatred not to give Voldemort a hold on his soul if he felt it, and shouted, “Burn them! Don’t meet their eyes, don’t listen to their voices! Don’t let them get a hold on you! Strike from a distance! Fight back to back!”

Then he plunged into the Forest, Draco on one side and Connor on the other, and heard battle yells mingle with the music he’d set flowing.

*****

Ron knew it wasn’t vampires that had killed Percy. He was perfectly aware of that. If someone had sat him down and asked him about vampires, he would have pointed to a picture of one and admitted that that was not the picture of the Thorn Bitch, and the Thorn Bitch was responsible for Percy’s death.

But the vampires were the first attackers he had seen, the first creatures against whom he’d had a chance to raise his wand in battle, since Percy died. And Ron had a lot of rage traveling back and forth under his skin in a vortex of red.

He was glad, oh he was glad, when a drone reached towards him from under the protective boughs of a tree. He spun, Harry and Moody’s training firmly in mind, and set his feet, because otherwise he could trip. Root to the left, stones to the right, and he stood in a small hollow. He didn’t want to be driven backwards.

“<i>Aduro!</i>” he barked, and his magic snatched at the fire and set it blazing through his veins, through his Declaration to the Light, through his family’s tradition of serving the Light, and what came out of his wand was as hot as dragonfire.

The drone’s hair began to blaze first. Ron laughed as he watched lines of blackness creep down the face, and did it while avoiding the compelling eyes. One hand lifted to beat at the fire, and an inhuman shriek that made Ron’s ears bleed arose, but the flames leaped neatly to the vampire’s fingers instead, and consumed its nails like fine wine. Ron laughed again, feeling very nearly drunk himself.

Someone slammed him from the side, bearing him a tottering step forward, where his foot caught the root and he fell. Rolling, trying to regain his balance, Ron felt an incredibly strong arm curl around his neck and haul him up, and then the first icy touch of fangs at his throat from a worker.
He still had his wand, though. And he still had his rage. He’d lost his brother, and nothing would ever assuage that pain, but something could come close to making up for it.

Ron hurled all his magic and all his strength behind the next spell, which was not one he’d trained in, but one he’d heard of and read about.

“Solstitialis!”

******

Draco had two things to do: keep an eye on Harry, and kill vampires. Both of them, he thought, were simple enough.

For the first, he curled an arm around Harry’s shoulders and hauled him up when he stumbled, spelled the flowing blood from his eyes with a quick Headshake Jinx, stood back-to-back with him when Harry needed an anchor in the physical world, and in general reminded him that they required him, here, in the Forest, and he didn’t have permission to vanish into the mental battle with Voldemort.

For the second, he had limited options—in fact, only one that he absolutely knew would work. Individual vampires were highly resistant to most forms of Dark magic, since it was Dark Arts that set them walking about in the first place. That resistance increased when they came together in a hive. Draco knew from the first time his eyes scraped past a worker’s and he felt the temptation to go to her that his possession gift wouldn’t protect him from them. And he simply wasn’t as skilled with fire or Light spells as other Light wizards, especially not now, near Midsummer, when the power of the wild Dark drew back and the sun prevailed.

So he waited until he saw a vampiress coming for him, springing lightly from branch to branch, and aimed his wand, and braced himself for the pull of magic he’d need to experience, and spoke.

“Avada Kedavra.”

The green light cut the flickering, flame-enhanced darkness like a foxfire sun. It touched the vampiress’s chest, and Draco heard, as if from a distance, Lupin’s voice reciting what they’d learned about vampires in third year. Powerful enough curses do not precisely kill the vampire, but leach the Dark magic that makes them able to maintain a semblance of life.

The Killing Curse faded, and the body tumbled through the branches to land with a splat on the ground. Draco turned away.

Other members of the hive had seen what that worker had done, though, and were coming at them from above, now, swarming up the trees with immense speed and dropping on their heads. Draco cursed and ducked a falling body, pulling Harry with him. They landed in an untidy heap, and he rolled over to see a drone already scrambling up. His body was naked, his eyes wild, and Draco knew that if he grabbed someone, he could rape that person in instants.

“Curis solis!” Harry’s voice shouted from beside him.

The Sun Spear Spell, Draco thought, and then he saw the golden-red weapon flash past the corner of his eye, hurled through Harry’s fingers. It burned a hole straight through the drone, cauterizing the flesh as it passed, and he fell in the middle of a shriek. Draco shuddered, stood, and hauled Harry up after him.

And then Harry had the nerve to pull him around so Draco could see his eyes—at least, as much as it was possible to notice eyes in the flashes of light and fire and darkness, and the continual flow of blood from Harry’s scar—and ask, “Are you sure that you can continue to manage the Unforgivables?”

“Damn it,” Draco hissed, sounding, he knew, rather like a vampire himself in that moment. “Yes, I can. And it’s the best weapon I have, and I’m going to use whatever weapon works. Now, can we please get on in our battle?”

Harry’s mouth quirked, and stayed that way as he swung a bright sword of fire over Draco’s head, beheading a leaping worker. Draco regretted they were in the middle of this battle, or, more precisely, that it took battles like this to bring magic that powerful out of Harry; he would have liked to explore what that smile could lead to in a more peaceful situation.

Then the ground shook.

******
Harry felt the moment someone cast the Solstice Summons. His breath caught, and a current of cold, solid air seemed to surge past him. It was not air, he knew, but time. The Solstice Summons reversed or sped up time in a certain small area around the caster, and created Midsummer in that space.

This close to Midsummer itself, it meant—

Welling sunlight struck through the trees. Harry was forced to lift his left hand and shield his eyes. Dying screams answered from every direction, overwhelming his music and the constant low mutter of calling vampires and the crackle of flames and Voldemort’s laughter in his head.

The vampires in the immediate clearing had all retreated or died by the time Harry could see again. They did not want to face the Light itself, and that was what the Solstice Summons had brought forth, if only for a moment.

Hooves sounded in response, and Harry turned hard, to find himself face-to-chest with a white centaur he had never seen before. The centaur clashed to a stop, forelegs lashing dangerously close to Harry’s face for a moment. He bore a spear in one hand stained with dark rivulets and what Harry sincerely hoped wasn’t a vampire’s heart still clinging to it.

“Vates, you have come,” the centaur snorted, and then slid to one knee and bowed his head. Even his hair was pale, a near match for Draco’s. “You must hurry. They have cornered the herd.”

Harry bit his tongue on the impulse to say that Voldemort hadn’t shown him that. Half of the things that Voldemort showed him were probably false, anyway. He took a step towards the centaur.

_Do you really think so?_ Voldemort’s voice was in his head again, worse than a Dementor’s, a red spike that hammered straight in through an ear and out again. Harry was surprised not to hear the sound of his head tearing open. _See this, then, Harry. You could have prevented their deaths if you went to London instead of choosing the Forest._

And Harry saw several people lying still, the dark puncture wounds in their necks gaping to the air, their bodies ripped limb from limb and left as cold, mangled flesh, without a trace of the blood, because the attacking vampires would have drunk it all. Two were adult women, one was a teenage girl, and the other two were boys, who might have been the same age as the girl or younger. Werewolf howls cut the air outside, and snarls and sounds of battle, but for this family, who might have been either wizards or Muggles, it was too late.

Harry knew sickness was coming, and he leaned over and vomited as best as he could, blind with the vision and incapable of aiming the foulness. He felt Draco’s arm around him, pulling him upright, his voice low and soothing as he urged him on, and the centaur saying his title in alarm.

_I have to get past this. I have to. I made the choice because I couldn’t have Apparated to Muggle London; I didn’t know where the attack was happening, and by the time I arrived it might have been too late for them._

But he could have Apparated to a werewolf pack’s safehouse and searched with them from there, the voice of his conscience answered.

_Of course I could have. And then more people here would have died than already have._

Every choice cost something.

Harry blinked hard, and this time the blindness came from blood and not the vision that Voldemort had implanted. “I’m all right,” he said, and shook his head angrily at Draco’s doubtful face. “I’ll be all right.” That was probably closer to the truth, but no matter; the simple truth was that he couldn’t leave this battlefield, not now. The vampires were coming slowly back, creeping from in between the trees now that the Solstice Summons hadn’t been repeated for a few minutes. Harry could hear them crooning of the delights to be found in their arms, whispering stories of dark tunnels and blood and soft slippery flesh. Merlin knew how many of the people who had accompanied him from inside Hogwarts were already dead.

The sorrow and the pain and the anger built in him, and suddenly Harry did think that he knew a tactic that would take out the vampires, and he was so angry now that the battle with Voldemort could not keep his magic or his mind occupied.

The Dark Lord felt that and began to struggle more strongly. Harry closed his eyes and refused to see anything he did not want to see. Instead, his hand rose, and Draco clasped it.

“Hold me here,” Harry whispered.
“What are you—“

Harry covered his own eyes with his free hand, tracing the shapes of them, the contours, the lashes, making them known to his fingers. Then he clenched his hand and exhaled into it. He didn’t know a spell that would mimic the effect he wanted, so he was having to lean on his magic and fly with it, tell it what he desired and let the surge of pure power through him answer, instead of shielding his mind with an incantation.

He breathed, pushing magic and will through his hand, and what came out was light.

A single ball of burning, blinding light was to hover in front of everyone in the Forest who had human eyes. Harry gave himself to that, completely. Humans, vampires, and centaurs it would cover, but not Runespoors and the others; their eyes were too different. He forced himself not to worry about that. He leaned forward and gave as much effort into the push as he would into rolling off a boulder that had fallen on Draco and crushed his legs.

He felt the moment when things suddenly got easier, and light and Light rushed through him. He gasped slightly, opening his eyes, then flinched and closed them again because of the pain of the glaring white ball in front of him.

Scream after scream after scream rang through the trees in answer, and Harry knew the vampires were probably retreating back into the shadows to avoid the balls of light. But they were made to hover in front of someone’s eyes, and that meant they would follow anywhere their targets went and penetrate any barriers. The vampires could retreat underground, or Apparate, and still the light would follow.

_Killing them all._

Harry felt regret about that, the same way he did about not being in London for the Muggle family. Vampires, individually, were intelligent creatures. He could have negotiated with them if he caught them alone. But, caught in the endless surging drive to establish a nest and scatter enough blood on the ground to sustain their queen and the young she would bear, they would not have listened.

_Unless you separated them off from one another..._

The best ideas always came too late, Harry thought as he sagged to the ground, the outflow of magic leaving him dizzy and light-headed. He felt someone crouch down beside him, and then the twine of many small bodies around him, their scales sliding up and down his skin like pebbles. Harry smiled and relaxed. He had felt them before, and knew what they were.

“What news?” he asked, making sure to visualize a snake to himself so the words would come out in Parseltongue.

_The vampires are running,_” said the snake who was speaking for the Many at the moment. By the sound of it, she was around his neck. Harry was vaguely amused to note that the word “vampires” in Parseltongue was “those with sharper fangs than we have.” _But we have lost many of our own, and as many dead centaurs lie on the ground as there are trees in the center of the Heart Grove._

Harry sighed and rose to his feet. “Show me. Are the vampires gone?”

“Yes.”

Harry ended the spell that made the balls of light hover in front of human eyes, and then blinked his way slowly through his own afterimages. The first person he saw was Connor, who looked extremely disappointed, though he smiled at Harry.

“What’s the matter?” Harry asked.

“I could never catch a vampire,” Connor said in frustration. “They just—avoided me, like I wasn’t worth battling. They went were I wasn’t, and they caught prey that wasn’t me.” His face brightened for a moment. “Did you hear the way that Ron cast the Solstice Summons?” he added. “Wasn’t that wonderful?”

“Very wonderful,” Harry said with a smile he knew was tired. Voldemort had gone silent in his head. Harry didn’t know if that came from the failure of his plans, or if he had simply retreated in frustration. A swift Occlumency exploration revealed no trace of him, but Harry wasn’t about to trust that. He replaced what shields he could. In the morning, he would ask Snape for help in strengthening them again. “Let’s tend to the dead,” he said, and this time the pale centaur scooped him up and set him on his back, Many snakes and all, instead of kneeling down. Draco and Connor followed at the centaur’s heels.
Harry did turn his head from side to side as they rode, asking for reports. It seemed that only a few people, Luna among them, had been seriously wounded; the battle had simply been too furious and too short for the vampires to make a good try at killing them all, and many had been in other parts of the Forest, chasing the magical creatures. Harry’s mouth tightened nonetheless. He would have to make sure that he visited Luna and the others in the hospital wing later.

His wrist chirruped, which made the Many snakes sway and hiss in surprise; they probably thought a phoenix was singing in the woods. Harry touched his left wrist, just under the curled body of one. “Yes?”

“Harry?” It was Remus’s voice, deeply tired. “We did find the attackers, but not before they’d killed. And then we only slew a few vampires before the rest of them vanished. It’s as if they decided against making that part of London their nest after all.”

*I chose right. I chose right.* Harry could have shouted for relief through his blasted throat. “The attack in the Forbidden Forest was the main one, Remus,” he said. “They would have chosen to make their nest here, I think. But they’re gone, and luckily without killing everyone here. How many dead in the packs?”

Remus was silent a moment.

“Remus?” Harry asked softly.

“Hawk has fallen,” Remus whispered. “My pack is without an alpha. And a few werewolves from Camellia’s pack, whom I know you knew. Rose. Trumpetflower. Evergreen.”

Harry closed his eyes and let images run through his head. He hadn’t known Hawk well or long, but the sturdy werewolf had been a good alpha by all accounts. Trumpetflower had been a nervous, elegant, pretty pureblood witch, who had nevertheless come into the Ministry with him last year when Harry decided to make his fight for the cause of werewolves public. Rose had had a mate, Bavaros, with whom she constantly wrestled.

Evergreen had been the young, extremely wild werewolf who’d bitten a Wizengamot Elder on Loki’s command and spent time in Tullianum for it, but he’d also sworn loyalty to Harry, and to Camellia when she became alpha in his place. And he had never done anything like that again, from what Harry knew. Nor would he, unless an alpha commanded it.

*I think he went to his death laughing.* Harry opened his eyes. “Please give them my condolences, Remus,” he said quietly. “Tell Camellia I’ll speak to her when I can.” Since Camellia wasn’t a witch, he couldn’t use the phoenix song spell to communicate directly with her, and Trumpetflower and Rose had been the only magical werewolves in the pack whom Harry had taught the spell to. “I’ll—do what I can as soon as I can.” The thoughts of what he needed to do were coming dangerously near overwhelming him again, and now he had to imagine four people he knew, if not well, going bravely to their deaths because he had asked them to.

*Stop,* he told himself forcefully.

“We’ll wait, Harry,” Remus’s voice said, balanced in deep calm. “And patrol London as we need to.”

The spell ended. Harry shook his head, and then looked up sharply as the pale centaur trotted up a rise. In front of them lay the herd.

Or what remained of it. There were still living centaurs picking their way among the dead, but the bulks and mounds of the dead were what commanded Harry’s attention. The blood gleamed like lakes in the moonlight, but there was less of it than there should have been with gore like this, the results of vampire feeding. Too many hooved legs pointed straight up into the air, and here and there a centaur collected a head torn from a body or a spine torn from a back.

Harry quelled the urge to be sick again, and slid slowly off the centaur who had brought him. “What is your name?” he asked quietly.

“Moon.” The white centaur snapped one hoof down. His eyes were a high, bright, pale blue, Harry saw, now that he had the time to look at them in the light of the *Apricus* charm that still hung overhead. “I will be the leader of the herd, now that Bone is gone.”

Harry spent a moment looking at the devastation. Now he could make out the hoofprints of thestrals, and the small broken green bodies of the dead Many, and the bright scales of Runespoors lying still, though now and then a living head lunged weakly upwards into the air beside its two dead brothers. He tried to estimate how long this had taken. A half an hour? Shorter than that?
There was no answer to this, Harry thought tiredly, rubbing one hand across his scar. No way to make up for it. Except by destroying Voldemort.

“We stand with you.”

Harry blinked, and looked up at Moon. “What do you mean? I know that you considered me an ally before now.”

“And now we have seen what devastation human wars may do.” Moon stamped again. “I will become the leader because I read the sun and moon in the way that others do the stars. The sun and the moon tell me that our destiny runs beside the humans’ for a time. Not for long in the lives of a herd or the heavens, but for long enough that our fight is yours. You shall have our aid outside the Forest as well as in it, if you will accept that from us.” He bent down until his face was only an inch or two away from Harry’s, staring at him, waiting.

Harry had to swallow several times before he could nod. “Thank you. Yes. I accept.”

He turned to face the battlefield again. There was not much he could do for the dead, any more than for the dead Muggles in London.

But what he could do, he would.

He walked slowly forward to begin cleaning up, his heart feeling as hollow and empty as his head without Voldemort.

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Interlude: A Clangor of Voices

The Daily Prophet
June 9th, 1997

MINISTRY NOW ON WAR FOOTING

Acting Minister Juniper says ‘Hunting He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named’ is most important priority

By: Rita Skeeter

Acting Minister Erasmus Juniper has put the Ministry, and most of wizarding Britain, on a war footing, and avowed his commitment to the struggle with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

The Acting Minister spoke at a small funeral held yesterday for Minister Rufus Scrimgeour, slain by Indigena Yaxley; a Dark Mark was found hovering over the body. The funeral was small so as not to provide a target for forces of the Dark, but Juniper was firm in refusing the suggestion that this meant his administration was afraid.

“We must be cautious to win this war,” he said. “Never afraid. We must watch for opportunities to commit our forces in the most advantageous places. But if we let terror take over, then we are doing the work of the Dark for it.”

In response to questions about whether he had been arguing with Harry vates, the Acting Minister was noncommittal.

“It’s true that we have philosophical disagreements,” he said. “I am more strictly of the Light than poor Scrimgeour was, and so he was more accommodating to young Harry. But I have every confidence that we can work together. I do not have any fear that the vates means to embrace the goals of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. This is the time for Light and undeclared wizards to trust each other. He is our mutual animosity, not the old and petty struggles of past times.”

The Acting Minister did admit that he intended to pass and strengthen some new edicts as a means of preparing wizarding Britain for the coming crisis, and eventual martial law.

“Certain Dark magic, the most destructive and debilitating kind, is being prohibited,” he said. “But that’s only natural. If we do not look to the lessons of history, we will only enact them, again and again. We made mistakes in the First War—and I include the Wizengamot, of which I was a member—in such matters as looking away from mistreatment of hostages and making the Unforgivable Curses legal for Aurors. That will not happen again. We will not become what we fight.”
The Acting Minister added that he hoped to have more definite answers on his negotiations with the **vates** by next week.

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**Savior or Menace?**

*A Vox Populi Special Report on the Harry Situation*

*June 12th, 1997*

It is now six days since the assassination of Minister Rufus Scrimgeour at the hands of a Dark agent widely thought to be Indigena Yaxley, and in the time since, we have received disturbing rumors of an attack at Hogwarts that almost killed the Headmistress, and of former Death Eaters returning to their Lord. Also, in that time, Harry **vates** has made no public statement of his position. It is rumored that he entered the Ministry the night after the Minister’s assassination, but what he might have said or done there has been kept quiet.

I conducted a series of interviews with the wizards in my home village, a quiet, sleepy little place in southern Cornwall. We’re just an ordinary group of seventy or so families, a good mixture of halfbloods, Muggleborns, and purebloods. Some of us have house elves, some don’t. Some of us favor complete freedom for the magical creatures, some don’t. Some have long thought of Harry as the Young Hero or the Boy-Who-Lived and thus the best hope for the wizarding world; some haven’t. Their voices (left anonymous to encourage the speakers to express themselves with more freedom) make for an interesting medley of opinions on the subject.

One older witch in our village, the daughter of a Muggleborn man and the pureblood witch who ran away from her family to marry him, was quite firm on the subject. “He’s always done good for us so far, and for the magical creatures, too. He’ll do right until we turn against him, I’d imagine.”

A young wizard who left Hogwarts three years ago, and so knew Harry as a student, was more skeptical. “I’d like to **think** that he’ll save us all,” he said, “but that’s a child’s dream, innit? More likely we’ll have to join in saving ourselves, and not hide behind one boy’s wand. Or hands. I heard that he doesn’t even use a wand any more.”

A Granian breeder only spat when I asked him. “Oh, yes,” he muttered. “He only wants to take our livelihoods, after all, and people only die around him, after all. A fine choice for savior of the world. It’s fitting fate chose him to be the savior, though. Fate’s a fickle bitch. I remember a time—” And he devolved into personal stories it would not be appropriate to repeat here.

A young witch, not of age to attend Hogwarts yet, was firmly of the opinion that Harry would kill You-Know-Who before the week was out. Her mother was more reserved.

“**He might,**” she said. “All I know that is that he hasn’t yet. I would be more impressed if he’d made an open statement about working with the new Ministry, that his commitments didn’t collapse when the Minister died, and that we won’t have to wait whilst the Acting Minister and him fight it out all over again.”

A small group of wizards and witches has formed in the village to write letters to Harry, asking him to make a Declaration. They believe he will need the extra power to defeat You-Know-Who, who at the moment is widely believed to be the most powerful wizard in the world.

A similar delegation of young wizards apparently tried to sneak out of their homes and go to Hogwarts, where they would have offered their wands to Harry, but were caught by their parents.

“I don’t think anything about this situation is normal,” one exasperated mother confided to me after hauling her son back inside by the ear, and effortlessly ignoring his spouted fantasies about wanting to fight at Harry’s side. “I only know that I wish it was over with, and that we just knew what he was **doing.**”

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*The Daily Prophet*

*June 16th, 1997*

**VAMPIRE ATTACK!**
Vampire hive hits Muggle London and Forbidden Forest

By: Rita Skeeter

The worst news of the Second War so far has been confirmed: He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has made common cause with a hive of vampires. There were attacks last night on both a Muggle home in London and the Forbidden Forest near Hogwarts. What place they sought for a nesting site seems to have been open to question; it may have been both.

Many Muggles, unfortunately, either witnessed the attack in London or found the torn, exsanguinated bodies when wandering into the scene of the crime, increasing the task for the Ministry’s Obliviators.

“It’s just one damn task after another, lately,” confided Lethe Amarantha, Head of the Obliviator Office. “We keep receiving word of Muggles seeing and remembering things from our world that they shouldn’t. This may be You-Know-Who’s secondary tactic: to expose our world to the Muggles via his attacks and so incite them to strike back at us just like they did three hundred years ago.”

Word is that Harry vates and several companions turned back the vampire attack in the Forbidden Forest, but not before a high cost in magical creature (and perhaps human) lives. Someone fought the vampires in London as well, but Madam Amarantha said they had all vanished before the Obliviators arrived.

“Whoever they are, we’re bloody grateful to them,” she added.

Not everyone was as grateful; a few wizards living near the Muggle family that was killed expressed fears that they were the real targets, and some resentment that the vates chose to attend to the Forbidden Forest instead of coming to help save lives in London.

“I know he doesn’t mean it this way,” said Flora Johnson, a halfblood witch who has made her home among Muggles for several decades while she studies the depiction of wizards and witches in their popular culture. “But it does make it seem as if he was choosing magical creatures’ lives over human lives, and that’s an impression that will do him no favors.”

Comment on the matter is as yet unavailable from Harry vates or any magical creature.

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Chapter Four: Bringing Him to Heel

“I do think that you made the right decision,” Aurora said, trying to control both the impulse to snap and the blood that hammered in her temples. “We can’t afford to regret matters now, sir. We must press ahead with the course we’ve chosen and do right by our people.”

Erasmus paused thoughtfully, his hand hovering over the paperwork in front of him. Aurora hoped she concealed her envy as she watched him. She had never realized that managing the Ministry, or even helping to manage it, would be so bloody exhausting. Of course, she had hardly envisioned coming to power after Scrimgeour’s assassination, either; the change should have been gentler. But either way, fatigue already bore her down, and yet didn’t seem to touch a hair on Erasmus’s head.

“If you think so,” said Erasmus at last.

“I do,” said Aurora firmly. They’d made the decision jointly not to send the Daily Prophet the edict that forbid use of the absorbere gift after Harry’s rather dramatic snatching back of his former Death Eaters. It would be too open an attack on Harry and Harry alone. Aurora didn’t intend to let Erasmus reconsider that choice now. They had other things to do.

Luckily, when the Acting Minister switched his attention to a new target, he switched all his attention. He picked up the list of tactics Aurora had suggested, and what she’d gathered from their allies, and looked them over carefully. “You think that these will work?”

“In an ordinary time? No.” Aurora forced her hand to fall from her temple and curl, relaxed, in her lap. “Now, when Harry foolishly hasn’t made a public statement about where exactly he stands with the Ministry? Yes, I do think so. He hasn’t made that public statement because he doesn’t want to lead to the impression of himself as a rebel or outlaw. Now, we’ll force him to make the statement, one way or the other. If he stands against us, we’re justified in taking sterner measures. If he stands with us, he’ll have to say so, and then act in concert with us instead of going behind our backs.”
“Hmmm,” said Erasmus.

Aurora fought to keep from rolling her eyes. The Acting Minister was going to suggest a drawback or exception when he made that noise. He had proven to be more prickly and hesitant than Aurora had thought he was when she allied with him. Perhaps it’s the difference between theory and practice. “Yes, sir?”

“I just don’t know if this is a guarantee,” said Erasmus, and drummed his fingers on the list of tactics. “The boy has proven annoyingly unpredictable so far. What will happen if he doesn’t pursue either course of action that you think is likeliest?”

Aurora relaxed. This was a reluctance she’d planned for. “Then you’ll still have the financial gains from the plan,” she said. “No harm done there.”

“Unless we drive the boy into open war against us because we threatened him,” Erasmus mused.

“I really do not think that will happen,” said Aurora, memories of Harry flashing through her mind. He stood up for his rights against the monitoring board in the end, but he still didn’t curse us, didn’t hurt us for what we’d done. “He may well fight a separate war against You-Know-Who and refuse to trust us. He would consider us enemies if we got in his way. But he won’t forget himself so far as to take revenge. He’s not that kind of person, Minister. Not Dark.”

That was the language one needed to speak with Erasmus, and Aurora saw it working now. His face firmed, and he gave one strong nod. “I knew he was not,” he said softly. “I’ve known some decent undeclared wizards, and Potter’s one of them. He won’t turn to the Dark.” His hand tightened on the parchment in front of him. “He just needs a bit of a reminder what war is like, and what the Ministry requires in times of war.”

Aurora smiled, her headache easing for the first time that morning. “Just so.”

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“Again.”

Harry let out his breath slowly, and then focused on Snape’s eyes. They were dark and burning in a way that made Harry nervous since the night he’d briefly fallen to Voldemort’s control and tried to assassinate McGonagall. But Harry trusted him now. He’d been inside Snape’s head when his guardian fought his way free of that control. This shining only meant fierce will.

“Legilimens,” he whispered.

His will flew forward, and he swept through the outer layer of Snape’s shields. Then Snape threw up another wall, and Harry realized he’d been allowed through the first one to encourage him and trap him into overconfidence.

This is the way, Snape told him without words, though they were so deep they might have shared thoughts easily. This way, and this, and this—

And so he went on, showing Harry Occlumency techniques less common than the silver pools, tactics he’d developed and used himself in his year spying for Dumbledore against the Dark Lord. Even with his concentration in tatters and the pain of his mental wounds still sometimes overwhelming him, he was the best Occlumens Harry had ever known. The shields were thin and flexible and perfectly in motion, and, best of all, they weren’t shaped like anything in particular. Once a Legilimens knew the shape of his victim’s mind, such as a forest or a house, he could often identify the defenses from the forms they took, but Snape had amorphous, constantly mutable walls. Harry would strike at what he thought was one of them and find it a shadow, or turn and find another curving behind him, blocking his path or protecting a memory he would have liked to access.

He learned a great deal from Snape during these sessions, but he remembered that he had been confident in the first set of shields that he wrapped around the scar connection, too, and that Voldemort had largely destroyed those without effort.

His will wavered, and Snape pushed him easily out of his mind. His frown was milder than it would have been before the war started, Harry thought, but still present. “You must concentrate harder, Harry,” he said quietly. “This is your only hope of keeping him out of your head.”

Harry lowered his eyes and nodded. He honestly didn’t think the connection could be closed at all, but giving up would be worse than spending this kind of effort. At least he was learning tactics that would help him to defend his mind more effectively if it was ever his own again.
It had not been for most of the last few days. Voldemort assaulted him with visions of hundreds of vampires brooding underground, under the fat, pale, instantly recognizable bulk of a queen. He sent visions of victims captured and tortured to death, and Harry had no idea if they were real or not; he only knew that the papers had reported no disappearances, and that his muscles still ached with the curses as if they were real. His body and his mind swam with potions he was using to keep awake and alert and to sometimes snatch a moment of real rest. He knew he could not continue like this, and he did not think Occlumency was the answer.

“What do you wish to do?” Snape asked, his hand gently stroking Harry’s hair. His voice had none of its usual ice or sharpness.

Harry blinked at him, confused, wondering if this meant something was wrong. Then he realized Snape was most likely acting as he did to avoid stressing him or backing him into a corner, the way that Harry himself would usually refrain from mentioning certain subjects when Snape was in a bad mood. He snorted, and Snape raised an eyebrow at him.

“Only thinking how our roles have reversed, again,” said Harry, and stretched his arms over his head, wishing the momentary feeling of relaxation and ease it brought him would last longer than it did.

Snape murmured a spell usually used to make patients hit with compression curses uncurl, and Harry felt some of the stress leave his neck and shoulders. He nodded to Snape.

“They are back to what they should have been,” said Snape, his voice rough with an emotion that Harry couldn’t identify, but knew his guardian would never have shown if his mind were normal. “I am guarding and guiding and protecting you, Harry. My burden should never have been yours to carry.”

Harry lowered his eyes. It wasn’t worth getting into an argument about that right now. He had enough other things to think about, enough other things to demand his time and attention, Merlin knew.

“You should rest,” Snape said quietly. “It’s been three nights since you took any Dreamless Sleep potion. You can have some of it again.”

Harry tensed again. He hated the way taking the potion made him feel in the morning, drugged and hazy, and it could be potentially fatal now, if he made a bad decision while under the potion’s influence. He was about to argue when a flutter of wings announced that an owl had found them in the dungeons, and he turned to deal with it, giving a slight sigh. The post never brought good news, now.

He frowned when he realized the envelope on the owl’s leg carried an official Ministry seal. Snape murmured the relaxation spell again, but Harry barely heard him. He almost tore the letter open.

The letter was brief and to the point, which wasn’t something Harry could say about most of the Ministry’s correspondence.

June 17th, 1997

Vates:

This is to inform you that the building belonging to the organization known as the Alliance of Sun and Shadow is hereby claimed. The Ministry requires it for official use. As well, the printing presses used by the Alliance to produce pamphlets and the like are now in service to the war effort. The people who lived and worked in the building have been notified, and are now seeking employment and shelter elsewhere.

Gloria Hopewell,  
Ministry War Claims Subcommittee.

Harry swore softly. The building that housed the Alliance’s “official” headquarters hadn’t been anything spectacular—a former shop in the middle of Diagon Alley—but it had given people a place to go if they wanted to learn more about the Alliance or swear the oaths, and had given several of the werewolves who were left abandoned and without jobs after the rebellion at Woodhouse a chance to work.

More than that, though, he could read the message Juniper was sending him. I have more important work for you than the Alliance. The Alliance should be absorbed into the Ministry before it can become a divisive force.

Or, perhaps even more simply: There’s nothing you can do about this.
Harry closed his eyes. He had made no public announcement of his position of the kind they were all clamoring for because he had hoped against hope to avoid open conflict with the Ministry. They could ignore each other. He wasn’t sure he’d piss on Juniper if he were on fire, but he wouldn’t interfere with the Minister’s war effort if it didn’t interfere with his. Cooperation was impossible; coexistence might not be. A lie would make him look bad when the Ministry did something he couldn’t approve of; a hostile statement would give Voldemort a crack in their defenses to exploit; something neutral and in-between wouldn’t satisfy anyone.

And now, this.

*Juniper is trying to push me towards open conflict. Why? Doesn’t he understand how bad this would be?*

A moment more of thinking, though, and Harry was sure that he understood Juniper’s position on the matter. Juniper *did* believe they could afford no division, and wanted Harry to stand with him. But he was determined to be in control of that—coalition; Harry could not bring himself to think of it as an alliance. So he had to demonstrate his control to Harry, and in such a way that Harry would surrender and go along quietly. If anything was better than open conflict, surely that would include surrender.

Except that Harry had changed his mind, and he would not surrender control again, and every step that Juniper took only insured that Harry grew more and more determined in that resolve.

“Harry!”

Abruptly, he blinked and realized that Snape had been calling his name for the past few minutes. He passed over the letter and then began pacing his guardian’s office, biting his lip, hard, as he thought.

What was the best course of action?

He didn’t want to part ways openly with the Ministry, but as long as he didn’t, Juniper would keep pushing him, and other people would spin horrible stories out of his silence, like the one that had emerged in the wake of the vampire attack—that he simply paid more attention to, and cared more about, magical creatures than humans. And those would stress him, and—

Harry let out a windy, gusting sigh. *I can’t let that happen. I’m pushed and harassed enough as it is, and Voldemort won’t let up on me; I can’t make him back off except by killing him. There’s a chance I can do it with Juniper and everyone chattering at me to say something, say something, say something. So I’ll do it.*

“You cannot let him get away with this,” Snape said softly, looking up. “I thought he would have taken his lesson from the open opposition you showed to him in the Ministry, but it does not seem so.”

“That gave him courage because it was private, I think,” said Harry. “And I didn’t hurry to publicize it, either. He must think I’ll accept an alliance with him in lieu of everyone finding out.” He took a deep breath. “And I know *exactly* which way to convince him that that’s wrong.”

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Draco had been staring at the letter that had come for him for the last five minutes, trying to decide on the best course of action.

*June 17th, 1997
Gringotts Bank*

*Dear Mr. Malfoy:*

*I speak for the hanarz, the leader of the southern goblins. You will, I think, know her, as you are the lover of the vates.*

*The Ministry contacted us today about seizing your vaults and forbidding you from accessing them. This includes not only the Malfoy fortune your father arranged for you to inherit, but every vault you might access in the future; if the vates gave you access to the Black money, for example, that money would automatically become the property of the Ministry. They have forgotten their recent lessons in our independence. As there has so far been no rumor of the vates and the Acting Minister definitely parting ways, however, we defer to your wishes.*

*Sincerely,*

*Ragsong.*
Draco closed his eyes.

He had, of course, wanted to seize the first quill near at hand and haughtily instruct the goblins never to let anyone touch anything of his. But that would get more people than just himself in trouble. Draco wasn’t foolish enough to think the Ministry would listen to him. They would invade Gringotts for the money, and the goblins would fight, and that would lead to bloodshed in the streets. Or they would demand access to the vaults, and the goblins would refuse, and Juniper could use that to stir up fears among wizards about who really controlled the gold in Gringotts, and unite some of Harry’s enemies against him, behind the Acting Minister.

*Just exactly what we do not need right now. Voldemort’s being explosive enough as it is.*

Draco let a small, fierce smile slip across his face. For one thing, he had no fear that he was suddenly about to go hungry or poor; Harry would insure he had money enough for his needs. Harry did not value money except for what it could do, and as far as he was concerned, Draco could have as much of the Black fortune as Regulus or the Black legal documents would let him take. So the Ministry’s threat to freeze future vaults was not something he needed to react against.

And it might be well to seemingly accede gracefully, for now, and have this hidden weapon lying in wait for when the time was right. There might come an hour when the goblins’ willingness to protect something because it belonged to a person who belonged to the vates would be useful. Likely in the wake of bigger explosions, of course, but Draco was determined not to cause one that could be traced to him.

And it was the Slytherin thing to do, not reacting to provocation with the expected hatred and open anger.

He sat down and wrote calmly back, instructing the goblins to allow the Ministry provisional access to the Malfoy vaults for now. If they tried to take any money from them, as opposed to not letting Draco remove money, then Draco wished to hear from Ragsong at once. He would decide what to do, depending on if Juniper was so audacious as to try to use the Malfoy funds like spoils of war.

He also asked, as if casually, for the letter the Ministry had sent to Gringotts making their demand.

He liked to have more than one weapon up his sleeve.

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Harry smiled as politely as he could through the green flames in the Floo connection, and inclined his head. “Madam Whitestag,” he said. He didn’t think his teeth were grinding. The pain in his head increased noticeably when he did that, and so far it remained at its even pounding, pulsing tempo. “I wanted to speak to you about this letter the Acting Minister sent me. A small matter of shutting down the organization of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, I think.”

Aurora gave him a little smile of her own. “I am sorry for that, Harry,” she said. “But we needed the space and the presses. Needs must, in a time of war.” She glanced up from the chair she sat in. “Here is the Acting Minister now. Of course he would want to speak with you about this.”

Juniper strode through the door of the office. Harry realized he was waiting for him to limp. He fought the temptation to close his eyes and bow his head. Yes, he missed Minister Scrimgeour, but he was dead now and beyond being hurt, since he hadn’t left a ghost. Harry had to concentrate on the living.

“*Vates,*” said Juniper, pulling up another chair. He bent down towards the fire, and let Harry have a good look at his face, stern and lined. Harry thought that was supposed to impress him with how busy the Acting Minister was and how he was taking time out of that busy day for this conversation. Since Harry was rather busy himself, he was not impressed. “You have some questions about what we did with the small group of werewolves and wizards working in the building the Ministry claimed yesterday?”

Harry shook his head. “I did have questions. Not any more, Acting Minister.”

Juniper raised his eyebrows. “Then you agree that the Ministry needs all the support it can receive in this war, Mr. Pott—*vates?*” For the first time, he spoke the name with eagerness, and true respect.

“I understand that you want my support,” Harry said.

Juniper nodded.
“I understand that you were willing to shut down an organization that did you no harm, and might have done you some good by encouraging people not to panic, and to _think_ about their situation, because you wanted to get at me,” Harry continued, in the same flat, almost bored voice. Really, he was surprised by how easy this was, once he assented to the idea that he and Juniper had parted ways and nothing was going to reconcile them.

“I would not phrase it that way,” said Juniper.

“Of course _you_ wouldn’t.” Harry leaned forward. “But I don’t see you claiming presses from the _Prophet_, Acting Minister, which has far more of them. There were two presses only that the Alliance owned. And we were able to purchase the building we did in the first place because it had sat abandoned for so long. There are much better buildings in Diagon Alley that you could have acquired if you wanted one.”

“Those others are legitimate businesses,” Juniper said.

He probably meant that to sound impressive, too, or at least chiding; his voice had taken on the tone of a parent scolding an angry child. Harry smiled, slowly. The man had said almost exactly what Harry would have wished him to.

“And the Alliance of Sun and Shadow cannot be,” he said. “Why is that, Acting Minister? Because it was associated with me? Or because the people who worked there were mostly werewolves?”

Juniper’s eyes narrowed. “Neither,” he said. “I only meant that the people working there did not depend on the Alliance for their livelihood, Mr. Potter.”

“And again you give me a name I dropped almost two years ago,” Harry said softly. “Not only Minister Scrimgeour, but most of my enemies, at least gave me the courtesy of using the only name I can lay claim to, my first one.”

Juniper was too good a politician to run his hand through his hair, but Harry thought he could see traces of the impulse to do so in his eyes. “I am not your enemy, _vates_.”

“You have tried to force me to join you,” said Harry. “You have targeted people close to me unfairly, when you could have claimed money and possessions from many others if your concern was the quality of life the Ministry must maintain under martial law. Tell me, Acting Minister. If that does not fit the definition of enemy, what does it fit? And if you are intent on acting as you should, if your main moral project in this war is to remain separate from Voldemort, how can you excuse such things?”

“There is no one else in your position,” said Juniper. He remained still, but his eyes burned like Snape’s, or like the suddenly mounting headache behind Harry’s temples. “No one else who can so influence what we do, Harry. No one else whose departure from our cause can so damage us. We _must_ have you with us.”

“This, Acting Minister,” said Harry, “was the exact wrong way to go about it. You have never understood me, and you never will. I have something in common with the magical creatures I am trying to free: I don’t like being cornered.”

He flipped his wrist over, and his magic rose around him. A silvery flow of memories traveled from his temple to the golden bubble suddenly forming in the air a few feet away. The bubble budded once it contained the memories, once and then again, and then again. It was still budding when it sped out of the room. Harry had directed it to go to Hogsmeade. The other, smaller bubbles would follow it and “learn” the right way to go about doing what Harry wanted them to do, before they spread around the British Isles.

“What have you done?” Juniper demanded, half-rising to his feet.

“The bubbles are modified Pensieves,” Harry said calmly, sitting back in his chair. “They will seek out every wizarding village of any size in Britain and Ireland, and display the memories of the conversation we just had. Anyone who wishes is welcome to capture one and put his or her head in, so that they can verify that these memories work like the memories of Pensieves. They are _true_, Acting Minister, and you have just made some admissions that could hurt your cause very badly.”

Aurora actually let out a little shriek, and then clasped her hand across her mouth, eyes wide. Juniper shook his head and leaned forward, voice lowering, the way Snape’s did when he was angry. Harry didn’t think he was angry, though. He sounded more as though he were struggling to understand.

“Why, Harry? Why would you do such a thing?”

“Because,” Harry said, rising to his feet, his headache easing a bit as the magic flooded away from him, “I am tired of being
pushed.”

Juniper’s face darkened. “And you wish us to lose the war to your childlike temper?”

“If you had approached me as an equal,” Harry said, “if you had accepted that I am not going to accept such measures as caging my father and targeting me specifically in the claiming of buildings, then that would never have been a concern, Acting Minister. As matters stand, it is very much your concern. Good day.” He shut the Floo connection with an easy wave of his hand, and then turned and strode out of the room.

He hadn’t told Juniper everything the bubbles would do, of course. There was no sense in ruining his fun. The papers coming out tomorrow, or the first person who sped into the Ministry with a report, would be early enough.

The villages would also see an announcement that Harry was willing to take on anyone who would come to him and promise to help in the war. The people raging and frustrated because they could do nothing would have something to do. Those exasperated by the Ministry’s actions would see that it was not the only locus of resistance to Voldemort. Those with nowhere else to go would have a place. Those who wanted to learn stronger defensive spells so that they could go back to their own homes and help protect them—an action Harry would highly encourage, so that he could be less worried about random attacks everywhere in Britain—could learn them.

He would never be a Lord, but he could modify their tactics. Lords had often taken on sworn companions in the past. Harry was doing the same thing, but he would work with them as equals, as true companions, and use them for far more than protecting and amusing himself.

And it will prevent this from becoming a war of Light and Dark, the way Juniper wants to make it. There are Light wizards like the Weasleys whom I hope to prevent from following the Ministry, but they might do it if they think that’s the only place they’re truly welcome. And I won’t have undeclared wizards and Dark wizards panicked into lying low or changing their allegiances merely to be safe, when they could fight in unique ways against Voldemort.

It was not his imagination, he realized suddenly. The constant headache had ebbed a bit. And it had done so not because of pleasant thoughts, as he had believed at first, but with his release of an enormous amount of magic.

I wonder if that happens because I’m drawing on the magic that flows between Voldemort and me, and this leaves him less strength to attack me with visions?

Harry felt something that could have been a smile and could have been a smirk tug at his mouth. I didn’t get everything I wanted. Juniper is an idiot, and this would have been far easier if he would simply work with me, or if there was a way that I could stand in his fold and not betray all my principles.

But at least now everyone will know, and realize there’s a viable alternative to the Ministry. They no longer own the field.

I am sorry that it came to this, Scrimgeour. But, if I’m right about the legacy you left in place, at least some of your people will become the core of a new, better Ministry—whether or not it’s within the walls of the current one.

He held up his hand, and cast a floating rainbow shimmer of magic around himself, because he could, and it eased his headache, and he thought he heard a distant snarl from Voldemort. Harry laughed back. The laugh was half a growl.

Anything I can do to discomfit the bastard is fair game.

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“That—no,” said Aurora blankly, and then leaned back in her chair.

Erasmus went on staring at the closed Floo connection. Of all the ways he had envisioned his conversation with Harry going, that had never been one of them. The boy could have acquiesced and come to their side quietly, or burst into noisy screams and tears, the way that most children of his age would have. He could have made some ridiculously extravagant gesture that would matter nothing to anyone but him, and be forgotten in a week’s time. He could finally have made the public statement on his position that everyone wanted out of him.

Instead, he had chosen a gesture that would wreak havoc with the British wizarding population, splitting it in half, or nearly so.

Erasmus leaned back against the chair, and finally forced himself to confront another piece of reality he’d been ignoring.
He cares more for his own freedom and independence, the way he looks and acts, than for the united front we must present against his enemies. He’s accepted the division as inevitable and used it to benefit himself.

That said and done, Erasmus thought, snapping his eyes open, he would not waste his time in trying to compel the boy. He could not afford to waste strength in fighting him, either. He would part ways with him, since it was what Harry wanted, and advance the new Order he planned to inaugurate on Midsummer Eve.

So the Light stands alone against the Dark. Well, it has ever been so.

Admittedly, that thought made him feel better before one of the Aurors came dashing in to report that Harry, had after all, made a public statement, and it was rather different than anyone had expected.

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**Interlude: The Offers**

*June 18th, 1997*

*Dear VATES:*

My living name is unimportant. You may call me Vermillion. What you need to know is that I am a vampire, and I, along with several others of my kind, are unhappy about the actions of the hive allied with the Dark Lord. Their attacks are too open, and they are trying too hard to establish a nesting site. They will provoke the Ministry into open panic soon, and that will result in the hunting and burning of vampires like us, who have no part in these activities, as well as those mindless creatures who deserve it.

We will come to a bargain with you. We will show you the resting place of the hive’s queen. Below is a map of the northern coast of Scotland, with Apparition coordinates. We trust you know how to use them.

In return, you will both come to meet us, so that you can hear of the differences between individual vampires and the hive, and take us among your allies when you have learned that we speak the truth. We expect to be lieutenants at the least. We are vampires, and that means cleverer, stronger, faster, and certainly more powerful than all but a few of your allies.

This owl will find me. In return for our choosing the place, you may choose the time of our meeting and who to bring with you. Bring as many or as few bodyguards as you feel comfortable with. We shall not be insulted, for we know mortals grow uneasy in our presence.

*In pride,*
*Vermillion.*

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*June 18th, 1997*

*Dear sister:*

I hope this letter finds you well. I have heard so little from you over the long years that I find myself ignorant of even your state of health. I also find myself lamenting that. Sisters should not be so estranged from one another.

Of course, I have another member of my family to keep close and comfort my sad heart during the long hours. I am able to look over at any time I wish and see my nephew with a pale face and a rapidly beating heart, but alive.

Understand one thing, sister. My Lord is not pleased with Feldspar. Nor am I, since he was the one who necessitated my service. That means that, though he has been called back into the Dark Lord’s service, he is unlikely to live long. He will be sent on the most dangerous missions, and, well, if something happens to him, I can at least hope that he will die in an amusing way, as there will be a mysterious shortage of healing potions in his immediate area.

I know that you do not wish this to happen. You love your son. That can be seen in the way you spoiled him. And who would not love such a child as he was, who *did* seem to understand Yaxley honor, who had so much potential?

But it is what will happen, Peridot, unless you do a few things for us. In return, I will protect Feldspar and keep him from
bleeding out his life on the end of another’s wand or cracking his silly head open on the ground.

First, I know that you still have access to some of the Ministry’s more corruptible elements. You will be helping my Lord find the contacts he needs to climb into the Acting Minister’s very pocket.

Second, you will do what you can to persuade our sister Lazuli out of her madness of supporting Harry vates.

Can you succeed in these? I do not know if you can. I only know that you should try very, very hard.

It is for the sake of the family, after all.

And so is the potion smeared on this letter. My Lord has recently acquired a Potions brewer who, while not of the same inventive skills as Severus Snape, is capable of following complicated instructions. The moment you touched this parchment, sister, the potion passed into your skin. My Lord can set you on fire with a thought, now, from any distance, and he will not hesitate to do it if you neglect your duties.

To avoid this is simple, of course. Do not neglect them.

With warm and sisterly regards,
Indigena Yaxley.

Vita desinit, decus permanit.

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Chapter Five: Rider on the Hatred

Minerva stood with head high and arms folded as she watched the last of the first-year Gryffindors Floo through the hearth in her office, on their way home. Those who didn’t have Floo connections, mostly the Muggleborn students, had already been Apparated home by those of the professors and Harry’s adult allies who could make the journey. The Hogwarts Express might be tradition, but it was a tradition too vulnerable to preserve in times of war.

“Madam?”

Minerva turned, a bit surprised to see Neville Longbottom behind her. She’d thought Augusta would have claimed him and transported him home already. “Yes, Mr. Longbottom?” she asked, and made sure to arrange her face in a welcoming expression. Merlin knew Neville needed all the encouragement he could get. One of the minor frustrations of becoming Headmistress and no longer having the time for her students in Gryffindor that she used to had been her knowledge that Neville was not as likely to receive that encouragement from anyone else.

“Is—” Neville paused for a moment, as if figuring out how to phrase the question, then asked, “Will the school be open next year?”

Minerva felt her face soften. She could remember a time when asking that question without stuttering would have been beyond Neville. And it was a good question, one that she had seen asked in the way people looked at her from the corners of their eyes and half-opened their mouths before they turned away from her again.

“Yes,” she said. “It will be, Neville.”

He blinked glassy eyes at her. “Really? Even with the War?”

“So even the War,” Minerva said firmly. “Hogwarts is a sanctuary for those in need, Neville. I will not shut it unless it became a greater magnet for trouble than a shelter. And its wards make it one of the most powerfully-defended places in Britain. Even Voldemort would have trouble attacking us, given the Founders and how deep the wards run. Whilst the children and others are sheltering here, they might as well learn something.”

Neville gave a faint smile, and for a moment, Minerva saw his father. Frank Longbottom had been taller than Neville at this age and not as stocky, but he’d had the same manner of considering what an adult said with a forthright air, as though he were grateful for the information but would make up his own mind about it. Minerva swallowed a sudden burst of pain. It had been less than five years after Frank was Neville’s age that he and his wife had lost their minds to Bellatrix Lestrange’s Cruciatus. May a similar fate not await their son.
“You don’t think the Ministry will force you to close the school?” Neville asked then, and proved he had a mind of his own. Frank had been a bit more trusting of authority figures—understandably, since Albus had been the Headmaster for all his years at school.

“They can try,” said Minerva.

She left unsaid that she would not let them win, but Neville picked up on it. His face brightened. “Thank you for telling me, Madam,” he said quietly, and then left the office.

Minerva turned and shut the Floo connection. She had already received a letter from the Acting Minister, in fact, asking her to visit him in a few days’ time and “explore choices for the alternative education of Hogwarts students in the autumn term.” It was lucky she was no stranger to battles.

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“And the beds tell me stories, and with coaxing, they will tell me stories that I haven’t heard from them before,” Luna finished with a triumphant expression.

“That’s good, Luna.” Harry squeezed her hand and smiled at her. Her throat was healing nicely, he saw, though a swathe of bandages still concealed the puncture wound from sight. Madam Pomfrey had had to use Skele-Gro on one of her arms; the vampire who’d attacked Luna had grabbed her arm and swung her so hard into a tree that her bones simply went to powder. But, with magic and the matron’s stern care to keep her from wandering out of bed and conversing with the walls, Luna was recovering. “You don’t need anything?”

“The stones tell me everything that I need to know,” said Luna serenely. Then her forehead wrinkled. “Oh, but they don’t tell me about the object that hates everything in the world.”

Harry caught his breath. Luna had told him about the object before, but now that he knew about Horcruxes, the description of something that hated everything in the world meant rather more. “What is it? Do you know?”

Luna gave him a patient look. “No. I just said that the stones don’t tell me everything. I’ve been in the Headmistress’s office whenever I felt it, but then it leaves. I don’t know why. I thought for a time that it was linked to Professor Snape’s presence, but I was very careful to pay attention to all the cauldrons and vials in Potions class, and even his wand. I never felt it.”

Harry nodded. It was, of course, reasonable that Voldemort had endowed a Horcrux with the power to move about. Hogwarts was a reasonably secure hiding place for one because of its large size, but it would be even more secure if the object—whatever it was—could scuttle into a corner when suspected. “Try to sense it again, Luna, if you can, and fetch me when you do.” He touched her left wrist with his hand. “You know the phoenix-calling spell?”

“Yes, but I don’t like using it,” said Luna. “I am not a phoenix. You are.”

“I grant you permission to be a phoenix, for a short time,” said Harry gravely. And why not? I have allies who speak a stranger tongue.

Luna’s face cleared. “Thank you,” she said a moment later. “I am glad you did that. Now perhaps I can sing about the object when I find it, and about Light.” She cocked her head to the side to study him. “I am Light, and my father is Light, and you do not mind that, do you?”

“No,” said Harry, letting go her hand and standing. He’d seen Draco enter the hospital wing, and he’d rather have the inevitable argument in private. “All wizards are welcome to fight beside us, Luna, as long as they’ll stay true and commit themselves to defense. That’s why I made that public statement through the bubbles that I did, that anyone can come and swear to me.”

“Oh, good,” said Luna sleepily, leaning back on her pillows. “That means that the headboard is not wrong, and I should invite my father to come to Hogwarts and talk to you. Since I won’t go home for the summer anyway.”

Harry blinked. He had assumed Luna stayed because she was still recovering from her intense wounds during the battle. “What?”

But she slept.
Harry shook his head and turned to meet Draco. Draco’s jaw was slightly clenched, and he gave a perfunctory nod when Harry raised an eyebrow. Harry sighed and accompanied him out of the hospital wing, absently lifting a hand to rub at his head. He hadn’t used much magic in the last day; given what he expected to happen tonight, he would need all he could gather at his disposal. That made the headache, the sudden flashes of death and torture, worse.

“I don’t think you should go,” Draco said.

“What? No sly hinting around the issue? No metaphors that could mean something else?” Harry stifled the impulse to yawn. He hadn’t had an unbroken night’s sleep since Scrimgeour died. He took cat-naps when he could, usually about an hour in duration. Hermione had found a book in the library that claimed such short periods of rest were actually more healthy than eight or nine hours of unbroken sleep. Neither Snape nor Draco had been amused when Harry repeated that to them.

“Of course not.” Draco folded his arms. “Vampires are intensely dangerous, Harry, and they’ve chosen their ground. This has all the earmarks of a trap. I don’t care how many people you take with you, it’s still dangerous.”

“I know that,” Harry pointed out patiently. “But I can choose the time, and I plan to give them a few minutes’ notice at best. And I’ll have you with me, and Owen, Syrinx, Snape, Regulus, Peter, Henrietta, your mother, and Connor. Moody is meeting us there with Ignifer, Honoria, and Thomas. You honestly don’t think that will be protection enough?”

“I still think it’s a trap,” said Draco. “And with the time they’ve had to prepare, they could overcome all of us. Doesn’t this seem a little suspicious to you, Harry? The resting place of the queen is valuable information.”

“It’s not the same as information on how to destroy her,” said Harry calmly. “Or offering to kill her for me, even. Then I’d be suspicious. But what they ask seems reasonable for people as proud and selfish as vampires. I have a lot of practice in dealing with that kind of person, after all.”

Draco flushed. “Very funny,” he snapped, and closed his eyes to regain his control. When he opened them, he’d bitten his lip hard enough to spill a bit of blood down his chin. Harry made a mental note to tell him to heal that before they met Vermillion and the other vampires. “I don’t think you’re safe, Harry, but I’ll go with you and protect you from yourself.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “You would have been coming with me anyway, prat. I’m not about to put my life in more danger than it already is, you know.”

Draco simply reached out and pulled Harry against him, seemingly wanting nothing more than a hug. Harry willingly gave it, smoothing his hand up and down Draco’s spine and wishing those simple strokes could calm the rapid beat of his heart.

“I know it’s hard,” he whispered. “For all of us, it’s hard. But I’ll stay as safe as I can, Draco. I’m making the safest decisions I can, with the most accurate information. We need as many people as will come to our side to win this war, and with the heavy protection we’ll have going in, the vampires should think twice about springing any trap.”

“I worry,” Draco whispered. “I worry about you, Harry. The toll of this is heaviest on you.”

“That’s impossible to know without interviewing everyone involved,” Harry pointed out gently, glad that Draco had said it anyway. He’d needed to smile. “And what there is of that weight is impossible to change.”

“So you’ll keep just bearing it?”

“Yes, Draco. What else is there to do?”

Draco sighed, and said nothing. Harry planted a kiss on the top of his head and stepped away. There was something else to be done, of course—in this case, speaking with Moon and asking him if he’d heard anything of a vampire called Vermillion before this. There was always something else to do.

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Draco stood close to Harry in ways that no one else did, so of course he would see things that no one else could.

Before they Apparated to the coordinates that Vermillion had given them, for example—coordinates already reported on by Moody as depositing them on a rippled brown-yellow beach with the North Sea breaking just beyond—Draco saw Harry’s face take on an intent, listening expression, as though he were hearing music, and saw him glance along the ranks of wizards accompanying him. From that look, Draco knew, he would memorize the physical condition and position of each wizard or witch.
He would know who was in the most danger if an attack came from north or south, east or west. He could direct the strongest wizards to fall in around the rest.

And there was the fact that he took Draco’s arm with an absent caress which set Draco’s blood racing at a ridiculous pace, probably because he and Harry had spent no time in bed together since Scrimgeour’s assassination. Harry was not, unfortunately, one of those people whose libido seemed encouraged by stress. Draco resolved quietly to himself to see what he could do to change that. For Harry’s sake, of course. Everyone knew that sex relaxed people and left them feeling happier.

And there was the fact that when the first of the vampires stepped forward in the darkness and the wind and came straight for Harry, Harry lifted his head and met his eyes without fear, but his magic humming around him like a bowstring.

He fought them a few nights ago, but he can give this one a chance. Draco kept his own eyes half-averted, so the vampire couldn’t compel him. He supposed it was good that Harry was that kind of person. He couldn’t be vates otherwise.

But it’s why the rest of us are here to protect him. Trusting these blood-suckers is still taking a risk.

“Harry,” said the vampire in a familiar voice that made Draco frown. He should at least have addressed him by title, if he’s serious about being respectful. But when have vampires ever respected anyone without having it beaten into them?

“Vermillion,” said Harry, without any hesitancy that Draco could hear. That was good. When dealing with vampires, uncertainty could cost lives. “I have come to see the resting place of the queen and discuss taking you into the alliance, as we agreed. How many of you are there?”

The darkness seemed to stir, and three other vampires melted out of it to stand beside Vermillion. Draco clenched his fists at his sides and observed them narrowly. Two were male, and clad in the same nondescript but well-tailored wizard clothing as Vermillion. The last was a woman, with long black hair which hung straight as reeds on either side of her face. She wore a flowing gown that showed off her pale shoulders and long, white hands.

Draco knew those hands could grab him by the throat and break his neck in seconds. There might be some Mudbloods who thought vampires were dashing and romantic, and Granger probably thought they were misunderstood and needed to be freed of prejudices just as house elves did, but Draco had grown up with stories of vampires and how they hunted. He let his wand fall into his hand, and waited. If one of them made a move to hurt Harry, he was sure he could summon enough hatred to use the Killing Curse.

More shadows moved, but those were Moody, the Pemberley women, and Rhangnara, stepping close to the vampires’ backs. By the way that Vermillion sniffed, he was aware of them, but did not deign to turn and face them.

“My companions are Adonis, Tammuz, and Psyche,” said Vermillion. “They have agreed to follow me and let me be their spokesman, Harry. But we will need guarantees from you before you see the queen.”

Don’t let them get away with this, Harry, Draco told him without sound, and was sure Snape was sending him the same silent message. They have to respect you, or they’ll manipulate, corrupt, and destroy you as soon as they can, and think nothing of it. Vampires believe that anyone weaker than they are deserves whatever they get.

“No,” said Harry.

Vermillion gave a single, sharp hiss, which reminded Draco far too much of the hisses the hive in the Forbidden Forest had given. “You dare?” he asked. “We approach you as an equal, while you are still mortal, and you would refuse a request?” His posture changed, though how, Draco could not have said, as he didn’t move. Small muscle shifts and perhaps an angling of his face transformed him into a savage predator, though, no longer relaxed, but ready to spring at the slightest motion. “Have a care. We need not show you the queen at all, and then the first you will see of her is when she comes to make your Hogwarts her nest, seasoned with the blood of wizard children.”

Draco fought to keep from vomiting at the thought. Vampires were so protective of their queens because the queens could bear living young, while otherwise vampires increased their numbers only through biting humans. But, to have a nesting site where the live births were possible, the ground needed to be prepared with the blood of hundreds of dead. It was some of the foulest magic that existed, beyond Dark and into filth. The spirits of the wizards—and other creatures—who died at the nesting site would become fodder for the hive, incarnated into the new vampires whether they would or no.

Harry didn’t move. Instead, his magic shifted to mimic what Vermillion had done, suddenly soaring around him to make him more threatening. Draco looked at him, since he couldn’t look at Vermillion or one of the other vampires without risking the
compulsion, and swallowed. Harry stood perfectly still, the wind lifting one dark curl, but his eyes actually cast their own light, cutting the darkness with a faint, eerie green glow like—well, not much like anything else, really, Draco thought, but maybe panther’s eyes set on fire.

Harry didn’t say a word, either. He went on gazing at the vampires, asking without words if they wanted to challenge his power, fang against magic both Dark and Light.

Vermillion moved a step closer. Draco’s wand snapped up, along with half-a-dozen others, and he was pleased to hear someone murmur a time-delayed charm, setting Merlin knew what kind of nasty trap for the vampires if they dared to strike. Behind the vampiress, Psyche, Ignifer Pemberley called fire. It blazed in her hands, a small, intense point of light, and dripped glowing beads of flame on the sand.

None of that made the vampires flinch. Draco watched how closely they all oriented on Harry, and was sure it was the sense of that magic that made Vermillion slowly lower his head and draw his lips over his fangs.

“The queen first,” he said.

No apologies, of course. Draco thought it was probably against some kind of ancient and obscure vampire code to apologize. Instead, Vermillion turned and hissed into the night, at the ocean.

A shimmer that was not light came into being over the waves. Draco, his eyes aching as he tried to follow the stinging curve of it—it hurt to look at—thought it might be the visible sign of the blood-heat a vampire could follow, and which would lead them straight to any but dying prey. The color, if this anti-light had a color at all, would have been dark red or purple, slowly tracing out an enormous bulk that seemed to float beneath the surface of the water. Draco shuddered at the thought of a queen so massive she could not support her weight on land.

A slight tremor ran through the beach.

Draco had little time to think about it before hands shot up out of a pit in the sand and grabbed his ankles.

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Harry threw himself sideways, and the hands that shot out of the concealed pit in the sand missed him. He landed badly, though, half-twisting one ankle, and he couldn’t avoid the crawling female vampire who threw herself out of a shallow trench and at him. One look at her glazed eyes told him this was a worker, however independent Vermillion and his friends were.

He betrayed us.

Or perhaps he’s of the hive.

Harry set his magic loose, in a shimmer of fire that danced over his limbs and curled along above his skin. In moments, it was on the worker’s flesh, clinging fiercely, and filling the night with dancing shadows. Harry saw Vermillion leap back as the shrieking vampiress let Harry go and rolled towards him, her thin, high, death keens filling the air.

Harry snapped a quick glance along the beach. The vampires had been completely covered, both, Harry guessed, for protection from the sun and because of course they didn’t need to breathe. No one else had escaped, and most of them were struggling without success against the superior strength of the vampires. The drone that held Connor simply clutched him stiffly, as if waiting for something, but the others were dipping their heads and pressing their fangs against yielding necks. Adonis, Tammuz, and Psyche had backed off, probably to avoid any chance of getting hit by Light magic that the captive wizards might manage to cast. Vermillion stood still with his arms folded, his eyes looking with equal and cool disinterest on the fighting humans and on the ashes that were all that remained of the worker who had attacked Harry.

For one moment, as he locked eyes with the vampire, all Harry felt was deep, pure, blackest hatred.

And in that instant, Voldemort struck his mind like a comet.

Harry shouted, but the cry was one mainly of rage, and not pain. This was not like the visions Voldemort had shown him, urging him to drop the pretense of having caution or morals and attack. This was much more like the emotion he’d felt the night of Scrimgeour’s assassination, a whirlwind drowning him, pulling him along, calling up all the anger that he’d ever felt for not being able to protect those he loved and turning it against him as a blade.
Voldemort knew what he was about this time, and had chosen his weapon well. No matter where Harry looked, whether he had his eyes open or shut, he saw a vision of someone he loved in danger.

Open, and there was Draco, head dangling limply as the worker fed greedily from his throat, her own throat pulsing in steady swallows.

Shut, and there was Sirius, the last, fey smile on his face before he lifted his wand for the curse that would doom him.

Open, and there was Connor, trying to do something, trying to break free, but unable to perform any spell without his wand.

Shut, and there was Sylarana, flinging herself on the basilisk, her bite sending it into convulsions, her slender golden body becoming less than a smear on the floor of the Chamber of Secrets.

Open, and there was Snape, his face already ashen pale, carved with the lines of so much pain he should never have had to endure.

Shut, and there was Scrimgeour, dying of a poison Harry might have been able to reverse if he hadn’t been so distracted by Snape’s possession, if he could have Apparated to the Minister’s side.

Harry’s grief became rage became hatred at the Dark Lord who had caused and was causing all these losses, and that hatred closed slow iron jaws around his conscience and his soul. He had to fight his way free, but he could only do that while he was being calm, and how he could be calm when people he loved were dying or being drained right in front of him?

He opened his eyes, and was in time to see Honoria drop limply to the sand.

Harry screamed.

His magic lashed about him, casting a film of ice across the beach that made Vermillion step away from him as if dancing, but that did nothing for the division in his skull. If anything, it made it worse. He could hear Voldemort laughing now, whispering to him.

Yes. Why not, Harry? You could come to me, and kill me, and end it now. You know of the Horcruxes, but there are ways to bypass them, ways to slay me and make me stop causing pain to those you love. Isn’t that what you were trained to do? Why should they be taking the brunt of a war that is aimed mainly at you? You are the one I hate, Harry, the one I want to hurt. If you came to me and yielded yourself, then I would stop hunting them. If you came to me and gave yourself, then I would spare anyone that you wanted me to spare, since my heir would have to have some say in the world we made. Is there not some temptation in that vision? Do you not hate yourself for wanting to listen to me, and believe that I mean what I say?

And yes, as much as he knew it wasn’t true, Harry wanted to believe it, and he hated Voldemort for that, too, and the hatred piled on top of the hatred, and he was gasping, choking, drowning, his mind counting the number of pale faces he saw when he opened his eyes, his self-loathing tearing him apart with claws sharper than any hatred Voldemort could have mustered, his scar burning and burning and burning as his vision dimmed.

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Connor pulled and struggled and kept his hand reaching frantically. He did not look up from the hold of the drone’s arms at anyone else, because he knew he would lose his concentration if he could see them, and he was having a hard enough time keeping to his goal without that.

His goal was sane, and simple.

Reach his wand.

His wand was in his robe pocket, from which he’d started to slide it when the sand shook beneath them. But it had fallen back inside when the drone grabbed him. It was still partially sticking out, though, and Connor’s hand had been trapped by the vampire’s arm just slightly above the pocket. If he could reach it, if he could pull it out, then he could do something.

The vampire paid no attention to him whatsoever, even when Connor’s fingers slipped past his elbow a quarter of an inch. Connor restrained the curses he wanted to utter, because that would only waste breath, already a precious commodity in the drone’s embrace, and wriggled his hand again. Sweat was easing its passage a bit, but not enough. If this had been bare flesh to bare flesh, instead of bare flesh against the moldering cloth the vampire wore, it would have been easier.
And any moment the vampire could notice him, and trap his hand more firmly, and he would lose all his priceless progress.

Connor gritted his teeth and forbade himself to think about that. It was the memory of the lessons in compulsion with Sirius—or, rather, Voldemort in Sirius’s body—that let him do so. Voldemort had taught him that, to compel someone else, you had to want that person’s body to move or her mind to change more than anything else in the world. And, right now, Connor wanted his hand to move.

Surge, surge, surge. Connor heard the impact of a body with the sand. And still he didn’t think about it, and still he concentrated, reaching, straining, dying to touch the end of his wand, making holly and phoenix feather the only thing that existed for him.

And then his fingers brushed it.

Strength and power flooded Connor, as much triumph as magic, and he bellowed the spell he’d known he would use if his miracle succeeded, the one Peter had taught him at Lux Aeterna last summer, the one he had a particular fondness for because it was of the Light and could be used to defend.

“Aurora ades dum!”

Dawn blossomed in the mouth of the vampire above him, and the drone shrieked and threw him away, the reflexes in the midst of burning strong enough, it seemed, to overcome even a queen’s command. Connor rolled, and it was Moody’s training that rang through his head now, telling him how to fall, and never, never to let his wand go out of sight. His body could take care of the fall, even if he hit his head, but one of his enemies would take care of his wand unless he claimed it.

There it was, arcing over his head and nearly vanishing behind him. Connor grabbed it, even as he fell heavily on his arse and shoulder.

More shrieks were arising now, and curses, probably from the individual vampires they had come to meet. Connor scrambled up, half-shielding his eyes against the intense light, and saw members of the hive writhing as the sunshine took them, withering like moths. Others were surging up from behind the shadows, though, and making their way towards the people who lay too still on the beach—Snape among them—or staggered, dizzy, trying to recover from blood loss but as yet too shocked to do so. Even Ignifer Pemberley, whose hands drizzled fire, simply stood with her arms hanging at her side, breath slow and head continually shaking.

Connor smiled. He had the impression that it wasn’t a very nice smile.

One of the drone creeping forward, belly to the ground, tried to catch his eye and roll him with compulsion, but Connor snorted and threw it off. He was a compeller, and that made him immune. Besides, he had the best idea for a spell ever. He didn’t think he could manage the Solstice Summons Ron had used last time, but he didn’t need to. This spell actually functioned better in the middle of the night.

“Sol concubia nocte!” he yelled.

And the sun came.

It was a version of the Apricus charm Harry had used above the Forbidden Forest, essentially, but it drew its power from the night around it, and weakened during the day—the Midnight Sun Charm. The sky above them went white, and then golden, and then red-orange, and Connor lifted his head to see lines of fire streaking down the night, eating the darkness as they came.

Those lines followed fated, destined paths to the vampires of the hive, and simply wiped them from existence when they struck. Connor smiled as he watched smear after smear of Dark magic vanish without a trace, becoming flares of dazzling radiance instead.

Sometimes, it was very, very good to be a Light wizard.

He spun, hearing movement behind him, and saw the vampire Vermillion holding his hands up, speaking without respect but with a certain cold dignity. “The vates,” he said. “He is under attack by the Dark Lord.”

Connor spun the other direction, the one he’d last seen Harry in. Yes, Harry lay in the midst of a puddle of ice that endured even the heat of the Midnight Sun Charm, and his eyes were wide and unseeing, as they certainly should not have been given what was happening right in front of him.
Connor knew the spell to use for that, too.

Pointing his wand straight at Harry, he whispered, “Memoriola amoris.”

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In and out, and all he could see was the death and the destruction that Voldemort had dealt, or that Harry had dealt, or that they would deliver together. The world had become hatred, and where it had originated, in his mind or in his training or in the Dark Lord’s thoughts, did not matter anymore. They were a pair of twinned dark birds, flying towards some unknown destination under a black sun.

And then Connor’s spell hit, and Harry’s head was filled with memories of his brother.

He lay on the grass of their lawn in sunshine and watched as Connor struggled to finish a book that Harry would have torn through by now. There was joy and pleasure and pride in the memory, in knowing that his brother was so different from himself, and for the right reasons. When Connor finally tossed the book aside, and rolled over with a frown that became a grin when he saw Harry watching, Harry felt the love spike through his chest and beat against his mind with wings of flame.

Voldemort recoiled. Love was not an emotion he understood, even though he had used it before to manipulate people. He knew it existed, but it was like a human’s understanding that the ways of a vampire hive existed; it did not mean he could think of it from the inside.

Connor held up a frog he’d caught in the pond at Godric’s Hollow, and showed it to Harry. Unfortunately, he didn’t hold it tight enough, and it leaped out of his hands with a croak and a plop that sent it straight back into the pond. Connor stamped his foot, and most of the water flew out of the pond and then settled back with a resounding crash, to splash the frog in turn. It had been Connor’s first show of accidental magic. Harry had smiled at his brother’s slack jaw and wide-open eyes, in the minute before Connor had turned and run back to the house, shrieking for Lily.

Voldemort scraped his claws along the bits of training Harry still had with his mother’s name on them, but another memory stepped into his way.

It was only two years ago, and Connor and Harry had come to Lux Aeterna to spend the Easter holidays with James. Connor was telling their father off; if he hurt Harry again, then Connor would hurt him, badly. It was the product of ten months’ thinking, the struggle Connor had gone through since the previous May to make himself see things from Harry’s perspective and not be jealous of the title and the power that the Boy-Who-Lived name conferred on him.

Voldemort had never had anyone who would fight for him that way. Even Bellatrix’s loyalty, the closest he had ever known to true love, had come to him because of his magic, and for no other reason.

Harry tore himself free, and could feel his body again, his arms and legs and his torso, though all of them were chilled and shivering from the ice around him. He opened his eyes, and saw the night blazing with the light of the Midnight Sun Charm, the vampires being wiped from existence one by one, the bodies or the limping of those he’d brought with him.

His brother’s face.

Harry lashed out with his magic, barely pausing to distinguish the spells from one another, just knowing what he wanted done. Lash and lash and lash, and Snape and Honoria and the others were sent to Hogwarts’s hospital wing, Apparated forcibly there. Lash and lash and lash, and the night filled with light, blazing, eliminating the last of the hive vampires who were pressing forward on the beach. They turned and stumbled, racing for the waves of the North Sea.

A few of them made it. Not many. Harry’s magic took the form of hounds of fire, coursing on their trails, closing golden jaws on their heels and worrying at their robes, and where one tooth touched, their bodies went up in flames.

He grabbed his brother, held him close, and swung around to meet Vermillion’s eyes. Shadows surrounded him and the three vampires who had come with him, rearing up to eat the light whenever it came close. His face was cool and unsmiling, but he inclined his head in a nod, a tiny nod, when he saw Harry looking at him.

“It was a trap, then,” Harry said.

“For both of you,” said Vermillion calmly. “We arranged to have the hive here so that Voldemort might incite your hatred and try
to take you. But we made a promise to reveal the location of the queen to you, and we will.” He nodded to the waves. “She is there, vates. In the sea. If you call powerful allies to your side, you might manage to kill her.”

He turned back to Harry. “And we wished to see if you could defeat Voldemort when he invaded your mind. You have done so. The Dark Lord has not impressed us, and we will not ally with him.” For a moment, his gaze slid sideways to Connor, and a faint smile lifted his lips. “His instructions to the hive to spare your brother, that he might have the pleasure of tormenting him later, were his downfall.”

“I do not wish to make an alliance with you,” Harry said flatly.

Vermillion laughed, briefly showing his fangs. “It is not your choice, vates. We will fight at your side, even if you will not fight at ours.” He casually held up a hand, and shadow flared around him and the other three, gathering them up and whirling them away in what looked like one of the black whirlwinds Harry had called to set Peter, Regulus, and Snape free at the Ministry.

Harry closed his eyes and shook his head.

I think Vermillion would get along well with Evan Rosier.

He held Connor close against himself and whispered, “Thank you. You saved my life. All our lives.”

Connor’s smile and eyes were both bright in the darkness. “Just repaying the debt owed—how many hundreds of times over, Harry?” he muttered, nuzzling his head into his brother’s shoulder. “Let’s go.”

Harry nodded, closed his eyes, and Apparated.

In his head, Voldemort had fallen silent.

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Chapter Six: Indelible Signs

Draco’s eyes weren’t listening to him. He had commanded the room to stop being fuzzy when he opened them, but still his vision had a blurred, drifting white mist in front of it, and he couldn’t move without black spots springing up to cloud the white.

“Draco.”

That voice, at least, he knew, even though when he tried to whip towards it his head fell heavily back against the pillow. Harry sat up in the chair at the edge of the bed and gave him a weary smile. Reaching out, he squeezed Draco’s hand. “You’ll be all right,” he murmured. “Madam Pomfrey’s had a new stock of Blood-Replenishing Potions since—well, since I tried to free the thestrals, actually. It’s one of the things Snape busied himself brewing. She had them on hand when I Apparated you back after the hive vampires bit you.”

“That’s what happened, then,” Draco murmured. He really only remembered a cold body gripping him, and then a surge of heat in his neck. He raised his hand to touch the side of his throat, but Harry gripped his hand and shook his head.

“Madam Pomfrey says that you aren’t to touch that,” he said.

Draco snorted. “And you always do what Madam Pomfrey says?”

“In this case, yes.” Harry’s voice had become iron suddenly, hard as a vampire’s grip, and Draco could make out the worry in his eyes. “Draco, every one of us was bitten except for Connor and me, and Snape and Honoria so badly that they’re going to be weak for days.” For a moment, his eyes darkened, and Draco opened his mouth to ask what was wrong, but Harry shook his head and moved briskly on, the moment vanishing. “I could have lost all of you last night.”

“It was a trap, wasn’t it?” Draco didn’t really look forward to saying that he’d told Harry so, but if it had been a trap then, well, he’d told Harry so.

“Of a sort,” Harry said. “Apparently, Vermillion and his friends were looking for the powerful wizard who’d protect them best against the Ministry, and they wanted to test us against each other and see who emerged victorious. They did help Voldemort set up the trap, but they warned me about the resting place of the queen, they took no part in the battle, and they told Connor what had happened when Voldemort attacked me through his hatred of him again.”

Draco sat up this time, and damn the way his vision seemed to swirl and Harry clucked like an anxious chicken, anyway. “He
tried to get at you again?” he demanded, clutching Harry’s arm.

Harry gave him a bemused glance. “Of course he did, Draco. He’s going to do that until I either devise a way to get him out of my head, or give in and go hunting him.”

Draco shook his head. Harry didn’t understand. *If he’s allowed to worry about us when vampires nearly kill us, then we’re allowed to worry about him when this madman tries to take over his mind.* “Harry, this can’t continue. You understand that, don’t you? More important than any other priority is making sure that Voldemort leaves your head so that you can concentrate on the war without having to mentally battle him.”

Harry spread one hand, never taking his eyes from Draco. The silver dog’s-head emblem in the center of his palm, a reminder of his encounter with Lady Death, winked and flashed as it caught the light. “And how would you suggest I do that, Draco? Occlumency doesn’t work. Potions don’t work. I— ah!”

He closed his eyes and bowed his head as his scar briefly glittered and seemed to open. Draco didn’t think it looked like a well of blood so much as a chasm opening onto a flow of magma. Harry took several deep, quick, huffing breaths, as if he were wounded in the side.

Then he lifted his head, and shook it grimly. “Deaths,” he whispered. “An initiation for new Death Eaters, or at least he wants me to think that’s what’s happening.”

“This only proves my point,” said Draco, and tightened his grip on Harry’s wrists to the point where Harry would have to listen to him. “You need some way to guard your mind from him. First and foremost.” He licked his lips, and ignored the way a net seemed to swing across the corners of his eyes, waiting to claim him. “Will you let me into your head, Harry? Let me possess you?”

Harry stiffened. “I don’t want you that close to his Legilimency, Draco,” he said.

“It’s my choice to risk that.”

“No.”

Draco cocked an eyebrow. “If you don’t want me invading your head, Harry, I can understand that. But if you’re frightened because of what happened last night, and you don’t want to expose me to the risk, then you’ll need to get over that.” He picked up Harry’s right hand and turned it over so that he could kiss the spot where the blood beat. “We fight beside you in this war. Taking risks is my choice.”

Harry closed his eyes. Then he gave a shallow nod.

Draco moved out of his head; his fragile state of consciousness actually made it easier, as his mind was eager to seek a body that wouldn’t shake every time he made a hasty movement. He sank deep into the familiar confines of Harry’s mind, and looked around, trying to see what form Voldemort’s constant Legilimency took here.

He could see it almost at once. It really did look like a tunnel, a hole carving through the foliage of Harry’s emotions, leading into an indefinable, misty distance. Red seamed it, and black, the colors of Dark compulsion magic. Draco could sense the slice of Voldemort’s dominating will, lying along the surface of the tunnel, forming its roof and one of its walls.

But the other wall and the floor were Harry’s to control. Draco saw that at once. If Harry turned around and pushed back at Voldemort, he could take over at least half the tunnel and read himself back into the confines of the Dark Lord’s thoughts. Voldemort would probably shut down the connection then, Draco thought. He wouldn’t want to risk Harry incapacitating him in the same way he had incapacitated Harry, or even reading his thoughts and knowing his plans.

But, of course, it wasn’t a surprise that Harry had never done that. His Legilimency had always been poorer than his Occlumency. Legilimency relied on a dominating will, the urge to possess and control. The Dark Lord could outmatch him at it any day.

*Except that now,* Draco thought sadly as his eyes blinked open, *he will have to learn better than that.*

He held Harry’s hands tight, so he couldn’t pull them away, as he explained what he’d discovered and what Harry would have to do. Sure enough, Harry tried to pull free and think about that alone. Draco gripped and hauled, and Harry let out a little grunt as he found himself half-sprawled on the bed.
“It has to be done,” Draco whispered into his ear. “And because you summon the will once doesn’t mean that you’ll suddenly become an evil and dominating Lord, Harry. Yes, it’s one step on a slippery road, but you don’t have to ride that road all the way to the bottom. You can control yourself. I think all of us trust you enough for that. Even Snape manages to control himself when it comes to reading minds, and he’s a much bitterer man than you’ll ever be.”

“I just—“ Harry swallowed. “It’s one thing to strike back at an enemy because he’s just killed someone else, Draco. But I’ve never planned in cold blood to make a slave of someone else.”

Draco could say nothing. Because Harry hated it, because his vates nature rebelled against it with his all his might, did not change the necessity of it. He stroked Harry’s hair.

“Do you think this one action will make me fall from the vates path?” Harry asked softly. “It could be enough, Draco. If I use compulsion once against someone else, I tumble off.”

Draco blinked. “But that’s ridiculous,” he said. “Or you would have fallen off the first time you used a Body-Bind on someone else after you became vates.”

“It means mental compulsion,” Harry murmured. “Forcing the changing of someone’s mind and actions, the way that Connor can do, and Voldemort—the way that Dumbledore could, and Sirius.” He swallowed. “And inflicting my will on someone else might be close enough to count.”

“So you’d rather live with the headaches and visions that Voldemort inflicts on you?” Draco asked incredulously. He thought that was what Harry was saying, but he couldn’t possibly be actually saying it.

“Yes,” Harry snapped, and twisted away from him. “If it’s that, the choice between enduring some pain or losing my vates path, then I’ll accept the pain, and even give Voldemort the means to enter my head himself.”

“You’re delusional,” Draco hissed, and reached out to capture Harry’s wrist. This time, Harry spun neatly, one of the motions he’d had trained into him from childhood, and avoided the touch without seeming to.

“I’ll speak with you later,” he said, and inclined his head to Draco as if they were little more than acquaintances, and left the hospital wing.

Draco punched the pillow behind him.

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Harry hesitated for a long moment in front of the door to Snape’s quarters. Madam Pomfrey had let him leave the hospital wing when he absolutely refused to lie still or stop criticizing the quality of the Blood-Replenishing Potions she’d chosen for him, and return to his own bed. Regulus, who had suffered only a small loss of blood, was taking care of him for right now. Harry wasn’t sure it was the best course to ask Regulus to leave so that he could have a private talk with Snape.

But he had to. Snape had very nearly died; the low amount of blood in his veins could have drained out at any moment before Harry moved him to the hospital wing, and then it had only been a diagnostic spell Madam Pomfrey had performed which let her know that he and Honoria were the ones she needed to treat first.

Harry sighed, and rapped on the one portion of the door which contained no wards.

He heard shuffling, and then Regulus opened it, his face creasing in a warm, welcoming smile. “Come in, Harry,” he said, stepping out of the way. “He’s been asking for you, but he stopped when I let him know that you were still in the hospital wing, alive and well and watching the others.”

“Thanks, Regulus,” said Harry, entering. He stopped for a long moment and closed his eyes, preparing himself to endure both the coming confrontation and the sudden spike of pain in his skull. When it faded, he opened his eyes, and started. Regulus had come up and put his arm around his shoulders. So deep had Harry been in his own mind that he hadn’t heard him moving.

“This was as hard on you as on any of us,” Regulus whispered. “You don’t need to pretend it wasn’t, Harry.”

Harry tossed his head uneasily and stepped away from the touch. He still didn’t react well to embraces unless he had some time to prepare for them. “I need to speak to Snape in private, Regulus,” he said. “Please. I have something to say that—well, he won’t like to hear it.”
“If you have come about what I suspect you have come about,” Snape’s voice said through the open door between sitting room and bedroom, “then you are right, I will not enjoy it.”

Harry closed one hand into a fist for a moment, then looked at Regulus. Regulus opened his mouth, looking thoughtful, but Snape cut them both off. “Let him come in, Harry. Perhaps, with two voices rather than one, we can convince you of the ridiculousness of this idea soon enough.”

He doesn’t even know what I was going to propose, Harry thought, mutinous, but followed Regulus into the bedroom. Snape was sitting up in bed, which Madam Pomfrey would have wailed to see, though well-supported by pillows. His eyes focused on Harry’s the moment he passed the door, and a bolt of Legilimency went home like an arrow.

Harry gasped and staggered, one hand rising to touch his scar. Snape’s face softened. “My apologies,” he said. “I did not realize the chaos that lingered inside your head.” Then he gave Harry a long, hard stare. “All the more reason for you to be asleep, instead of sitting awake by all our beds, and for you to realize that I will not stop my participation in this battle.”

Rattled, Harry began his speech less gracefully than he’d intended. “I—sir, you’ve lost so much to this war. You suffered under Voldemort’s control for months, and I never noticed. And now your mind’s been hurt, and you’ve nearly died again. Why should you have to sacrifice so much, personally, to this war when you’ve done so much to make up for your old mistakes? You’ve long since proved what kind of man you are: more than the Dark Mark on your arm. More than any possible ‘redemption’ Dumbledore might have tried to inflict on you. You don’t have to keep doing this out of a misplaced sense of guilt.”

Snape was silent for long moments. Then he said, “Regulus, leave us.”

“Severus—”

“Do not call me that!” That was the voice Harry knew from classes, from scoldings, from the man he’d confronted on top of the Astronomy Tower fifteen days ago. “Leave now, Regulus. I assure you, I won’t hurt the boy, but we do have something to discuss.”

Harry could feel Regulus lock eyes with Snape in a silent staring contest over his head. Then he sighed, and said, perhaps a bit petulantly, “Fine,” and shut the door of the bedroom behind him on his way out.

Silence stayed in the room with them, and grew thicker and thicker. Harry locked his eyes on his clenched hands and waited.

“Harry,” Snape said quietly. “I know that you don’t think I’ve only stayed in the battle because I feel guilty for my past. You were in my mind on the Tower. You know how strong a part of this is my—” He paused, then forced the word from his lips as if he were spitting out poison. “Love for you. Why did you approach me with that? Did you honestly think I would ever give up fighting at your side?”

“If I could insult you enough, yes,” said Harry evenly.

“And you would not try to do this with anyone else?” Snape had a tone in the back of his voice that Harry couldn’t quite make out. It might have been a cousin of amusement, but if so, Harry didn’t want to hear the full-bodied thing. “That is insulting in its own way, Harry. Am I so fragile that I cannot bear the blows of war?” He moved, and Harry glanced up to see him pushing back his left sleeve, revealing the Dark Mark. “Do you honestly believe that?”

“No,” said Harry.

“No,” said Harry.

“Then you would not have tried this tactic on anyone else?”

“No, because it wouldn’t have worked on them,” Harry snapped.

Snape’s eyebrows lifted. “Explain that if you would, Harry.”

Harry rose and paced back and forth, restless, wondering if he could actually speak his mind without sounding stupid. Then he realized what he was thinking—as if Snape, like an enemy, would take his words and twist them, or use them as weapons to inflict wounds on him. Someone listening to his thoughts might well have thought he didn’t trust Snape at all.

But I do. Trust him, I mean. It’s just—this is so important, and his situation is so different from anyone else’s, and I know that he’s not going to back off now, and I still prefer to hide some things rather than speak about them.
“Harry? I am waiting.”

“You’ve lost so much,” Harry whispered, talking, but stubbornly refusing to actually look at him. “More than anyone else, sir, across a longer span of years. I thought—when I saw you nearly die, I realized that. And I thought it was possible that if I could hit you with the right mixture of smothering concern and condescension, you’d withdraw from the war. I know that you’d never be completely safe, because Voldemort would still target you for what you are to me, but you could avoid going directly into battle and having things like this happen to you. It wasn’t that I thought guilt was propelling you into this. It was that I thought you’d be angry enough at my seeming to think that guilt was propelling you into this—”

“You’ve quite proven that you belong in Slytherin House already, Harry,” Snape said. “I don’t need this sort of demonstration.”

Harry said nothing.

“Harry. Come here.”

He thought about remaining on the other side of the room to spite Snape, and then perhaps Snape would be angry enough at him to accomplish Harry’s original goal, but he was no longer sure that would work. And Snape did not ask again, but his eyes didn’t waver from Harry’s face, either.

Harry slowly crossed the room, and was beyond surprised when Snape’s left arm curled around him in an awkward embrace and tugged him forward. He struggled for exactly as long as it took Snape to begin speaking.

“I made a vow to myself, Harry, to make my choice again and again from day to day, to insure that I did not simply wake up each morning and continue in the rut of an old allegiance,” Snape whispered into his ear. “And that is what I am doing. If I ever decided to withdraw from the war, I would tell you. In the meantime, love and determination keep me here. It is not only pain.”

“You almost died again, sir,” Harry whispered, and felt the tears he hadn’t been able to shed so far well up against his lids. They were tears of fury and frustration, born of the temptation to scream that Voldemort should just stop and it wasn’t fair. Harry swallowed them back again. Of course Voldemort wouldn’t stop—another excess of fury in his scar reminded him of that—and of course it wasn’t fair. “You’ve paid so much, so many prices. How can I ask that of anyone? How can I ask that your pain should increase, even?”

“You can ask it,” said Snape calmly. “You can ask anything that you like, Harry. I am always free to refuse if I don’t like the price. And you are free to do what you think should be done, for my good and the good of the war effort.” He cupped his hand beneath Harry’s chin and lifted his face, forcing Harry to meet his eyes. “That is why I am not angry at what you did. You manipulated me to stop the increase of my pain, and to spare yourself pain. But nothing will separate me from the war effort but my own choice—not love of you, not anger at you, not weariness.”

“No one should have to bear what you have,” Harry said softly.

“I could say the same thing of you.” Snape’s eyes glittered for a moment. “And were school in session, I might give you a detention for not realizing that. But it does not matter, Harry. What really, truly matters is that you realize that your manipulation does not work on me. I have known hard choices too long and too deeply to allow my emotions to lead me by the nose any more.”

Harry closed his eyes, drew a deep breath, and nodded.

Snape’s hand tightened on his shoulder for a moment, then let him go. “And now,” he said, “you can make up for your attempt to manipulate me.”

Harry blinked. “You said you weren’t angry.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean that you were right to do it,” said Snape remorselessly. “So you’ll take some Dreamless Sleep so that you can rest, Harry, and be ready for the step that you’ve told me you’re going to take tomorrow. The effects of the potion will wear off long before you need to make a speech, so don’t use that as an argument. And you need the sleep more than you need the freedom from the haze, right now. Do not argue with me,” he added, as Harry opened his mouth. “Or I will call Regulus back in and repeat everything that you said to him.”

Harry sighed. He would get a scolding from Regulus as he had, unexpectedly, not received one from Snape, and he didn’t think that he could bear that right now. “I’ll take the potion, sir.”
“Good.” Snape’s arm curled around him again, and dragged Harry back to rest against his shoulder. For a moment, just a moment, Harry closed his eyes and let himself take pleasure, comfort, even rest in the strength of that hold, and not think about the fragility of the heart that beat beneath it.

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“Harry.”

Draco knew from the tension in Harry’s shoulders that his partner had heard him. He didn’t look around, though, only turned and studied himself critically in the mirror that hung on the wall of their bedroom. Harry had conjured it, and he would surely banish it again the instant he was done with it, Draco knew.

The robes he wore resembled the ones he’d worn more than a year ago to Draco’s confirmation festival as a magical heir. They were dark green, and glittered with silver symbols on the bottom that melted and dashed and dodged and darted in and out of each other, snakes becoming runes becoming small ovals fringed with lines like eyelashes. Draco knew that some of the symbols proclaimed Harry as the heir of the Black line, and another, a circle with thirteen points of which five were connected, said that he was in a joining ritual of which five rituals had been completed.

“I suppose that will have to do,” Harry murmured, and the mirror vanished.

“Harry, I wanted to talk to you,” said Draco, and took a firm step forward.

“I have to go outside the school now,” Harry said, lifting his head. “You know that I have to, Draco. When I ordered the golden bubbles to travel from wizarding village to wizarding village, I also ordered them to say that I would accept the help of anyone who wanted to give it at Hogwarts, on Midsummer afternoon. That means that I have to wear these robes, and make a certain speech, and accept an oath from anyone who wants to give it.”

“And hate every minute of it,” Draco muttered.

Harry’s shoulders shifted. “I know that I need help to fight him, Draco. I don’t hate that.”

“No. Just the other things, the things that anyone else would take pleasure in.” Draco stepped forward and clasped Harry’s face with his hands, holding him when he would have withdrawn. “And I wanted to say that I do understand why you hate them, Harry, and why you don’t want to use Legilimency on Voldemort. I never thought you should do it simply because I said so.”

Harry blinked, and a shadow that had been in his eyes since their argument in the hospital wing yesterday vanished. Harry gave a single, shallow nod, gaze locked on Draco’s. “Then why?”

“Because I would rather see you alive and healthy and doing something you hate than dead or broken mentally,” said Draco, and pulled Harry against him. He tried desperately to ignore the scent of Harry’s hair and the softness of his neck. He wanted to kiss and lick and suck, throw Harry down on the bed and do all the things they hadn’t had the time to do lately—he was determined not to let their partnership become a casualty of the war. But they really didn’t have time now, any more than they had at another hour of the day. Harry had to make a formal presentation, and he had to look the part. He’d dressed up in the robes even though he hated them, because it was what people would expect, and it added to the symbolic force of the role he played. Draco couldn’t ruin that for him. “And I don’t think that using Legilimency on Voldemort would count as forsaking your vows to be vates, not when he’s already tortured or killed or otherwise stepped on the free wills of so many other people.”

Harry stirred in Draco’s arms, but didn’t make an attempt to shrug off the hold, for which Draco was grateful. “I hate this,” he said softly, with a passionate loathing in his voice that made Draco shiver, and feel grateful it would never be directed at him. “Being in control. I can put up with rituals and dances and special robes and all the rest of it when I know that I’m an equal among equals. But this—” He plucked at the sleeve of his robe as if it were made of spiderwebs. “I don’t want this, not when it says that I stand above other people, and have the right to command them.”

“Because I would rather see you alive and healthy and doing something you hate than dead or broken mentally,” said Draco, and pulled Harry against him. He tried desperately to ignore the scent of Harry’s hair and the softness of his neck. He wanted to kiss and lick and suck, throw Harry down on the bed and do all the things they hadn’t had the time to do lately—he was determined not to let their partnership become a casualty of the war. But they really didn’t have time now, any more than they had at another hour of the day. Harry had to make a formal presentation, and he had to look the part. He’d dressed up in the robes even though he hated them, because it was what people would expect, and it added to the symbolic force of the role he played. Draco couldn’t ruin that for him. “And I don’t think that using Legilimency on Voldemort would count as forsaking your vows to be vates, not when he’s already tortured or killed or otherwise stepped on the free wills of so many other people.”

Harry met his eyes, his own wide and desolate. “I know what has to be done,” he muttered. “I know that there are many people
who will follow me if I show that I’m willing to tell them what to do some of the time. They can’t gain the strength and the
confidence to make their own decisions without knowing what other people are also doing, and so I need to coordinate those
decisions. They can’t act in isolation. And they can gain strength and courage knowing I’m behind them, even if I’m not
physically present at every battle.” He folded his arms. “They’re used to the way Lords act, whether or not I call myself by that
name. So acting that way some of the time is the easiest way to win this war.

“I’ll do it. But I hate it.”

Draco smiled and kissed the back of Harry’s neck, letting Harry feel the smile against his skin. “Harry,” he said quietly.

“What?”

“The very fact that you hate it means that you’ll watch your own behavior more vigilantly, and you have a very slim chance of
becoming what Voldemort is, or Dumbledore was.” Draco stepped back and met his gaze again. “You’re right. This will calm and
inspire people, and it’s easier than arguing with every single person who wants to ally with you. It doesn’t hurt them. Or do you
think that Connor’s status, when he was the Boy-Who-Lived, would have hurt someone who wanted to follow him?”

Harry’s mouth, opening to voice a protest, shut with a snap. Draco nodded and tugged at his hair. “It’s not the behavior that
worries you, then, so much as the person doing it. And we’ve discussed before, Harry, how silly it is to think that you’re the
exception to all rules and can somehow cause people pain through a behavior that wouldn’t cause pain if anyone else did it. So do
relax.”

“Thank you, Draco,” Harry said, and turned, and pulled him into one fierce kiss before he exited their bedroom with a determined
stride.

Draco blinked and touched his flushed cheek, then shrugged. It wouldn’t do for Harry to arrive at the ceremony completely
mussed, but he supposed it wasn’t such a problem for Harry’s lover. His major part today was to stand behind Harry, and if he
grinned like an idiot while he did it, that was acceptable.

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Harry’s mind was busy with past Midsummers as he strode towards the ring of people waiting near the Forbidden Forest.

A year ago, the ground had been littered with corpses. Today, the sun stormed across the sky as if to deny that any such thing had
ever happened, and the people slowly turning to face Harry were all alive.

Two years ago, it had been dark in the graveyard and blood-red with the loss of his hand. Today a left hand swung on the end of
his wrist again, even if it was the one marked with the silver emblem of Lady Death.

And today he had something to do that would have horrified him more, ahead of time, than either of those things. He could face
pain, and loss, and death. He could face a battle where he had planned every movement and knew that some casualties would
occur on his side, but that those of the Death Eaters were likely to be far greater.

He was not so sure he could face a ceremony that led him so far towards becoming something he hated.

Ancient Lords and Ladies had not all gathered their companions in silence and secrecy, the way that Voldemort had done with the
Death Eaters and Dumbledore had done with the Order of the Phoenix. Some of them had sent out public calls, especially if they
were of the Light, and told anyone who wanted to follow them in no uncertain terms what would be expected of them and why
they wanted companions. Harry had followed that tradition with his golden bubbles, and that would be what had pulled some of
the people here now to him: the following of tradition, the comforting familiarity. Harry could not expect them to jump headlong
at the idea of serving someone who did everything differently.

But then, how far could he walk along this road before his similarities to a Lord became Lordship? Draco and Snape might have
faith in him to avoid that fate forever, but Harry had swung on the abyss above his hatred of Voldemort. He knew things about
himself that he never wanted to share with them. He had learned the first of them in the Chamber of Secrets when Sylarané died,
that he was capable of wishing death on his brother and his parents, and now—

But there was no other way.

Or there is, and you didn’t think hard enough to find it.
That would always be the specter haunting the back of his mind, in battle as well as out of it, Harry thought. He forced himself, now, to concentrate on the people in front of him, and give a small smile. If he could walk the thin line between love and hatred, knowing Voldemort could snatch him at any moment, surely he could walk a similarly thin line between formal ceremony and actual domination.

He spread his hands and called an ivory platform from the ground, letting it rise beneath him and lift him up. That was another part of a Calling ceremony like this: Lords and Ladies used their magic as a demonstration of their strength and why they were worthy to lead willing recruits. Harry actually didn’t mind this part, since it eased the pounding pain in his head.

“Thank you for coming,” he said, turning the air sideways so that it would bear his voice better than any other sound. “I wish you to know exactly what I am, and what I am offering. The only formal name I will claim, for now, is Harry. I belong to no family save that which I choose to honor. The man who sired me and the woman who bore me have no claim on my loyalty, and though my father’s line was Light pureblood, I have no loyalty to the Light purebloods above all else. I am not of that heritage.

“I call myself vates. That means walking the path of freedom, offering freedom to magical creatures as the most bound of us all, but also to wizards and witches who join me. It also means voluntary limitation, because at some points one’s actions begin to intrude on the freedom of others. For me, it means not claiming every honor I could, not commanding or compelling others, not taking advantage of opportunities that would harm others, and not benefiting from the service of enslaved species such as house elves. What one chooses not to do is just as important as what one chooses to do.

“I call myself legal heir of the Black line, with the permission of its blood and legal descendant, Regulus Black.” His eyes sought out Regulus’s where he stood in the front of the crowd, and Regulus sent him a warm smile. “That gives me access to the fortunes of a Dark pureblood heritage. I acknowledge this tie and claim it mine.

“I call myself the Boy-Who-Lived, the war leader of an effort against Voldemort.” Many still flinched at that name, but not as many as he had expected. Harry wondered if it had anything to do with the set masks of many faces, showing those, like the Weasleys, who had lost family members to Voldemort and had resolved to be angry rather than afraid. “I say that I will fight him until he is dead or I die. I ask others to follow me in that fight. If you agree, I will arrange local networks of defense, including arranging teaching of defensive magic and Dark Arts for those who want it. Or you may remain with me, if that is your decision, and go to battles all around Britain. Whether you defend a beloved home or defend the principles on which this war effort stands, you are welcome.”

He paced slowly back and forth on the platform, meeting pair after pair of eyes, and holding them until they fell or the person nodded back to him. All the Weasleys were there—or all the remaining Weasleys, at least—and Augusta Longbottom, Neville’s grandmother, standing with her hand on his shoulder. Luna leaned against her father. Dionysus Hornblower stood in the background, taking numerous photos. Priscilla Burke, Thomas’s wife, and his children were there as well, and Thomas waved madly to Harry before turning to scribble down something on the scroll he held. Owen and Syrinx stood in front of the platform, chins high with exultant pride. It was something, Harry supposed, to be able to say that they had followed and honored all these principles Harry was talking about long before this meeting.

“How you choose to commit is up to you,” Harry continued calmly. “I will brand those who wish it with the lightning bolt.” He never tasted words so foul, but he made himself say it. *I will always hate this, but they need it.* “I will match those who ask with dueling teachers. I will be grateful to accept those with specialized skills into specialized positions. But I ask for a commitment. If, after hearing me say this, you no longer wish to join the fight against Voldemort, I ask you to leave now.”

A few people Apparated away from the crowd, but not many. Harry nodded. “Then who will be the first to come forward?” he asked.

To his surprise, it was Augusta Longbottom. Neville walked beside her, but Harry was sure it was the old witch’s decision to come to him. Her eyes never wavered from his face, and there was a deep resolve in her expression that reminded Harry of Laura Gloryflower.

“Vates,” she said. The hideous purple vulture on her hat bobbed as she gave him a slow nod. “I must ask if you are serious about the announcement you made a short time ago, that you would fight for the rights of those witches and wizards who are half-human but have had to hide their heritage.”

Harry blinked. “Yes, madam. I am.”

Augusta nodded once more, then whispered, *Finite Incantatem.*

A glamour charm so old and deep that Harry hadn’t sensed it ripped off her in strips and dropped away. He blinked again when he
saw her eyes alter color to a deep green, and her face push outward into a cat-like muzzle. Gray dapples appeared as well, lying
like shadows along her skin, rosettes that passed under her clothing. She turned, and Harry saw the weight of a golden, similarly
spotted tail swaying behind her.

Amid exclamations of shock, the clearest sound, to Harry, was Neville’s voice whispering, “Grandmother?”

Augusta smiled fiercely down at him and stroked his hair. “I am still myself, Neville. And still a Longbottom.” She looked up at
Harry. “My parents went on a honeymoon to South America soon after they were married,” she said calmly. “They chose a bad
time to visit the Peruvian Vipertooth reserve, though—just after some of them broke free. During the dragons’ stampede, my
parents were separated. My father found his wife, or a woman he thought was his wife, and stayed with her a few days. Then she
vanished, and the next morning he found his wife wandering lost in the jungle.”

Harry cocked his head. “Werejaguar?” Given the signs on Augusta’s skin and the tale she told, that was the only explanation he
could think of.

Augusta nodded. “Werejaguars,” she explained, to Neville’s staring face, “are sentient jaguars who can take the form of humans
when they wish. They once lived in close contact with both wizards and Muggles, before the Spanish conquest, and were
worshipped as gods. And they are very, very good at glamour charms, illusions, and shadow magic—as they should be, when they
can hide in plain sunlight. My mother took on the form of my father’s wife for a time, because she wished to, and then changed
back to her own form and bore me. Two years later, I showed up on my father’s doorstep in England.” She shook her head
slightly. “I don’t remember much of the two years my mother kept me, but my father claimed me and bound me magically as heir
to the Longbottom line. And all my life, I have learned to hide what I am.” She nodded to Harry. “You could change that. I wish
to see it changed. My heritage does not give me as much trouble as some others have, but I am of the Light. I detest subterfuge
and deception, and I have lived a lie. Now that I know you will fight for half-humans like me, vates, I am prepared to swear.” She
drew her wand. “Votum ignigena!”

Gold spread from her palm, a welling line that reminded Harry for an eerie moment of his own scar, and the way it looked when it
first opened and began to bleed. It did not resemble fire, though the incantation called it that. This was the warm color of
lamplight, or of the wings of the gryphon Harry had seen last Midwinter when the Light answered Fawkes’s sacrifice. Augusta
Longbottom knelt, with difficulty, and then looked up at Harry.

“I would give the Fire Oath,” she said. “It Transfigures some of my blood to fire, and passes my promise to you. I swear to follow
you, to be loyal, to struggle against Voldemort in such ways as I can without injuring my honor. Should I break my promise, then
the rest of my blood ignites, and that is the end of me. Do you accept this promise, vates?”

Harry would have said no even a year ago, he knew. And now he could not. He had to rely on others, as he’d told himself on the
Astronomy Tower. He had to let other people fight beside him if they willed it, and in the ways they desired. He’d had that
brought home to him again after Snape’s speech about how it would be his own choice, and only that, that would make him leave
the war effort.

“I accept,” he breathed.

The yellow line of light lashed like a whip across Augusta’s palms, and then down her right arm. Harry found himself smiling
faintly. Of course. A Dark Lord marks the left forearm, but Light Lords more often marked the right.

When the light went out, Augusta bore a faint, round burn in the center of each palm, and a burn shaped like a lightning bolt on
her right forearm. She nodded to Harry and stood slowly, creakily. “I think my grandson has something to say to you,” she said,
and then put a hand on Neville’s shoulder and pushed him forward.

Neville stumbled a bit—Harry thought he was still taken by surprise that Augusta carried werejaguar blood in her veins—but he
lifted his head proudly when he saw Harry looking at him.

“I want to help, Harry,” he said. “I know I’m not always the best wizard, but I’m good in Herbology, and I’ve been learning the
proper spells from you and Moody, and—I want to help.” He ended by chewing his lip, as if he wondered whether he should have
said something more specific.

Harry smiled and nodded. “You can, Neville. I know that you were working on plants that could counter Indigena Yaxley’s vines.
I’m putting you in charge of that. Develop as many plants as you can that you think could help defend people, either from an
attack or from her specific weapons like her poisons and her thorns.”

Neville’s face brightened. “Thank you, Harry!”
Harry gently steered him back to his grandmother, and then, as the Longbottoms moved off, he stood in silence again, waiting for the next claimant. He didn’t need to wait long, though.

A cloaked woman in the front row moved forward, and lowered her hood the moment she was in front of Harry. Harry blinked. He would not have expected Lazuli Yaxley here; he had thought it would be too Light for her, or, at the very least, too public.

Of course, she walked the paths of Light as well as Dark. Harry supposed that could lead to a double allegiance. And she might always have meant to make her alliance with Harry public.

“My lady,” he said. “What form of commitment will you make to me?”

“One based on the future,” Lazuli answered. Her eyes were colder than those of anyone Harry had ever met, but he knew the reason. Every single day was a battle for her, against pain and for the consequences of her choice: the half-human daughter, Jacinth, she’d borne to some completely inhuman thing she met in the paths. “I wish to fight beside you. My sister Indigena knows of magic I will never possess. But it is her will that makes her dangerous. If she were all ambition and dreams and no determination, she would never have changed the world. I wish to change it back, Harry, to act as her counterbalance.” She made his first name sound as formal as any title, and when she dropped into a kneeling posture, she did it without a trace of actual submissiveness. “Do I have your permission to join you?”

“Yes, of course,” Harry said. “And what mark will you take?”

“The snake.”

Harry frowned. The snake had been a symbol of several Dark Lords, sometimes by itself and sometimes as part of a Mark like the one Voldemort used. “I use a lightning bolt, my lady, even when I take a sworn companion, and that is the most extreme form of marking I give.”

“I realize this,” said Lazuli. “But you have no one else in your train, I believe, Harry, who is doing this to oppose a member of her family. Those of your allies who have experienced a split in their blood—” her eyes tracked towards Draco, who stood beside him, and Millicent, on the right side of the platform “—have done so through no fault of their own. I wish the snake as an ouroboros, the snake that feeds on its own tail and so comes back to its own beginning, to show that what one member of my family begins, another must finish.”

Harry hesitated again, but he had said that he would do this, even as he hated it. Lazuli was hardly trying to make him like this, only do it.

“Hold out your left arm,” he whispered.

She did, and he winced at the chewed look of it revealed as her sleeve fell back. But she had chosen this. Harry placed his hand in the center of the thickest part of her arm and closed his eyes, trying to picture a serpent eating its own tail that would be appropriate for this very dangerous and very strong-willed woman.

The mark that materialized in his mind was not, perhaps, the most appropriate—once again he felt that he could have thought of something better, if only he’d thought—but his magic seized it and guided it into Lazuli’s flesh before Harry could decide on a different one. He lifted his hand, and Lazuli looked without expression at the gray-black snake eating its tail on her arm. The scales were the color of her daughter’s, and the serpent’s yellow eyes resembled Jacinth’s, as well.

“I’m—” Harry began.

“You remember the color of her scales,” said Lazuli, and there was something in her voice that made Harry shut his mouth with a harsh click.

Never taking her eyes off the serpent, Lazuli stood and retreated. Harry shook his head, and then had to smile at the Weasleys, who were coming forward as a body. He had the feeling that he’d just been offered a declaration of loyalty deeper and richer than many he would know, but Lazuli had used no words for it beyond the ones she’d already spoken, and so he didn’t know its exact nature.

“We wish to help you, Harry,” Mr. Weasley said, drawing his attention. His face was pale and drained, but he looked less tired than he had at Percy’s funeral. Harry found himself remembering that this man had always been nice to Connor, to the point of sheltering him during that horrible summer between fourth and fifth years when their parents’ trial was beginning. “We’re always
Light wizards, we’ve never followed a Dark leader, but we’ve decided that you’re Light enough for us.”

“Even though such a burden should never have fallen on a child so young,” Mrs. Weasley said, and then sniffled and patted at her cheeks with a handkerchief.

Harry nodded to them, and then glanced at the two Weasleys he knew the least, the two eldest sons. He’d met Bill only once, on his visit to the Burrow just after his parents had been arrested, and Charlie not at all. Bill’s face was grim, as though he carried the shadow of Percy’s death in his heart, and Charlie had a frightening intensity about his eyes.

“We want to become sworn companions,” said Bill.

Harry blinked. “But—” he said intelligently, and stopped.

“What about our jobs?” Charlie had a soft voice, or perhaps he was only making it soft so that he wouldn’t break into a shout. Harry gave him a cautious nod. Charlie snorted, and lowered his voice a bit. “I suppose you know that I’m a Dragon-Keeper in Romania, Harry?” Harry nodded again, and Charlie’s smile turned predatory. “Do you have any idea what it means to me, that you’ve shown yourself willing to fight for the rights of magical creatures, and try to preserve the freedom of dragons instead of binding or killing them?”

“And I work with goblins,” Bill added, turning his head so that the fang-shaped earring swung. “It’s the same for me, Harry. You’re one of the few wizards I’ve met who treats them like real people. And they’re perfectly willing to spare me for a while, so that I can help you.”

Fred and George were the next to approach, both their faces cast in an iron mold. “Harry, you’ll have—"

“Any of our products you need. Some of them are—"

“Better in battle than as jokes. I’ll not deny that we—"

“We only ask for battle,” they finished, and then stood looking expectantly at him.

“Thank you both,” Harry murmured, which seemed to be all they were waiting for. He turned to Ron and Ginny, curious as to what they wanted. Ron was an adult now, but Ginny wasn’t. Their parents might argue for them both to make the same commitment of defense the elder Weasleys were making, but nothing more.

Ron met his gaze and held it, in a way that Harry couldn’t look away from. “I want to fight,” he said. “Take me with you into battle.”

Harry eyed him for a moment, and then stifled a shudder. Ron’s magic boiled around him like a leashed cat, dangerously near to developing a life of its own. It would if it were confined much longer. It was best to let him work off that dangerous energy in
battle, and it wasn’t as though they would have a shortage of them in this war.

“I’ll do it,” he said. “Do you want to stay at Hogwarts for the summer holidays?”

Mrs. Weasley offered a little sob, but Ron didn’t even glance at his parents. “Yes,” he said. “Just in case a battle happens and I would miss it otherwise.”

Harry nodded, then glanced at Ginny.

“I can’t fight beside you all the time yet, for—obvious reasons.” Ginny glared at her mother, who pretended not to notice. “But I want to help train people. I’ve been reading up on the theory behind Defense Against the Dark Arts, and I know a lot of the spells that Moody and you showed us in the dueling club by name and incantation and wand movement, even if I can’t perform them all. I can at least show people what to do. You said that you needed dueling teachers, to teach local wizards and witches how to protect themselves. I want to do that.”

Harry felt his face relax into a smile. He had been wondering where he would find teachers, since most of the people around him—Moody included—wanted to fight with him instead of stay behind and instruct. Ginny’s youth would actually help him in this case, since Mr. and Mrs. Weasley didn’t want her fighting yet. “Thank you, Ginny. I accept that offer. Would you like to stay at Hogwarts as well?”

“Ginny will be staying at the Burrow,” Mr. Weasley cut in.

Harry winced. I don’t like this, either, and I don’t have to. He faced Mr. Weasley directly. “That will make it hard for her to travel around and teach others as she needs to,” he said quietly. “Hogwarts is heavily-warded; she’ll be safe here. And it’s a central location where people can learn and then take the knowledge back home. I know that you can defend the Burrow, Mr. Weasley, and Ginny too, but not everyone is that lucky.”

Mrs. Weasley bowed her head. “I don’t want her to go,” she whispered. “Ginny’s so young still.”

“Not so young, Mum,” said Ginny, and her voice was gentler than Harry would have believed it could be. It reminded him of the way he used to talk to Lily. “And if you forbid me to do it, I’ll do it anyway, like I ran away to Woodhouse and fought the vampires in the Forest a few nights ago. I need to do this, and I’ll be good at it, and Harry can use the help.”

“Ginny,” Mr. Weasley said, drawing her attention. “Do you really want to do this?”

Ginny lifted her chin and nodded. Her father watched her for a moment more, then sighed and drew his wife into his arms. “We have to let her go, Molly,” he whispered. “Just because she’s not seventeen yet doesn’t—mean anything. It didn’t mean anything when we were growing up, either, you remember. Children younger than Ginny were becoming Death Eaters, and casting the Killing Curse. At least she’s chosen the right side.”

Mrs. Weasley began to cry. Ginny touched her mother on the back, then faced Harry. “I’ll be staying at Hogwarts.”

Harry nodded to her, then faced the rest. Other people he didn’t know, or had only heard of by reputation, were coming forward now, Dark families and Light, some of them half-human, some of them people who had given up their house elves, some of them people who had written him letters earnestly pledging support.

He collected oaths from some of them, but not nearly as many as he had feared. Many of them were interested in becoming better duelists so that they stood some chance of defending their families or home villages from a Death Eater attack. Others, often older witches and wizards who had attended Hogwarts years ago, wanted to teach, and to talk with Harry about what spells would be most useful. Others volunteered their services as liaisons between Harry and the wizarding villages, able to cast the phoenix-song communication spell already and quickly and neatly summarize a dangerous situation and the strengths and weaknesses of the people they knew.

Halfway through the afternoon, Harry had to blink and realize that he had the beginnings of a defensive structure growing up around him, something like an army but not nearly as hateful, and that so far the oaths he accepted and the orders he issued didn’t seem to have hurt anyone. His biggest personal danger was a sore throat from all the talking he was doing.

Perhaps—perhaps—

Perhaps I’m still distinguishable from a Lord after all.
Chapter Seven: The Order of the Firebird

“I know it’s not the same,” Connor whispered as he launched the paper boat into the water, and then wondered who he was talking to—sun, or sand, or sky, or sea. “But I wanted to celebrate this anyway.”

He stepped back as the boat glided away, bobbing and then tumbling on the swells. The sand beneath his feet rasped softly—the sand of the beach where James had brought him and Harry twice on Midsummer to continue a ritual that the Potters had completed since the beginning of time, essentially. Connor hadn’t returned last year, though that was mostly because of the battle. And today he hadn’t sent the boat off at dawn, as the ritual strictly called for. But that didn’t matter as much as completing the ritual on the same day, he thought, even if it was almost noon now, and the sun was high enough to cast multiple trails of dazzling light across the water, not just one.

“We came from the east,” he said, and shook his head when the words seemed to clank, falling around him like limp chains. Who came? James doesn’t have the magic to be considered part of the family line anymore, and Harry isn’t a Potter.

Of course, that didn’t mean the Potters were gone. There was still him.

Connor frowned. I don’t think I care for the sensation of being the sole support of a bloodline. It’s lonely.

He kept his eyes on his boat, watching the tiny parchment sail flutter bravely as it crested one wave, and then another. It probably sank eventually, but not before it vanished. Connor smiled. He could live with the vision of the ship passing unharmed into the future, even if it sank a short time later.

Turning, he waded out of the shallow water and back onto the beach. Peter, who had brought him, nodded and smiled at him.

“Are you ready to practice Apparating?” he asked.

“Ready or not, I need to be,” Connor said. “Thanks for bringing me here.”

“Of course,” said Peter, his eyes softening. “I would have done it anyway, Connor, you realize, whether or not this was Midsummer, once you told me that you wanted to practice.”

Connor didn’t say that he’d been waiting for Peter to recover somewhat from the effects of the vampire bites before he suggested Apparition practice, or that he actually preferred this day, since it gave him something to do while Harry was busy gathering his army. He had briefly considered participating in the ceremony, but it would have made him feel too strange to swear an oath to his own twin, even if he was the last Potter and thus the last representative of an important Light pureblood family. He wanted to do something else, and learning to Apparate would ultimately benefit both Harry and the war they were trying to fight.

“Thanks,” he told Peter again. “What’s the first step?”

“You need concentration,” said Peter. “It’s impossible to Apparate to a place that you can’t imagine, whether that’s because someone’s described it to you or you know it. Look at that place up the beach, for example, next to that piece of driftwood.” He waved his wand, and a white log glittered and caught the light of a Lumos charm. “Do you think you can know it from this distance?”

“I suppose,” Connor said doubtfully, squinting. His eyes weren’t bad, especially given that he had to chase a Snitch around in all sorts of weather, but he had never before tried to fix a nondescript location so firmly in his mind. He could more easily have Apparated to a place like Gryffindor Tower. He tried, now, to memorize the particular way the driftwood bent and the small shadow it cast on the sand, while being sure that it was a losing battle.

“Good, then,” Peter whispered, his voice soft, lulling. Connor felt himself slip almost into a trance as Peter’s hand gripped his shoulder and guided him around. “Now, face the driftwood. All you want is to get there. There’s a distance between you and it, one that shouldn’t be there. Do you see the distance?”

“Yes.” Connor eyed the stretch of sand unenthusiastically. It really shouldn’t be there, should it? He should possess the magic to cross it and land next to the log if he wanted without using his feet. It wasn’t worth the time it would take to cross it using his feet.

“Good,” Peter murmured. “Now. Can you feel your magic boiling up, answering the call of your will?”
“Yes,” Connor whispered again. The stretch of sand grew more hateful as he glared at it. Why was it there? Why couldn’t he have already been at the driftwood? It really shouldn’t exist.

“Good,” Peter said a third time. “Now, can you make the leap to the driftwood? It ought to be a simple thing, given how much you want it, and how short the distance is.”

Connor snorted. “Of course it should be.”

He called on his magic, and the driftwood seemed to shine as he summoned it closer. He saw it tremble, and realized with a frown that that wasn’t right. He didn’t want to pull the driftwood off whatever invisible support in the sand it rested on. A moment later, though, he understood.

He relaxed the pull of his magic, and instead of thinking that he wanted the driftwood to come to him, he went to the driftwood.

The world around him turned to black, dizzying nothingness, squeezing and rolling him up as if in a tube. But Connor had known this before, and he didn’t panic. If this was the best way to eliminate that unnatural distance between himself and the driftwood, then he would use it.

He came out with a sharp stagger next to the bend of the driftwood. But the projecting limbs didn’t hurt him, because he’d carefully planned where he should alight. The distance made sense when he was on the patch of sand in its shadow, and could catch himself on one of the branches with his right hand.

“Well done, Connor!”

Connor blinked and glanced up, to see Peter applauding from a good distance down the beach, looking as small from this angle as the driftwood log had from his position a few minutes ago. Hesitantly, he lifted a hand and waved back, still recovering from the shock of suddenly having everything be as it should, with him next to the log and the distance crossed.

And then it really hit him. He’d Apparated. And he hadn’t Splinched himself, either, as a careful look down at his body showed. Connor threw back his head and laughed in exultation.

Peter came up to him a few moments later, looking somewhere between smug and pleased. “That’s the best technique to use, I think,” he murmured, his hand resting on Connor’s shoulder. “Others tell you to be aware of your body at all times, so that you don’t leave a piece behind or send one ahead when you leap, but that only adds an extra layer of anxiety to the process that I don’t think anyone really needs. It’s much better to concentrate on the place, and make irritation one of the forces of magic that answers your needs.”

“It is,” Connor agreed, though he knew he might only be saying that because the method was the one that had worked for him. But so what? He was allowed to like it because it worked. He gave Peter a hug he could no more have resisted giving than he could have resisted anger at the driftwood when he realized it wasn’t where it was supposed to be. “Can we try to make it faster this time?”

“Oh course,” said Peter, and squeezed him in turn, and then stepped away to direct Connor’s attention to the place at the edge of the beach where they’d stood a few moments before his Apparition.

My first successful Apparition. The first of many more.

Grinning like a fool, Connor forced himself to attend closely to what Peter was saying.

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This is a most unusual invitation.

Indigena tapped the folded parchment against her wrist, keeping her face calm as she considered the house in front of her. Of course she’d visited it before, but she hadn’t come here since her mother died. She had had Thornhall as her rightful inheritance, and, more importantly, the gardens and greenhouses that surrounded Thornhall. She had no reason to come to Briar-Rise.

Yet here she was again, and here the house was, quiet and resting, wound with spells to defeat Muggles that included ones to make them fall asleep when they came in sight of it. It was denser and darker than Thornhall, built of a black stone that Indigena had never seen elsewhere, but with the individual blocks faceted and made to hook into each other like pieces of an intricate puzzle. The windows were enormous black portals, without shutters or curtains, but with spells to insure that someone standing
outside couldn’t use them to spy on those inside. Black canes of briars framed the windows and acted as decorations on the walls and roof of the house, but Indigena could feel no empathy for them. They were purely magical, artificial, not the living plants that she’d devoted so much time to caring for in Thornhall.

And yet her sister had issued her an invitation to visit it.

Indigena began to walk. It was Midsummer Day, which meant a very great deal of sun, and the leaves and petals curled under her skin rejoiced in it even if she didn’t. The tendrils in her hair writhed high, licking at the light, quivering now and then in joy that had Indigena reluctantly smiling as she pressed her hand flat against Briar-Rise’s door.

For a moment, the door sparked, and the symbol of the Yaxley family appeared: a black thorn tree against a rising full moon, with the family motto floating below in dark letters. *Vita desinit, decus permanit.*

Then the symbol died, and the door swung open with a faint click. Indigena saw no house elf on the other side, or human. Of course not. Her sister had let her house elves go when she allied herself with Harry.

She felt her way forward, through corridors in which wards guided her, creating a narrow aisle in the midst of the magic down which she could pass. Indigena shook her head. Lazuli was trying mightily to convince Indigena that she was powerful and didn’t fear her sister. That only filled Indigena with sadness and irritation. *I have honor to compel me to serve my Lord. What has sent her to Harry’s side? Worry over the future of her daughter, not something so high as honor.*

She ended up at last in the biggest room of the house, a library like a pit, with multiple hearths facing each other in which magical fires blazed, one red, one blue, and one green. The room was octagonal, or possibly shaped like a heptagon; the presence of bookshelves all along the walls kept Indigena from getting an accurate count of their numbers. The walls curled with briars like a forest, but once again they were carved and painted, and the black of the stones was overwhelming. Indigena sniffed. The place could have done with living plants, if only to cheer up the color scheme a bit.

Lazuli stood in front of a window, gazing out. She had her back to Indigena, but Indigena would have known her sister in a crowd of a hundred similar women. No one else had that stiffness to the neck, the curve that permanent pride created. When she turned around and met her eyes, Indigena was ready for the coldness that lingered there, the utterly inflexible lines of her face.

“Sister,” said Lazuli.

“Lazuli,” Indigena returned, because she didn’t feel like giving the intimate title to a woman who opposed her. “I don’t suppose you would care to explain this?” She held up the invitation.

“Sit down,” said Lazuli, and moved towards one of the three blue chairs arranged in a triangle in the center of the room. Indigena lifted her eyebrows, but did as commanded. *We are to have one more visitor. Dare I think that Lazuli would have the courage to invite our third sister?*

But of course she could think that. Lazuli had had the courage to go alone into the paths between Dark and Light and do something utterly mad, sleep with something utterly nonhuman. Summoning Peridot to a meeting like this was something she could plan in her sleep, next to that.

Just after Indigena had taken her seat, Peridot entered the room. Indigena nodded, perforce, keeping her thorns from climbing from the sheaths on her back.

But it was a near thing. She did not like her sister for the way Peridot had raised her son, but the dislike could not rest in simple contempt. She was forced to be uneasily conscious of what her sister had achieved magically.

Peridot wore a simple gown, which seemed black at first but was revealed as dark red when the light of the fires fell on it. It barely concealed her breasts, and the sleeves twined up into her long dark hair in impossible ribbons. She took her seat in a way that made the gown flap and then freeze, plunging in long folds into the earth. Indigena smelled—not because she wanted to, but because she couldn’t escape it—the deep, musky scent around Peridot, the scent of sex and lust and reproductive magic. Indigena knew a variation of that enchantment herself, the incredible power that sent green things striving back to the surface of the earth in spring after their long winter sleep, but it was never as demanding as the magic Peridot wielded, and never as heated.

*Low magic. Lust magic.*

But most low magic and lust magic was a passing fancy for the witches or wizards who were interested in it, and they went on to more powerful spells later. Not so Peridot, who had made it her life’s work, and who had used her network of former lovers in the
Ministry to establish her political connections. What she did was worthy of scorn, but it worked, and Indigena was uneasily aware of her sister when they met, in every sense. That she had become pregnant only once in all her liaisons was astounding, but Indigena supposed Peridot must know the secrets of preventing life as well as engendering it, and of course she might have climbed mostly into the beds of women since Feldspar was born.

Indigena did not know. She did not wish to know anything about the activities of her pariah sister, whether they were held at night or during the day.

“Welcome, sister,” said Lazuli, of course sounding no different than she had when she welcomed Indigena. She turned to face both of them and shook her left sleeve back. Indigena’s eyes narrowed when she saw the snake on the chewed flesh, the serpent eating its tail, curling forward and back.

“What is that?” she asked quietly.

“My ouroboros,” Lazuli said, voice as flat and emotionless as though she had always borne the tattoo. “Given to me by Harry at my request, that I might repair the wrong of my family.”

Indigena stared. Not only had Peridot failed to persuade Lazuli to abandon Harry’s side, she had failed so spectacularly that Lazuli had, in essence, sworn an oath of vengeance against Indigena. She would cut the diseased graft—in her eyes, in Harry’s—from the Yaxley family tree. She would actually fight, not just protect her daughter or give Harry political advice.

“Why?” she asked quietly.

“The answer to that lies in Peridot.” Lazuli turned her head to face the pariah, in such a smooth, snake-like movement that she didn’t disturb her robe, and the circling serpent remained visible.

Reluctantly, Indigena looked at Peridot, whose eyes were currently closed. They opened, and they were green, flecked with gold, like the stone from which she took her name. And there was a beauty about her, lithe and fierce as a snake’s, that made Indigena want to—

“Stop it!” she hissed, and heard the cloth on her seat tear as the thorns surged from her back.

Peridot laughed, and the sound was too deep, damn her, too husky. “Something wrong, sister?” she asked. “But of course it would be. That particular spell only works on people who haven’t let someone crawl between their legs in far too long. You should watch that. I can only imagine how all that humid heat you carry will rot you if you don’t use it.”

“What did you want?” Indigena said, and made the tendrils in her hair lie flat.

“Why, sister,” said Peridot, with a tilt of her head, “only to repay you for infecting me with a potion that can light me on fire with a thought, and for taking my son from me when you had no right to do so.”

“You know why I did it,” said Indigena, and forced herself to relax. Lazuli had made no move to attack her yet, and she was the one Indigena worried most about, despite Peridot’s disgusting lack of inhibitions. “He was the one responsible for my enslavement. And he can still die, easily. Or he could survive this war. I meant every word of my bargain in that letter, sister. I would have,” she added, with a glance at Lazuli, “since it seems you could not fulfill it.”

Peridot snorted. “Of course I didn’t. I went to Lazuli the moment I received the letter and told her about it.”

Indigena stared at her. The sister who had raised her son to be a coward should not have done that. “You know the threat of the potion is real,” she said. “You know that you could die at any moment my Lord wills.”

“Yes, but its reality is not the important thing.” Peridot shook her head, and the dark scent of sex filled the room. Indigena forced herself to keep her eyes on her sister’s face, because looking anywhere else on her body was just too disgusting at this point. “I am tired of you threatening me, Indigena. You have never thought I had any courage, because I chose to spoil the one child I ever bore, and because I did think there were more important things than your interpretation of Yaxley honor. My honor is different.”

“Your honor is nonexistent,” Indigena muttered.

“I did tell you that she had the most charmingly childish beliefs,” Peridot remarked to Lazuli, who was watching them both with calm, narrowed eyes. “She still mixes up chastity with honor.” She turned back to Indigena. “All of my lovers have experienced
pleasure, Indigena, and none of them ever regretted going to bed with me. And my son never regretted being born my son. He may have, now. That means that of course I am going to act against you.”

“Even though my Lord could destroy you?” Indigena asked.

Peridot rolled her eyes. “He can try,” she said. “I have some magic that may yet teach him a thing or two. Even potions are not unbeatable, for someone who has spent as much time in the dark as I have. And if I die, then I die pursuing my vision of honor and courage.” She locked gazes with Indigena. “Did you honestly not think that I was a Yaxley, too? That you could compel me?”

Indigena tightened the grip of her hands on her knees. She had suggested the Meleager’s Fire potion for Peridot because it should have compelled her to do what the Dark Lord wanted. She was a coward. She had to be. She worked in such a lowly branch of magic, and she had raised her son that way, and—and Indigena despised her, and who would want to die of flames from inside her own blood?

“You have underestimated us both, sister,” Lazuli said in an empty voice. “And now you have paid the price. We asked you here to tell you this. You have two sisters working against you now.” She turned her left arm over again to show off the ouroboros, not reacting when a chunk of flesh vanished from near her elbow. “If you have any questions to ask of us, you may ask them. Otherwise, you should leave now, because you are no longer welcome in Briar-Rise.”

Indigena looked from sister to sister. She had lost, she would not keep them from participating in the war, and she still did not understand how she had lost. Lazuli’s most important priority had always been the protection of her daughter. Participating in the war meant she might lose her life, and thus leave Jacinth undefended. How had Harry convinced her?

And Peridot! Lust magic was low magic, no matter what she thought. She should have given in the moment Indigena threatened her, more interested in surviving and fucking than joining one side of the war or another.

I suppose I am not the only one who has honor, and a failure as a mother does not make her a failure as a Yaxley.

Indigena rose and left the room without a word. She had learned a bitter lesson, and learned it too late. There was nothing to say.

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“You are ready?” Peregrine asked, head tilted back to stare up at him as they walked towards the meadow where the contest would be held. She was tiny, a black woman hardly above five feet, but that didn’t matter. She radiated more than the usual wild aura of a werewolf, but a sense of tightly controlled and restrained power. She was alpha, and no movement of hers let one forget it.

Remus nodded, and then looked ahead of them. They were descending a small slope, into the center of a boiling mass of werewolves. Not only Hawk’s pack, but Peregrine’s and Camellia’s, as their nearest neighbors, had come to see who would win this fight for alpha. It was one of a very few times when the dead alpha had left no indication as to who he preferred to take over. Hawk had not expected to die, much less to end in the arms of a vampire.

Remus had been beta male for all intents and purposes—one of the werewolves in the pack who had lived with the curse longest, and specially invited into the pack by Hawk himself. But that made no difference when Hawk hadn’t chosen him to follow him, and there was a challenger. Remus would have to fight her.

He thought he was ready. He had spent the last few days preparing himself for this challenge, and he had sought that preparation in the blending of his wizard and werewolf mindsets. As a beta, he hadn’t had to lead. He could follow Hawk as he had followed Loki at one time, and Dumbledore before that, and James and Sirius at a time before that.

But now the pack needed a leader, and Remus knew he was the best candidate. Many other members of the pack were either content with their place in the hierarchy or, like Blackbird, his challenger, simply didn’t understand what being an alpha now would mean. They were thinking of the power and the privileges first, and secondarily of the safety of the pack. Sometimes, as when the packs were simply surviving in London and had no larger part to play in the world, that worked.

It wouldn’t work now. They had to consider what their actions would mean in the larger world of wizards and werewolves. Blackbird had been a Muggle until she was bitten six years ago, and then she had voyaged from pack to pack around Europe, only ending up in Hawk’s a few months prior. She thought she understood challenges, and perhaps she did, but she had no idea of pack tradition or of how the magical world really saw them.

We need someone who has experience of both worlds, and can subdue his own pride to follow another’s orders, like Harry’s,
when necessary.

The very traits that would have made him unsuited to lead a pack in peacetime made him perfect now.

They reached the bottom of the meadow, and the others came forward to greet them, rubbing against Remus with carefully neutral gestures, but nipping gently at Peregrine’s jaw and nose to show submission, or rolling on their backs and baring their bellies and throats. Peregrine responded calmly and confidently to such gestures, secure in her power. Remus watched her with a trace of envy.

*I am not there yet.*

But the challenge would help. Already Remus could feel the currents of the packmind shifting and changing, as Hawk’s pack prepared to accept the winner of this fight as their leader. It was *right*, and someone who rebelled and insisted on not following the leader because of personal dislike would cost the pack. What they were together was more important than any single individual, even as every single member made them what they were, like notes in a symphony.

The moon was rising. Remus could feel it coming, the slow tide of his blood as it surged towards the walls of his veins.

They had all taken Wolfsbane before the contest, of course, though it had never been traditional in such challenges. The participants had to be equal in as many ways as possible, though; a werewolf with a broken leg would insure that the other had his or her leg weighted down, either with physical obstacles or pain spells. So, since Remus insisted on taking Wolfsbane, Blackbird had also taken it, and so had the others so that they could retain their minds and better judge the contest.

Remus and Peregrine separated to take their places. She loped to the northern side of the circle, and sat down facing Camellia, who sat on the south. Remus himself was in the west, with the other members of the pack carefully falling away and letting him have all the room he needed. Blackbird had won the privilege of being on the east, nearest the rising full moon.

Remus locked his eyes with hers, and felt the growl rising in his throat as something almost foreign to himself. The important thing was making Blackbird back down. Of course, she didn’t, a thin, wiry young woman with long dark hair, already naked as the contest demanded, skin bared to the first touch of moonlight. She was strong, and had a naturally dominant personality. That second thing was what really made her believe she would win, Remus knew. She *liked* to command people, and she believed that was all a pack leader needed.

He would have smiled if he could have worked his face into some expression other than a snarl. She had been a werewolf for six years, and Remus for more than thirty. Yes, personality mattered, but so did perception. And if she had seen nothing more than desire to command in the alphas she studied, something was wrong with her perceptions.

And then the moon was there.

Remus tossed back his head, and felt the bone-deep shudder begin as his skeleton rearranged itself. The most exquisitely painful part of this was the elongation of his face, the muzzle thrusting itself forward at the same moment his spine bowed. Remus sometimes thought he could have borne the change even before the invention of Wolfsbane as long as he could have remained a human-headed wolf.

Not to say that the forcing out of the tail didn’t hurt, or the flattening and opening of his hands into paws, or the sudden crook of his legs. But they didn’t hurt in the same way, and once the alteration of his face passed, Remus knew the worst was done.

Besides, the moments when he opened his eyes as Moony under the full moon were the only ones when the wolf in his head fell silent, as long as he was dosed with Wolfsbane. The transformation contented it as it was never contented while he was human, whispering endless tales of blood and obsession. But the potion insured that it could not fulfill its desire for blood now.

Remus studied Blackbird, who had become a bitch so large and black, with such a thin gray stripe on her muzzle, that he was momentarily reminded of Fenrir. But she was not Fenrir. Remus knew he was dead. He parted his jaws and panted, eyes locking with Blackbird’s and never moving, his own growl and her answering sound becoming the whole world.

The whole world until Peregrine howled to begin the challenge, at least.

Blackbird sprang forward first, but Remus was only a moment behind. They swung past each other, and Remus felt the dash of fangs at his shoulder, followed by her weight, trying to bowl him over and end the contest quickly.

*So crude.* Not even six years in a werewolf’s body could teach what had become instinct for Remus, though Blackbird was of
course incredibly graceful compared to the young pups turned a month or so ago. She was still trying to use her strength the way a human wrestler would have used it.

But the world that ran on four legs was different. Remus was not as quick or strong as Blackbird, but he was clever, and he knew the wolf’s body. He braced his feet and met her jaws with jaws of his own, grabbing onto her face, clamping onto the sensitive nose.

Blackbird yelped, and thus wasted her breath. Idiot, Remus thought, still closing his jaws. She is not what the pack needs, not if she cannot anticipate something this simple.

She did drag herself free after a moment, using main force, but bearing long, ragged runnels of wounds all down her face. A howl rang from Camellia’s side of the circle this time, marking first blood, and Remus felt the pack tremble with excitement. Wolfsbane held them where they were, though.

He didn’t give Blackbird time to recover, but drove straight ahead, hitting her legs and tripping her into a tumble. Blackbird barked and tried to take him along, the front half of her body jerking like a fish or a rope. Remus kicked off the ground with his hind legs and leaped up and out, avoiding the trap. When he landed, it was with a skid, but he had humiliated Blackbird successfully and avoided taking any bruises of his own.

She flipped over and came up into a leap. Remus reared to meet her.

For a moment, they stood on their hind legs, locked jaw to jaw and snarl to snarl, shoving and pushing. Blackbird’s greater strength was always going to tell, and Remus could feel himself slowly going over backwards.

He waited until the moment when Blackbird’s confidence would be greatest, the moment before he would have fallen and been irrevocably caught under her in a losing position, with her jaws on his throat. Then he yanked himself away and ducked, practically swimming under her belly, lifting his head now and then to snap at all that vulnerable soft fur.

Blackbird half-limped and half-stamped, trying to get him out from under her groin, her yelps high and shrill. Remus added indignity to insult by snatching her tail in his jaws as he came out, bracing his feet again, and shaking so hard that she went sprawling face-first on the earth.

Blackbird tried to roll over and stand, but Remus raked his teeth through the fur on her tail, ripping off chunks and shredding it to little more than a fluffy strip of flesh. Then he jumped away, scraping one paw through the grass to celebrate his triumph. He couldn’t have played that trick on an ordinary wolf. Occasionally a werewolf’s longer legs, which gave them more speed, were not an advantage.

But she recovered fast, and was up, and springing at him. And that might even have made a difference if Remus was stupid enough to allow himself to be cornered, which he wasn’t.

He leaped and turned and spun, making Blackbird fall more than once, and angering her immensely. He could practically feel her thoughts, because she wasn’t a subtle or a deep thinker, and they all shone in her amber eyes anyway. She thought that, since she was faster, she ought to have been able to catch up with him.

But just because she had more speed in a run on open ground didn’t mean she could anticipate all his moves. And as Remus humiliated her more and more thoroughly, including one point at which she crossed her paws in front of herself and tripped, he knew she grew more and more frustrated.

Finally she uttered an ear-splitting roar and hit him, trying to knock him over.

Remus had been waiting for that. He molded himself to her chest, locked his jaws on her left shoulder, and held on. When they fell, she on top of him, she snapped frantically, trying to find a place to bite, but Remus was in an excellent position to both worry at her shoulder and kick with his hind paws, coming nearer and nearer to ripping open her gut.

Instinct made Blackbird try to let go of him. Remus wouldn’t allow that. He didn’t want to kill her—they could use a wolf of her strength and speed in the war—but he also couldn’t take the chance that she would consider herself less than thoroughly beaten and renew the challenge at a later date. So he gave her a taste of what death by his teeth and his nails was like, and clung even when she tried to back off.

Finally, her yelps had a sound of distinct terror, and her stumbling had taken her into a little hollow. It was easy for Remus to lower his paws—he’d been letting her carry most of his weight, which only exhausted her further—and lock them on the higher
ground. Meanwhile, his jaws surged from her shoulder to her face, never letting go of at least one hold in her fur on the way. A moment later, he was squeezing the breath from her nostrils again, his fangs falling easily into the grooves he’d carved earlier.

Blackbird whimpered, and Remus saw desperation in her eyes. She whined into his mouth then, and Remus, knowing he would pay for this if he’d misjudged her, let her go.

He hadn’t misjudged her. Even Blackbird could admit defeat when it actually happened to her, it seemed. She whined some more, sucked in air, and then crouched in front of him, lipping at his chin like a puppy seeking to make a parent regurgitate meat. When Remus flipped his ears forward and snarled, she rolled eagerly on her back, and Remus lowered his head and clamped his jaws into place on her throat, holding her in signal of submission given and accepted, and a challenge won.

Howls rang from Camellia’s and Peregrine’s throats, to be joined a moment later by the cries of all the pack, and then they were leaping around Remus, nudging him, slamming him with their shoulders, wagging their tails furiously, meeting his eyes for only a moment before averting their heads.

Remus accepted it all, and felt the packmind reorient around him, a blaze of redrawn ley lines that accepted him as their keystone. He could do this, he reminded himself, because he had to, and because he was not alone. He had other pack leaders around him, and Harry to follow if times became too hard.

He tore free of the press at last, and lifted his head to call. Their voices blended with his, an endless eerie chorus to announce the latest addition to the long lineage of pack leaders.

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Erasmus shivered as he appeared from Apparition. He could hear werewolves howling somewhere near, and it was not a comfortable sound. That is Dark magic that should never have been cast. Why did whoever invented the curse spread it? Some things, wizards were not meant to learn.

He turned, and found Aurora already beside him, with Cupressus Apollonis at the other shoulder. More and more Light wizards and witches appeared as he watched, or undeclared ones, like Aurora, who had decided to stand with them tonight. He lifted his wand and cast the Dawn’s Light Charm. Warmer and richer radiance than was possible with Lumos slid over them, echoing the very last gleams of sunset in the sky, on this evening of longest light and shortest night.

He felt the magic taking hold around him, a breath of sky and sun, and turned to see the stones appearing. They were near the monument that Muggles called Stonehenge, and Erasmus could feel the place magic if he concentrated, a blend of wizardly and druidic power endlessly renewed and sent back into the soil and the stones each year.

But these were the other stones, the ones that Muggles could not see, and which never appeared any more except at Midsummer, and except in answer to the needs of Light wizards. It was appropriate that they would come now, Erasmus thought, when he intended to found a new Order in the ancient tradition.

Diamond lines of light were rising from the grass, rippling like reflections on water. They snapped firm in moments, and filled with gold, as if someone had slipped phoenix feathers into them. And now they were visible: four circles consisting of pairs of upright stones with lintels laid across them, and from each hung a lazily swaying pendulum of light. A flickering, dancing glow like a will-o’-the-wisp called them from the center.

Erasmus glanced once around his companions, forty-four of them in all. The number would do. They had agreed to come here and begin the Order, and that meant more to him than a greater number of unwilling volunteers would have.

“We have forty-five,” he said, and lifted his wand, so that the Dawn’s Light Charm could more fully reveal the shining bulk of the stones. “We are here, in the Shining Place, where once Christopher the White asked for help to combat the Dark Lady Genevieve, who brought the Dementors into the world. We are here, in the Circles of Light, where once British wizards made their stand against the Midwinter Warlocks. We are here, in the Changing Ring, where the Firestar Lord who immorally blended Dark and Light magic met his end at the hands of Helen Potter. We are here, and we serve the Light.”

The chorus came back to him, a ragged flutter of voices from forty-four throats. Erasmus smiled slightly. The one who had spoken most strongly and confidently was Cupressus Apollonis. That was not a surprise, since he was the one of all his allies most committed to Light. The only disagreement he and Erasmus had had since Apollonis threw his weight behind their alliance was in whether they should leave Harry alone. Erasmus had at last made the point that they should ignore his defiance for now, that fighting Voldemort was more important. Apollonis had looked at him for a long time with wild eyes before inclining his head in agreement.
Erasmus walked inward now, passing the first ring of stones. The glow in the center became clearer and clearer, and he saw Aurora shiver. She was undeclared, so the place affected her more. Erasmus mostly felt contented, embraced, loved. The Light was here, singing in every breeze, the wings of its great gryphon rising and falling in the corner of every eye. And now the pendulums in the second ring of stones were swaying faster and faster, grasping Erasmus’s words and drawing them forth from his throat. Everything was as it should be, he thought, or would be, once their new Order was established.

“We have forty-five. We are as the old ones were, the bright ones, the wizards who risked everything to bring back the Light when it was banished from Britain for fifty years. We are as the old ones were, the wise ones, who saved so many treasures from the sack of Rome. We are as the old ones were, the powerful ones, who made sure that Muggles and wizards separated so that both our worlds could survive. We are here, and we serve the Light.”

The response was stronger this time, and Erasmus felt a growing heat on his face and neck, softer than any fire. He lifted his wand. It drew a triangle of light in the air on its own, pointing to his heart, and to Aurora’s, and to Cupressus Apollonis’s. Since they were the most powerful wizards there, the Light would draw on their strength for the coming ritual.

Summer had been invited into the circles with them, and paced beside them like a great cat as they crossed to the third ring of stones. Here, Erasmus could hear the clash of bells as the pendulums swung against each other, and together they made a wall of bladed light among the stones the moment the last of their forty-five were through. Again, he paused to study them, and was gratified to see hope and belief beginning to creep into many faces. Even Elizabeth Dawnborn, who had agreed to participate in this ritual because of the Light and not because of him, was clasping her hands now, her eyes shining with faith and love.

“We are forty-five,” Erasmus whispered this time, letting his voice build. “We are the ones who value righteousness above our own lives. We are the ones who would voluntarily limit ourselves that others might live and do as they would, respecting free will. We are the ones who would bow our heads to the will of order, of patterns, knowing that human life needs patterns in order to exist. We are here, and we serve the Light.”

All the pendulums chimed at once when the response came back from his people, and Erasmus shivered as the music ran up and down his spine. For a moment, he thought he saw a curled wing, a curved neck, in the edge of the gold that shone around him, that spilled into and split the night, and he shivered again.

They walked inward to the fourth ring. Now only a few trunks of stone hid the darting golden treasure in the center of the circle.

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“We are forty-five!” Erasmus found himself bellowing, his voice ringing out like a trumpet cry, though he hadn’t meant it to. The power of the ritual was building itself up, wringing out its human vessels. “We are the ones who work together, disdaining the solitude of the Dark. We are the ones who love truth, who value honesty, who disdain subterfuge. We are the ones who live more for peace than war, and do not think war glorious. We are here, and we serve the Light!”

He could not have asked for a more intimidating clangor than the voices of those around him raised this time. It might have made even Voldemort back away in fear, at least if he knew what was good for him. The stones hummed as if they were wineglasses tapped with a finger, and Erasmus caught his breath as the golden glow in the center of the circle at last turned and swept towards them.

As he had hoped, it had taken the form of a firebird, longer-legged than the phoenix, brighter, with eyes like hope. The firebird hovered in front of them for a moment, and then began to dance.

Its dance was the beginning of spring, the laughter of children, the tiny emotions of the human psyche that had room to flourish when not crushed by the overwhelming Dark. Erasmus bowed his head, and felt his heart thrumming in his ears, and tears on his cheeks like the touch of butterfly wings.

He knelt, pressed down by a great warm hand. The others followed, and all of them held their wands out in front of them, because this was what was supposed to happen.

The firebird danced past them, the touch of its long, graceful legs setting a tiny, smoldering, brilliant light on the end of every wand. And Erasmus felt its blessing breathed into his ears and his eyes, as the Light accepted and approved what they were to do.

_We are the Order of the Firebird. We are the pure ones, the fighters who cling to the ancient traditions. We shall not do what is expedient, but what is right, and purge ourselves of tainted beliefs and believers. Not for us the close company of Dark wizards that Harry favors, or the dangerous connection to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. This is the path that runs up into the Light._

_We are the Order of the Firebird, and we shall fight._
And all the world was light.

Intermission: Testing

It felt rather like hurling himself against the equivalent of steel coils armed with blades, but why shouldn’t he do it? It wasn’t as though he had anything else to do. Waking or sleeping, eating or standing motionless, carrying out some order of the Dark Lord or looking blankly at the wall of the earth burrow, his body moved and existed without him. The corner of his mind that still belonged to him, though, was aware and bored. He might as well test the boundaries of the Dark Lord’s control and see what happened.

Lucius had never been aware of how much he detested slavery before this. He tried spells on the wall in front of him, because in this small, blank corner of his mind he did clutch an imagining of his wand. He tried to summon love for Narcissa and Draco, because that seemed to be the key to evading the hatred. He tried to imagine the walls parting in front of him and spilling him back into his body, which he felt the sensations from as distant tingles. He highly suspected he was doomed to lose this contest if he forgot what his body felt like.

He realized somewhere in the second week that he could not imagine bowing to the Dark Lord now, could barely conceptualize his younger self’s decision to take the Mark and bow down to a powerful wizard. What had he been thinking? Was the promise of distant power and riches, the rewards of ambition, really enough to make up for torture and the humbling of his pride? Had he really needed the Dark Lord to prop him up in the Ministry and in life because he hadn’t trusted his own capacities?

When he fully understood the current of his thoughts, he swore, profusely.

Harry had finally converted him.

His body was currently listening to his Lord’s estimation of Harry’s allies, based on what he’d glimpsed through Harry’s mind during the latest hive vampire attack. His true self coiled along the boundaries of the walls, looking carefully at the blades that guarded them. One was rusted, he found—a representation of the Dark Lord’s overconfidence or inattention, perhaps.

He tugged at it, and no one was more surprised than Lucius when it came away, crumbling, in his hand.

That left a breach in the walls. Lucius strode forward, determined to get through it. He knew he would face a terrible struggle when once he was back in control of his body, but it had to happen. He could not stay here. This was no life, shut behind walls and having this horrible empathy for house elves that would destroy his resolve and change him into a weak Light wizard if he could not escape.

The Dark Lord scooped him up as he stepped into the breach.

Lucius couldn’t breathe. The pain that flooded his body and his mind now was like what he imagined a stroke to be. Agony danced in his blood and crowned his head. His body made a rasping noise and subsided to its knees. No one made a noise or blink of surprise except Indigena Yaxley. The rest of them were not independent actors, and could do nothing but what the Dark Lord commanded.

Moments later, he was back behind the dark walls, the breach repaired and the sword restored to shining sharpness. Lucius snarled and began to prowl again, determined to find a way through.

“Ah, Lucius,” murmured the Dark Lord, and the eyes of his snake shone brilliant red as his own blinded ones now no longer could. “I have the perfect task for you, my silver serpent.”

And his damnable, traitorous body that made him sympathize with house elves bowed its head and crawled a little further to lick the Dark Lord’s boots, murmuring, “I live to serve, my Lord.”

Such humility is unbecoming of a Malfoy, Lucius thought furiously, and moved to another place in the barriers to begin his search again.

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Hawthorn knew she could wake.
She had to wake. She had asserted command of herself when she was turned into a werewolf. She had not let Fenrir Greyback’s bite corrupt and destroy her life, even though it had been intended to do so.

*But you could only do that with the help of Wolfsbane.*

Likewise, she would not let her hatred for Lucius and Indigena and the Aurors who had beaten her and mistreated her in the cell in Tullianum cripple her forever. She would fight her way free and flee back to Harry’s side.

*If you can do that without outside help. Do you really think you can?*

Her mouth was wide in a helpless, gasping breath—or at least it felt that way. She swam in a sea of hatred, black crushing loathing that pressed her towards the bottom of her mind. She had to make it to the surface, but she could not stop looking at Indigena and seeing Pansy dying in a frenzy of vines, or glancing towards Lucius and seeing the man who had coolly penned a letter condemning her to worse than death. She had tried to see them otherwise, to see Yaxley as an enemy who should be quickly killed and Lucius as a fellow prisoner, but she could not.

*You cannot do this.*

Her Lord had rather quickly realized, from the oath scar on her left arm cutting the Dark Mark, that he could not use her directly against Harry or his brother, but that did not matter. The oath of loyalty Hawthorn had sworn, and which would bleed her dry if she violated it, only protected Harry’s *blood* family. She could still go after and bite Professor Snape, or Draco Malfoy, or anyone else among Harry’s friends and allies and loved ones who did not have that connection of direct relation to him.

*You cannot win free.*

She tried and tried to surface, and every time, another dark breaker knocked her back to the bottom of the ocean.

*Why should you strive, when you lose all the time?*

Hawthorn tried to remember what Harry had taught her about the storm-colored nature of the world, that every storm passed, that the future might be greener than the past and might be grayer, but must be borne. It was hard, though. Every path she could see from here only looked black, and led her deeper into the darkness. Should control of her body ever return to her, would she ever be able to do anything but kill herself for the shame of what she had done while enslaved?

“Oh Hawthorn.”

Her head snapped up, and her wolf snarled in eagerness. One presence in her head approved fully of what the Dark Lord commanded her to do, and that made her struggle ever so much harder.

“I have a task for you as well,” her Lord said softly, and the snake around his waist danced and danced and danced.

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His days were an endless round. Sometimes he brewed potions that his Lord told him to make, and sometimes he worked on inventing an improvement to the Black Plague spores, and sometimes he went in the dead of night and fetched those who were least likely to be missed, the children of Mudblood families who did not even know they were magical yet. His Lord was gathering them against the day when he had repaired the hole in his magical core and could feed on them for their magic.

Adalrico’s life, then, was not so different from the life he had led years ago, except that he had not often fetched victims then. Each use of the *absorbere* gift had weakened his Lord, and left him prostrate for days. Since his resurrection with Harry’s blood and flesh, though, the ability had changed and strengthened.

He looked down at his hands, stirring the black liquid that would become the silver Imperius potion in a cauldron, and wondered.

He had told Harry that he had once lived life as in a poisoned garden. He had felt like that when he tortured Alba Starrise, and suggested having the man who raped her take the form of her own son. He had felt like that when he descended on a Muggle village and himself raped one of the women who fought to defend a Mudblood child, giving her tainted womb a gift of pureblood seed it did not deserve. He felt like that now.

He was bent, flawed. There was a wound within his soul that made him vulnerable to such persuasion, that made him less than
human when he contemplated what harm he could do to his fellow humans.

It made it very hard to fight the hold of the Dark Lord’s hatred on him. Adalrico was quietly, frighteningly, deadly certain, in one part of himself, that this was all he deserved. He belonged in the poisoned garden, as a dangerous beast did in chains, and now that it had embraced him again, he did not think he could find the strength to fight it.

“Adalrico.”

He looked up, and then was not sure whether that was his choice or Voldemort’s. The Dark Lord hovered in the doorway, borne up by the current of magic running through Indigena Yaxley’s Dark Mark.

“You will bring the potion to a safe stopping place and then come to me,” his Lord’s voice instructed. “I have a task for you.”

And his head bowed, because what was he but a killer, a tool of his hatred, a puppet pulled here because of the darkness inside himself? He committed such evil, and that only proved that he was worthy but to commit such evil.

He turned back to his brewing as the Dark Lord moved away. It was perhaps five minutes later when he became aware of someone else watching him. He looked up.

Evan Rosier leaned against the doorway of the potions lab, the packed earth of the burrow, and stared at him. It took Adalrico a moment to make out the words he was whispering.

“Then star nor sun shall waken,
Nor any change of light:
Nor sound of waters shaken,
Nor any sound or sight:
Nor wintry leaves nor vernal,
Nor days nor things diurnal;
Only the sleep eternal
In an eternal night.”

“Go away, Evan,” Adalrico said indifferently, because his Lord would grant him permission for that much. “I have things to do.”

“All of us do,” Rosier said softly. “All of us are playing the great game, and it does not end until we are dead. But some of us find the eternal night sooner than others.” He gave Adalrico half a bow, and went on his way.

Adalrico turned back to the potion.

Only the sleep eternal, in an eternal night.

* * * * *

Chapter Eight: A Blizzard of Bad News

Harry paced in a circle, studying the way that Ginny was aiming her wand at the far wall of the dueling room. So far, he hadn’t seen anything to criticize from her. As she’d said, she didn’t have the raw power to perform every spell, but she’d studied the wand movements and incantations until she had them down pat. The wizards and witches in the room, many of them from villages far away from Hogwarts and older than she was, should have nothing to complain about.

“This is the way that you perform Ardesco,” said Ginny, and started to turn to the wizard-shaped figure propped against the wall.

“That’s a Dark Arts spell,” said an older witch suddenly. She’d worn makeup for the first session of the dueling practice, but sweat had caked it and sent it dripping in unfortunate globs down her cheeks. At least she’d had the sense to remove it, Harry thought. Other people had to be scolded into realizing that flowing robes or long hair or other ornaments were obvious targets in battle. “How do you know it?”

“Because I taught it to her,” said Harry. “And any Dark Arts spell that can be used in defense is fair game in these sessions.”

The witch hushed, cowed, but Ginny shot him an annoyed look. Harry hid a smile, seeing it. She couldn’t really teach and make them trust her if he was there and undermining her authority, or making her seem like nothing more than a prop for him, her knowledge relying on his own.
“And I trust her to teach it to you,” said Harry, walking to the door of the classroom. “Please tell me when you’re finished here, Ginny. Bill and Charlie suggested that you had even more knowledge of hiding places around Ottery St. Catchpole than they did.”

Ginny nodded, her back gone stiff with pride again, and Harry heard her clearly intone, “Ardesco!” just before he pulled the door shut behind him.

Charlie and Syrinx were waiting in the hallway. They’d been trading shifts guarding him with Bill and Owen, so that all four of them could get used to working together in different combinations. Harry nodded to them and started towards the next room, mind already running over the plans for establishing the network of safehouses that he’d started setting up.

Charlie saved his life. He was on the last stair when Voldemort hit him. If he’d been alone, he would have fallen from the angle he was perched at and cracked his head open. As it was, Harry felt himself black out for a moment, and when he came to, around the excruciating, splitting pain in his brow, he was aware that Charlie was the one who held him and whispered, “Harry?”

“Attack,” Harry tried to say, but his jaw clenched shut and he almost bit his tongue off. This wasn’t a strike at him through his hatred. This was Voldemort purely and simply exploiting the scar connection to cause him pain. He felt his body begin to jerk, and then the visions swept in, one after the other, a blizzard of bad news seeming to travel down the red hot wires Voldemort had clamped to his brain.

Honoria stretched her arms to the sky. She enjoyed being the liaison with the Maenad Press and Dionysus Hornblower, but she still loved the open sky, too, and in the hot rooms where the Vox Populi was produced, she had precious little chance to feel it.

She wandered down the small alley behind the press, keeping her senses alert, but not overly worried about an attack. Wards sparked and danced around her, and it was almost time for her to Apparate home, anyway. Honoria had agreed that she shouldn’t use her gull Animagus form to fly anymore, since almost everyone among Harry’s allies—and former allies—knew about it thanks to several spectacular stunts last year.

Distant children’s shouts came to her; they might have been wizard or Muggle. Honoria paused, wondering if she should go and see what they were shouting about. Then she could clearly make out the sound of Exploding Snap cards, and relaxed. One couldn’t be paranoid all the time, she reminded herself. That was more Ignifer’s province. And I won’t let this damn war change me that much.

She did want to make a stop before she went home, after all. She’d visit the Weasley brothers’ joke shop, and choose a prank to pull on Ignifer. Her beloved had been far too serious lately, acting as if crumbs in the bed would mean that the Death Eaters had won. She needed something to cheer her up.

And then, Honoria thought, as she turned in the direction of Diagon Alley, a round of good, athletic sex.

A footstep fell softly behind her, too softly for anyone with legitimate business. Honoria lifted her head, feeling the cords in her neck stretch, and listened. She was still within the Press’s wards. Once outside them, she’d Apparate.

And then she felt the sheer power exerted, cutting through the press’s wards as if they were nothing. She turned, her own wand already whipping up and out, the words of a cutting hex poised on her lips.

Lucius Malfoy got there first. “Abrumpo mebratim!”

The spell that came at Honoria was one she hadn’t seen before, a gout of yellow light as sharp as an arrow. She leaped back, still trying to get out through the edge of the wards, to Apparate, and dodged the curse. But it bounced off the side of the alley and came back at her, too sudden to run from, too quick to avoid, leaving her nowhere to run—

And then she couldn’t run.

The spell took her left leg, severing it cleanly from her body, and cauterizing the wound as it went. Nice of the spell’s creator, Honoria thought dazedly, catching herself against the wall. Now I won’t bleed to death. I must remember to learn who invented this and thank him.

The curse wasn’t done, either. It had cornered off another wall and was coming back at her. Honoria’s mind, meanwhile, had finally picked up the meaning of the Latin incantation used for the curse. I sever limb by limb.
It wouldn’t stop until it had cut off all her arms and legs.

She forced her will down and above the intense, immense pain, into the small form of the gull. Then she was hovering, her body’s weight shifted to her wings, and she darted away from the curse far faster than a clumsy human could have managed it. She strove upward, out of the narrow confines of the alley, trying to ignore the fact that her unchanged human leg was lying below.

The yellow light of the curse turned and flew into the open sky after her. Now, without stones to bounce off, it simply pursued a straight-line course. Honoria sucked in a breath of deep pain, and knew that she would have to try something she’d never tried before as a gull: Apparition.

The pain gave her a goad, or she might not have done it even then. She pictured the bedroom that she shared with Ignifer, the gleaming white wood headboard, the brilliant sheets on the bed—red and gold, and that was her idea, to use Gryffindor colors that were also the colors of flame—and then threw herself forward. Perhaps she changed back to human as she began the spell. She didn’t know. She only knew that she wanted to be home more than she wanted anything else in the world.

And then she bounced on the sheets, gasping, exquisitely aware of the fact that she had only one leg and was human again, but aware, also, that the curse had not followed her across the distance. She rolled over and sat up.

Ignifer came through the door at a dead run. She stopped when she saw Honoria, for just a moment, and then came forward and wrapped her in an embrace that left Honoria hardly able to breathe, murmuring over and over again that they’d get help, that this wasn’t the end of everything, that she’d take her to St. Mungo’s—

Honoria blinked, and blinked, and it was only then, with the guarantee of not losing her life in the next ten seconds, that she was able to cry.

“Thomas!”

Priscilla rolled her eyes. She’d been knocking on the door of his library for the last ten minutes, and sometimes calling his name, and still she hadn’t managed to stir his attention from whatever scroll had it this time. Now, she used an unlocking spell to force the door.

Thomas looked up and grinned at her from the middle of a table strewn with parchment. At once, he pushed one of them towards her. Priscilla gave it a patient glance. It looked like a map.

“I think this is a way to find repositories of Voldemort’s soul,” he told her. “The Horcruxes are immortal in and of themselves, unable to be destroyed as long as the spells surrounding them aren’t broken. And this map can locate immortal objects in Britain.”

He ran one finger reverently over the corner of it. “Granted, it’s several decades old, but some of the Horcruxes are several decades old.”

“Wouldn’t someone have found them already, if it was that simple?” Priscilla could see a great many red circles on the map, ones that made her skeptical. There were research wizards like Thomas who would have given everything to find the objects simply so they could study them, and others who would seek them out and sell them to collectors. Even if the Horcruxes had been shown on the map, Priscilla was of the opinion that they were long gone already.

“Oh.” Thomas frowned, the endearing expression that had made Priscilla fall in love with him. “I suppose so. Yes.” He looked at the map mournfully. “Why do people have to render such treasures useless? I would study them and put them back again, so that future generations could come and see them.”

Priscilla kissed him on the cheek. “I know you would, dear. Now, come to dinner.” It was good that she’d developed the automatic habit of casting warming charms on the food, she thought. Sometimes, it took far more than ten minutes to gain Thomas’s attention, even if she opened the door.

“All right,” he said agreeably now, and started folding the map up.

Priscilla felt the quiver in the wards at the same time he did. Someone was testing them. Priscilla frowned and drew her wand, her heartbeat quickening. She had known this day might come from the time that Thomas allied with Harry. At least their wards were among the best that Thomas could design, and she had a spell that would let her know in an instant where every single one of their children was. She cast it now, and sighed in relief. All gathered in the kitchen, trying not to pick bits of warm food off the plates, and none near the front garden, where the intruder was.
“What should we do?” Thomas had risen to his feet, but looked to her for instructions. That was as it should be, Priscilla thought. She had been the Auror. She was more skilled at defense than he was, and more present in the world, though right now his eyes were as sharp and clear as even she could wish.

“The wards aren’t breached yet,” she said calmly. “Go to the kitchen and take the children through the Portkeys we’ve prepared to —”

And then something sucked hard, unnaturally, on the wards, and they were simply gone. At the same moment, Priscilla heard the sharp crack of Apparition, and knew that someone was inside the house.

In the kitchen, where her children were.

Priscilla did not think; she acted. She seized Thomas’s arm and Apparated down to the kitchen, her body shaking with cold sweat as she landed, her mind seeking out obstacles—table, chairs, cupboards—she could put between her children and the intruder.

Hawthorn Parkinson was just lifting her wand to cast a curse of some kind at Charis, their youngest daughter. Priscilla yelled, “Expelliarmus!”

Hawthorn’s wand very nearly tugged free, but the other witch spun and kept a grip on it, shielding it with her body so it couldn’t go flying away. Priscilla swallowed at the sight of her eyes. They wavered back and forth between cold and determined, and hot and tormented. This was a torture for her as much as it was for them, sending her after their family.

But Priscilla, much as she knew what it would cost Harry, was determined to kill the woman if she had to. “Thomas, the stones!” she shouted, knowing he would understand by that that she meant the pebbles they’d made into emergency Portkeys to Hogwarts, and then moved forward, wand lifted.

Hawthorn tried a Cutting Curse. Priscilla countered with the Shield Charm. She heard soft pops behind her, the sound of Portkeys activating, at least two, and knew it meant two of her children were gone to safety.

“Caedes maxima!” Hawthorn cried. The Slaughter Curse was aimed to go past Priscilla, to hit Rose or perhaps Melissa. She knew they would still be there. The children had been drilled to let the youngest go first with the Portkeys, so Charis and Albert would already have fled.

Priscilla flung herself in the way.

The Slaughter Curse made all the blood in one’s body try to explode out through the veins. Priscilla rode the rushing tide of red, hearing pops behind her, one and then two. She heard Thomas, too, screaming her name, his voice high and furious, and saw the curtain of red-purple that dashed past her, soaking the wall.

She managed to whisper the Killing Curse, and though it cast only a faint green light, Hawthorn still had to move out of the way, because there was no block for the Killing Curse. That won Priscilla’s family a moment, and it was an important one. She heard the pop of the final Portkey, and then Thomas’s voice cut off. He’d gone with Robert, then.

She smiled, and closed her eyes, so that her last sight was not Hawthorn’s desolate face, or the wall covered in her own life’s blood.

He did not want to do this. He could at least hold that thought in the dead of night to comfort himself, when no one else would come to do it, and the thoughts of what his family had been was haunting to him, because he knew they would turn away from him.

He strode towards the house in front of him, which was asleep and drowsing in the shadows of early morning. A path stretched out from it, white and sculptured in the form of scales. The wards shimmered above it, glittering curtains of light that would expand into full-fledged walls if someone threatened them. Already, Adalrico could feel them stirring and opening one eye, trying to judge how much this one, walking wizard who had Apparated in a mile away was a threat.

Adalrico knelt and placed a chunk of gray stone on the path. The wards began to flow outward to investigate it, wrapping around the stone like a gauzy butterfly’s wing.

The moment they touched it, they were gone, sucked into the stone and torn apart.
Adalrico shivered a bit. His Lord had seen the memory of the gray stone that did the same to wards in his mind, from when the Unspeakables had brought a chunk of their Stone to Woodhouse during Harry’s rebellion. He had ordered Adalrico to invent a magical object that would do the same thing. Adalrico had been able to do it in theory, but the larger spells that would secure that capacity in stone were beyond him, and would have made it only a pretty idea.

With several Death Eaters and the Dark Lord drawing on their magic through their Marks, however, very few powerful spells were impossible. Hawthorn and Lucius had gone armed with the stones to their targets. The final strike that his Lord had planned for today would also use it, but it would not be the main weapon in that killer’s arsenal.

Adalrico picked up the stone, fixed his gaze forward, and strode on. With every step, he reminded himself he did not want to be here, doing this. But since this body continued striding forward anyway, oblivious to what his mind wanted, the mantra did no good. And, in a way, the fact that he was here gave him a black satisfaction. It answered the question he had always been unsure of: Had he really changed? Had he really escaped his Lord’s fold? And now he could say conclusively that he had not.

He opened the door.

The house was still and silent. The wards might have cast alarms as they’d gone off, Adalrico thought, but it was unlikely they’d alerted anyone. For one thing, the inhabitants of this house were probably still asleep, and only one of them was in any condition to do anything about the sudden end of the wards. For another, he’d brought the most powerful stone with him. Those hidden behind the wards in other targets could feel the breach before it happened, if they were sensitive. This one had simply and suddenly destroyed them, and it could take some time to notice the absence of what had always been there.

He moved forward quietly, shutting the door behind him. The house had many windows, Light rained in every corner that Adalrico looked, contrasting with the family’s Dark reputation. Of course, given recent events, perhaps the grieving widow had wanted light.

He moved through the kitchen, a drawing room with Floo connection, and then hovered in front of the bedroom, the door of which was ajar. Carefully, he pushed it back, and nodded when he saw his targets lying motionless on the bed. Medusa Rosier-Henlin slept the sleep of an exhausted new mother, with her hair spread all around her and her babe curled on her breast. Adalrico could destroy them both. He lifted his wand, raging in one part of his mind, but utterly unable to stop it.

“Diffindo!”

He staggered, nearly going to one knee, as the curse cut him all down his side, rendering the skin over his ribs ragged. He turned to see one of the Rosier-Henlin twins casting another curse at him. This one, at least, he could dodge, all the while scolding himself for his stupidity in simply assuming the house was empty. His Lord knew that one twin was sworn to Harry as a protector and never left his side, but that didn’t mean the other one couldn’t leave.

“Expelliarmus! Accio stone!”

Adalrico’s wand soared out of his hand, and so did the gray stone that had sucked up the wards. He howled and grabbed more for the latter than his wand. If it went into his enemies’ possession, then they could learn something of what his Lord had intended to remain a mighty secret and weapon.

The boy darted past him, though, moving lithely, and grabbed his mother around the waist, holding her close. The baby awakened, beginning to cry. Medusa Rosier-Henlin snatched her wand from the bedside table and aimed it at Adalrico.

He could not have moved if he tried. The cry of the child was summoning memories back to him, so strongly that they assaulted the walls of hatred that his Lord had woven to keep his conscience at bay. He was remembering his own daughter, born just two years ago, and the way she had cried when she was born, and the reason that his wife and daughter had both survived that day with magic intact. It had been Harry, and here he was attacking a child far younger than his daughter, under Harry’s protection—

He cried out as the swirl of color in front of him announced a Portkey, but not because his prey was escaping. He was on his knees, love struggling with hatred in his soul, trying to ignore the impulse to either lunge forward and interrupt the escape or stand and go back to his Lord.

It didn’t matter, though. Just when he might have won free, the image of Pharos Starrise flashed in front of his vision, and his hand ached with remembered pain. The boy, the whelp, had dared to send him to the Unspeakables, had not let the grudge between the Bulstrode and Starrise families rest, had committed himself to doing what he could to insure honor was violated—
And hatred shook, and settled back into his soul. Adalrico stood and calmly Apparated back to tell his Lord what had happened, though, of a certainty, he already knew.

Millicent jerked her head up. The wards had fallen, and that meant Blackstone was no longer safe.

*It’s a good thing that I already moved Mother and Marian elsewhere,* she thought, and stood, drawing her wand. There were still valuable things at Blackstone, including their house elves and the library of magical books she’d been looking through, but no valuable people.

Other than herself, and she had remained here, searching through the Bulstrode treasures, tempting fate, both because not everything needed to be transported into exile and because she knew her father might come back.

If she faced Adalrico in battle, it was her duty to execute him.

She strode rapidly through the house to the front garden, her mind already shoving personal sentiments into a small closet and locking the door. This was her duty. One could not escape the oldest codes, not if one also benefited from them, and the Bulstrode family did. Sometimes those codes of honor had saved lives, or allowed a prisoner a chance to duel when he should have been killed immediately. But they were not allowed to simply claim the privileges from them. One had to pay the price.

And one price said that the family head was supposed to execute a traitor.

Millicent opened Blackstone’s front door, and made her way towards the gate. The garden was soft with summer, and the roses her mother loved. Millicent felt a distant regret for that. It was entirely possible that the duel today would destroy the garden, and the house elves would not put it back together again if she was dead; they would go to her mother and Marian instead, and await their commands.

A man waited at the end of the path, beyond the gates. Millicent slowed on seeing him. This was not her father, but in some ways, including the half-wild gleam of his black eyes, he resembled him.

“Millicent Bulstrode,” said the man, with a bow and a smile that was not a sneer or a smirk. “I am so happy to meet you at last. As the saying goes, ‘Faint heart never won fair lady.’”

From that alone, Millicent thought she knew who he was.

“You are Evan Rosier,” she said, and brought her wand up.

Rosier sighed and took a step forward. “Is the mere revelation of my identity enough to put an end to my courtship?”

Millicent didn’t bother to answer, because Rosier was mad, and one didn’t answer madness; one destroyed it. She used a Severing Curse first, because she knew that he had used them on his enemies in the past, and he Apparated out of the way, appearing again just a little to the left of where he had been. He reached out and stroked a rose, avoiding the thorns, his eyes on her wide and amused.

“I would give you a flower,” he said. “But I think a girl like you would prefer stone. *Cautes!*”

Millicent dipped her head and rolled forward as the boulder crashed behind her, doing a full somersault. Rosier was already chanting another curse, one that would put a burning in her blood from the sound of it. Millicent knew that she couldn’t dodge the curse, which struck inside one’s shields, and so she gave him something else to think about instead.

She was her father’s magical heir. She could wield the gifts of the Bulstrode line when she chose. And now she chose, reaching deep into the crystalline spaces around and inside her and drawing up the flame that usually slept beneath the surface. This was not something to be done lightly, both because it was traditionally a secret and because it removed so much strength from the caster. But *she* was going to do it, and she did, drawing out and flinging the Bulstrode blackfire at Rosier just as he hit the climax of his curse.

His wand hand turned to stone, effectively disrupting the flow of magic from his body, and thus the spell. Rosier considered it for a moment, turning the living part of the limb back and forth to admire the smooth black rock. Millicent scrambled up, ready to try another Severing Curse.
“You have given me a gift,” said Rosier, and it was hard to concentrate on the spell when he was speaking. “I shall have your father reverse it before I leave, of course, but that doesn’t matter. You tried your hardest, and you gave me a gift of stone to answer the gift of stone I gave you.” He gave her an appallingly genuine smile. “I wish that you were available for me to freely wed instead of kill, my lady. I think that we could have a chance together.”

Millicent spat the curse in answer. Again he Apparated out of the way, and when he appeared, said simply, “Caeco,” in a disinterested tone.

Millicent’s sight went black. She knew the battle was lost, and whether Rosier burned the whole of the house, as he’d probably come for, or just lit the garden on fire and danced in the ruins, she could not remain there. Her life was more valuable than any books or treasures. That was especially true now, when she had only her little sister for an heir and no child of her own.

She focused on the Hogsmeade road and Apparated, but not before Rosier’s voice came after her, soft and reverent.

“I have the best luck with Bulstrode women.”

It seemed like a long time before Harry could open his eyes. He was lying in a hospital bed; he knew that from the feeling of the sheets around him. And there was an enormous, crushing pain in his chest, which confused him. He knew that Voldemort had assaulted him with visions, but he should feel either all the pain of the curses he’d seen cast or none at all, and the only spell this agony could possibly have come from was the Slaughter Curse that had taken Priscilla.

Taken her. She was dead. And Millicent blind, and Honoria wounded, and Medusa and Eos and Michael barely escaped—

He tried to lunge upward, only to run into an invisible iron bar just above the bed that rather effectively sent him sprawling back down. Harry blinked, and blinked again, and then held out his hand and murmured, “Accio glasses.”

When they zipped over to him, he slipped them on, and his eyes narrowed as he saw the faint mark of a ward directly over his chest. Well. What one can’t go through, one can slip under.

He started to move, and his vision grayed. This was annoying. Harry leaned on his pillows and tried to recover his breath, and wondered why in the world the crushing pain in his chest had just got worse.

“Someday, you’ll wake up wounded and have the sense not to move,” Draco’s voice said from the side. “But I think that day will be long in coming.”

Harry turned towards him. “I have to know how they are,” he said insistently. “And if the effects of the Slaughter Curse are still lingering, I know that Madam Pomfrey can cure them. It’s not as though I received the blast of the full thing. I want to know how Millicent and—”

“All here,” said Draco, pressing him back down. “Except for Honoria, who’s in St. Mungo’s. But Rhangnara and his children, the Rosier-Henlin woman and her children, and Millicent all made it. They’re tired, they’re grieving, but they’re alive, and Regulus managed to reverse Millicent’s blindness. The one who came closest to death was you. Lie still, Harry.”

Grumbling, Harry dropped back onto the pillows, and was even more annoyed when his vision swayed again, making it hard for him to see Draco when he sat down in the chair beside the bed. “What did I get hit with?” he asked. “Is this some combined effect of the visions? Or—”

“It is not, Harry,” said Madam Pomfrey’s voice from off to the side. “The truth is that you fought the visions so hard, trying to throw off what You-Know-Who was doing, that your heart almost burst. It produced symptoms similar to a heart attack.” She was in front of his bed then, waving her wand and murmuring several diagnostic spells under her breath. She seemed satisfied when each produced a stream of white light that tied together into a knot over Harry’s bed, but fixed him with a piercing eye when he tried to sit up again. “You’ve strained your heart, and you are going to rest if I have to keep you dosed with Dreamless Sleep.”

Harry wanted to say that he couldn’t have any Dreamless Sleep, he’d had some just a few days ago, but he lowered his eyes and nodded. He heard Madam Pomfrey bustle away, and then Draco took his hand.

“The Headmistress has made them welcome,” Draco said. “She said they’re welcome to stay here for as long as they like, and so is anyone else who flees to Hogwarts. The wards here are strong. We’ll be able to keep anyone who attacks out, even if they have stones like the one Michael brought in. And now that we have it, we can study it. Rhangnara thinks he can create a variation on the stone soon that might keep wards from being drained.”
Harry closed his eyes and nodded again. He was pondering whether he should tell Draco about the laughing words that Voldemort had planted in his head as he watched vision after vision happen, attack after attack occur that he could have prevented, had he not been locked helpless in the pain from his scar.

_I will take from you everything that you have loved._

Honoria and Thomas’s family hadn’t been targeted because they were his allies. Medusa Rosier-Henlin and Eos, the child he had named, whose godfather he was, hadn’t earned Adalrico’s attention because they were vulnerable. Millicent hadn’t even been assigned to Evan Rosier because Voldemort thought sending Adalrico against his family was stupid.

It had happened because Harry cared for them, and that was all.

That sense of things had come through while Harry fought helplessly, stridently, to take back control of his mind. This was not the war it had been. Voldemort cared about immortality and taking over the wizarding and Muggle worlds and making his enemies pay for what they’d done to him, but they were secondary goals now. What really mattered was torturing Harry until he made a stupid mistake, or gave in to the hatred and came to Voldemort’s side, or died.

_And if what Madam Pomfrey says about my heart is true, that last almost happened today._

Draco cupped his chin and tilted his head up, and Harry went, opening his eyes slowly. Grief was beginning to hit him, and weariness, along with the general urgency. This time, the reason he had trouble seeing Draco was because he looked through a haze of tears.

“The first priority,” Draco said calmly, “is keeping Voldemort out of your head. We had a talk about that, Harry, and you ignored me.”

“The _vates_ path is strict,” Harry whispered. “I might not think that using Legilimency on Voldemort counts as violating someone’s free will, _you_ might not think that, but it could count by the definition of the path.”

Draco’s grip tightened until Harry winced, and then fell down and back. “Then you can’t be _vates_ anyway,” he said. “It would need someone who didn’t have a mad Dark Lord after his blood. I know that it matters to you, Harry, but you can’t fulfill your ambitions if you’re dead, can you?”

Harry sighed. His own death from heart failure didn’t seem real to him, still, but that was probably because he had the other deaths and wounds in his head, and he knew they had happened, while he had managed to live through his. “No.”

“You can’t,” Draco said, sounding satisfied. “So. As soon as you’re recovered, you’ll take the offensive against Voldemort inside your mind.”

When Harry hesitated, his fingers came back and tightened again. “I want a promise, Harry.”

“I do promise,” Harry said.

“Good.” Draco’s lips brushed his forehead this time. “Snape will be by to see you later, I think, and he’s more than willing to help you with the Legilimency. For now—well, Madam Pomfrey granted me permission to do this. _Consopio._”

The sleeping charm took over before Harry could protest any more, and sank him down into darkness, and destroyed his plans for safehouses and sanctuaries. Drowsily, he felt that this was not fair, but then he remembered it also kept him from thinking about possibly falling off the _vates_ path and the attacks he’d failed to prevent today, and he welcomed it.

The last thing he thought he heard was high, cold laughter, and Voldemort’s voice repeating the hateful words.

_I will take from you everything that you have loved._

~*~*~*~*~

**Chapter Nine: Dancer In His Mind**

“How will we know when to wake you?” Draco’s voice was steady, but his eyes glittered with a mixture of frustration and anger that almost masked the worry. Harry stifled the temptation to tell him that he wasn’t such an icicle to someone who knew him well. This was serious, and Draco had never appreciated mixing jokes with matters of life and death.
“Connor can tell you better than I can,” said Harry gently. “Remember, he’ll be awake, even though he’s carrying the visions. If he shouts for you or Snape to wake me up, then you’ll know.”

“And if he doesn’t sense it?” Draco glared at Connor, who crouched on the hospital wing’s hearth, talking to Parvati through the Floo. Her parents wouldn’t let her return to Hogwarts or visit Connor anywhere else, but they would permit an occasional conversation. From the tone he could hear in Parvati’s voice, Harry wondered how much longer she would put up with that. “He might not, you know. It’s not as if he’s experienced in magics of the mind.”

“Draco, he has compulsion,” Harry pointed out.

Draco had the grace to look abashed. For approximately two seconds. “I don’t like this,” he snarled under his breath, leaning towards Harry. “We should have created another bond between us. That way, I could have been the one to take the damn potion and carry the damn visions.”

“We don’t know if another bond would have satisfied the potion,” Harry said calmly. “We know that the connection of blood and birth Connor and I have does.” He left unsaid that he didn’t trust Draco not to reveal his presence, and thus the plan, through indiscreetly cheering Harry on. Draco had done very well the one time he’d had to possess Voldemort, after the Midsummer battle, but he was still not very good at self-control without a defined plan like that. “This will work.”

Draco let out a windy sigh and dropped his forehead onto Harry’s shoulder. Slightly surprised, Harry raised a hand to touch his shoulder in return, and found it shaking as if he were a leaf caught in a high wind.

He’s afraid for me. Of course, that’s most of it. I keep forgetting, somehow, that I matter that much to other people.

Harry leaned over and kissed the back of Draco’s neck, feeling a rush of pleasure and wonder. He had once believed not only that no one would ever care for him this way, but that it was right no one did so. So many things had changed, and this wasn’t the greatest, but it might be the one with the most personal implications for the two of them.

“I’ll be well,” he whispered into Draco’s ear. “And if I’m not, then you can kick and punch Connor all you like, and I wouldn’t even try to interfere.”

Draco laughed, but the laughter was too thick at the back of his throat, as though tears were fighting to rise. “Of course you wouldn’t try to interfere, because my kicking and punching him would mean that you were dead, you prat.”

“Yes, but I won’t come back as a ghost and protect him, either.” Harry ran his hand through Draco’s hair, forcing himself to think of nothing for a moment but the way it felt as it slipped through his fingers. He wouldn’t have been able to do that a few months ago, either, since he was using his left hand. An emotion he hadn’t felt before was bubbling to the surface of his mind, and Harry sat there patiently, waiting for it to rise so that he could see and judge it.

The bubble burst. Harry gasped as he felt a hungry pulse of wonder travel through him. He wanted to stay alive. He wanted to know more about how it felt to touch Draco like this, more about what would happen tomorrow, more about what might occur when he no longer had the threat of Voldemort hanging over his life like Damocles’s sword. It was the first time he could remember being emotionally excited that he had a future, instead of curious about what he could use the extended time for.

He tapped the back of Draco’s neck, and when he lifted his head, Harry caught his lips in a kiss as hungry as the wonder. Draco made a muffled noise, but Harry didn’t think it was one of protest, the way that his teeth and tongue and lips closed in a moment later. Harry let himself be borne backward, so that Draco could take control of the kiss. He was more interested in simply feeling.

“Harry!”

And that was Connor, and by the clink of glass as he set a vial back down, he’d just taken the Switching Potion. Harry could already feel the odd tugging in the middle of his forehead that would be Connor bearing the visions and pain that Voldemort sent at him, hopefully for long enough that Harry could shut the scar connection. Reluctantly, he pulled back from Draco and pushed at his shoulders.

Draco pulled away as slowly, nipping at his mouth several times. “We’ll continue this when you come back,” he whispered into Harry’s ear.

Harry, still a bit overwhelmed, could only nod. Then he lay down on the hospital bed, and watched Draco take his place beside him with an air of determination. He had been concentrating so fiercely on that that he was a bit shocked to look over and see
Parvati sitting down near Connor’s bed.

She caught his eye and tossed his head. “My parents let me come through for this evening,” she said. “Since Connor was doing something so vital to the ending of the war, and all.”

The spark in her gaze made Harry feel a bit sorry for her parents and their probable attempts, come morning, to get Parvati back through the Floo connection. He saw Connor close his eyes, and then Draco squeezed his hand, and then the door of the hospital wing opened and Snape came through, bearing several healing potions in his hands that Harry hoped they were not going to need.

He closed his eyes and nudged forward into the scar connection. Any moment now, Voldemort would sense him and attack him with visions, but the visions would hit Connor instead, leaving Harry’s mind clear.

And it was all thanks to the potion they’d found.

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Harry stared down at the book in front of him for a moment. He could feel the compulsion boiling along the edges of the black cover, waiting to spring like an unfolding set of spines and stick in the flesh and mind of anyone who opened it. He should know. Draco had been a victim of the damn book for two months of their fourth year.

But he needed a potion that could insure his mind was clear while he fought Voldemort and tried to eliminate the scar tunnel, and if there was any book that could tell him of such a potion, it was this one.

Reluctantly, he opened *Medicamenta Meatus Verus*, Melissa Prince’s Potions book, and let the pages turn past his fingers. The compulsion unfolded just enough to hook to the major desire in his mind: to keep the visions at bay. It tried to curl deeper than that, to compel him to brew the potion and do nothing else until the brewing was done, but Harry fought it back. He thought he heard a sulky snarl, as if the book were a child not used to being denied what it wanted.

The pages stopped turning. He looked down, and blinked.

*Switching Potion.*

The ingredients were simple enough, even common; Snape surely had comfrey in his stores, and two identical chips of red stones, and hippogriff feathers. It was the conditions, which were listed under the potion, where Harry found the reason that this was not more widely used.

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*Ready?*

Harry heard and did not hear that question with his ears. When he glanced to the side, a misty representation of Connor hovered there, his grin wide enough to swallow a whole pickle. Harry shook his head slightly. In truth, this bond between them always existed, and this shade of Connor always had a presence in his head, but most of the time Harry wasn’t paying attention to it.

*Yes,* he answered. *I want you to tell Draco and Snape, or Madam Pomfrey, at any moment the pain gets too much for you.*

Connor snorted, and Harry had the feeling that that wouldn’t be happening. He sighed. He appreciated that Connor wanted to make up for the years that he’d neglected Harry by protecting him now, but sometimes it simply went too far, with Connor acting as though he were personally responsible for every blow inflicted by their parents, Dumbledore, Voldemort, and Sirius during those years.

He could only trust his brother, though. Connor had agreed to take the Switching Potion and do this for him, and Harry could hardly turn away from the plan now because he was afraid that Connor might strain his heart out of Gryffindor nobility.

He plunged into the tunnel ahead of him.

Almost at once, he felt Voldemort’s Legilimency stir. He wasn’t a very good Occlumens, at least not compared to someone like Snape, so his outer defenses consisted of offensive projections instead. The moment Harry triggered them, they were supposed to latch into his mental probe, drag him to a halt, and cause him pain until the Dark Lord could attend to them and see what was happening.
This time, though, the first probe slid straight through him as if he were a ghost, and traveled along the bond the Switching Potion had opened into Connor instead. Harry heard his brother gasp, and paused, looking back.

*If I feel you do that again, I'll tell Draco,* Connor snapped.

Harry blinked, and reminded himself that the longer he delayed, the more agony his brother would suffer. He darted forward, and the tunnel opened in front of him. As Draco had said, only half the tunnel was Voldemort’s, and the traps that kept lunging at him were complemented by layered defenses that resembled Harry’s own magic. He began to draw on them, pushing a fog of Occlumency ahead of him like a cloud bank.

He felt Voldemort’s anger, the rage building like a storm, and permitted himself a moment of intense satisfaction that might show on his misty face as a smirk.

*Let’s see what you do now, Tom.*

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“But what *good* is it, then?” Draco drummed his fingers on the table. “If it ‘s supposed to switch dreams or pains or something else embedded in one person’s mind or body to the mind or body of another, what *good* is it if you can’t *choose* the target?”

“You’re thinking about it the wrong way,” Harry murmured, smiling at him over *Medicamenta Meatus Verus.* The book bounced, sulky even now that it hadn’t been able to take control of him and compel him to finish the potion before he did anything else. Harry stilled it with one hand, and looked again at the recipe. *Three hippogriff feathers, shredded into three parts each.* He picked up a knife and began to strip them off, making sure that each third got an equal portion of the plumes on the feathers. “Whoever invented the potion didn’t want to target someone else—for example, they didn’t want to make their enemies suffer the pain of their own wounds. That’s obvious from the fact that the ‘target,’ as you put it, has to drink the potion willingly. It was originally invented to enable the husbands of fragile wives to share their labor pains, so that the births of their children didn’t kill them.”

“But it’s even more restricted than that, you said.” Draco craned around upside down to get a look at the book. Harry floated a wooden spoon up and tapped him on the back of the head. Draco jerked away, glaring at him.

“Stay back, please,” Harry told him. “This book took you once. It’ll do it again if you don’t watch out.” He floated the hippogriff feathers into the cauldron and picked up the first chip of red stone, concentrating intensely to impart it with some of his own magical essence. When he felt the stone warm beneath his hand, he cast it into the potion, and watched in satisfaction as a cloud of scarlet steam drifted up and the potion thickened, sudden waves of bright liquid sloshing against the sides of the cauldron. “Yes, it’s restricted. The person who takes the potion and the person switching the pain, or the dreams, or whatever it is, out of themselves have to be related in at least two ways. One of them is a blood bond. So the potion would work between a husband and wife who happened to be first cousins, but not between unrelated spouses or just two cousins. Of course, when so many pureblood families were intermarrying so closely, that really wasn’t a problem most of the time.”

“We have the bond of the joining ritual,” Draco said stubbornly. “And I know that the Malfoys and the Potters intermarried seven or eight generations ago.”

Harry shook his head, eyes locked on the bubbling surface of the potion. When the bubbles leaped above the rim, then he needed to add the second red stone. Right now, he cradled it in his hand, thinking of Connor and concentrating on the bonds that he shared with his twin. “The bond of blood has to be closer than that. The book said that the Light Lady Calypso McGonagall, when she was married to her husband Thomas Mackenzie, tried to share the labor pains of their first child with him. They were fourth cousins, and they thought that was close enough. But it wasn’t.”

“And—“

“And the Switching Potion is fatal in one of three ways,” Harry said softly. The bubble crested the rim, and he cast Connor’s red stone in. The liquid thickened yet again, this time settling back into place languidly. The bubbles detached themselves from the surface and drifted above it, glimmering. Harry reached out and popped the largest, letting the liquid fall on his hand, mingle with the salt of his skin, and then tumble back into the potion. “One is if the target drinks another potion within five minutes of drinking this one. Another is if the target drinks more than half the potion. It has to be *exactly* half in order to work. And the third way is if the blood bond between the drinker and the original bearer of the pain or the dreams isn’t close enough. It wasn’t close enough for Calypso and Thomas. He died screaming, and their child died, and she would have followed him if her magic hadn’t been powerful enough to keep her from death.”

“So that’s why she joined with Achernar Black later and adopted a magical heir,” Draco muttered.
Harry nodded, and then leaned in and blew on the cauldron. Besides the salt of his body, it needed his breath. The liquid gave a shrill whistle back, and changed color to a silver mass that reminded Harry unfortunately of Snape’s Imperius potion. He shook his head quickly, to clear it of the memories. “She couldn’t stand the thought of another husband and another child after that, but she fell in love with Achernar when the Seer told her that Achernar’s soul wasn’t completely lost to darkness, and then she adopted the magical child to have an heir.”

Draco was silent for a moment. Then he said, “There are magical ways of forging blood bonds, Harry.”

“But I don’t need to, when Connor and I have the double bond of blood and being born at the same time,” Harry said softly, and pulled a hair from his head, watching the cauldron intently. There should be a maelstrom forming in the center—yes, there it was. He tossed the hair nearly into the middle of it, and the maelstrom molded over, the whole of the potion becoming one smooth dome. “So he’ll take half the Potion, and bear the visions for me while I attack Voldemort to close the scar connection, and then I’ll take half the Potion when I’m done and accept the visions back.”

“Why not leave them with him, if he’s so willing to bear them?” Draco muttered.

Harry rolled his eyes and glared at him over his shoulder while he dipped a single finger in the potion, again letting it taste of his skin and sweat. “I am not going to answer that.”

“He could do this at least some of the time,” Draco persisted. “And he’s willing to do so. I talked with him about it.”

“You—“ Harry cut off what he wanted to say. Draco would see nothing wrong with asking if Connor could carry the visions beyond the term that Harry spent attacking Voldemort, because he did not care about Connor the way that Harry did. So long as the people Draco loved weren’t suffering, he did not give a good damn about the rest of the world. Harry had always known that, but sometimes he forgot, and then it was brought home to him in this dramatic way.

“Never mind,” he said. “We are switching back when this is done, Draco, and that’s final.”

Draco folded his arms and looked as sulky as the potions book.

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Harry came in under the cloudbank, which had Voldemort furiously lashing and stinging, trying to see through the “smoke” and strike at him. Harry ignored the impulse to confront him straight on. That was probably some of the Gryffindor bleeding through, since at the moment he shared Connor’s emotions as well.

Then he felt the first tidal wave of anxiety, and knew that Voldemort was attacking in earnest, trying to make him suffer. Connor was suffering, instead, and while Harry couldn’t feel the physical sensation of pain, which they’d exchanged, he could feel the fear. He held his breath and pushed forward again, refusing to let it panic him, doing his best to understand the multi-layered structure of the tunnel around him.

Then the fear stiffened like blades at his back, and Harry smiled grimly. Connor was doing what he did best: fighting back against the fear, asserting his courage and the stubbornness of his House. Harry was glad. He knew Connor had agreed to take on the pain of his own free will, but still, he did not like sharing it.

He studied the tunnel again, and narrowed his eyes when he realized just how many layers coiled under each other. If he wasn’t mistaken, there were fifteen layers, with an incomplete sixteenth growing underneath that, a transparent red sheath that suddenly ran out on the side of the tunnel that Voldemort controlled, turning the rest of them a paler shade of scarlet.

And why not? There’s probably one layer for each year. Fifteen years we’ve been connected, with the sixteenth not quite complete.

Harry could sense even more than the number of years in that compacted tunnel, though, and he reached out carefully, seeking through and beyond it under the cover of his cloud, trying to see if what he felt was true. Yes, it was. The scar connection interconnected with two other tunnels, one flowing straight between him and Voldemort, the other floating off into space and going—somewhere. Harry could not quite be certain of where.

The Unspeakables’ Stone said something about a third, he remembered. A third person missing from the equation between me and Voldemort? There was a place in my aura for a third, it said. A guest.
Harry gnawed his lip, not sure what to make of that, and then shook his head. He understood the construction of the scar connection now; its deepest link was with the straight tunnel between him and Voldemort, along which their shared magic flowed and the evil bird had come. That meant he should be able to call up his own Legilimency and close the tunnel off, or at least seal it with a plug like a plug of stone. Voldemort would have to exert much more serious effort to get through that than he would through Harry’s Occlumency.

And Harry understood why, given the conversation he’d had with Snape the day before.

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“Sit down, Harry.”

Harry did, never moving his eyes from Snape’s face. He suspected he knew what the conversation would be about, though it was hard to concentrate on. He’d just come from Priscilla’s funeral, where Thomas had burned an effigy of her body and cast the ashes to the four winds, while their children softly sang a mourning song he’d found in an Egyptian book behind him. Thomas had a lost expression on his face, as if the ceremonies of the funeral should have brought his wife back to him, and he could not understand why they hadn’t. He had tried to return to their house for his wife’s body, but the Death Eaters had taken it. Harry had put a hand on Thomas’s shoulder and felt the old wizard half-curl into him, as if seeking comfort. Luckily, if there was one thing Harry was experienced in doing, it was offering comfort.

Before that, he’d been with Honoria in St. Mungo’s, listening to the outlook for her leg. The Healers were confident that they could give her a new one, less confident that she would walk on it before a year was out. Ignifer had listened fuming, with bits of fire leaping from her fingers and nearly setting the blankets alight several times. Honoria squeezed her hand lightly and smiled at Harry. “Not only do I have a lover willing to be a pair of hands and feet for me,” she’d told him, “but I have one willing to light a fire, and perhaps cook for me. If I had any house elves, I would set them free immediately.”

Ignifer had not thought that was funny, and in the ensuing argument, Harry had had time to look at the cleanly cut space where Honoria’s left leg had been and reflect that, if all went well, the war would be over before she walked again.

So, understandably, even though he knew Snape was going to talk to him about Legilimency and Occlumency, his mind was not in the same territory as those two branches of magic.

Snape brought him back as soon as possible.

“Draco informs me that you have refused a reasonable solution to your problems with Voldemort by refusing to use Legilimency.”

Harry jerked his head up, and scowled. “Draco is too presumptuous sometimes,” he said. “I have decided to use it. I didn’t use it until now because I didn’t know if dominating use of Legilimency like that would cost me the vates path.” And there was another reason, too, a reason that he wouldn’t tell anyone about, because they would chuckle and scoff and say he was overreacting. So that secret lay in the back of Harry’s mind, and was his to keep.

He knew he would have to face it if he used Legilimency, though.

“A path that would demand such strict standards of you is not one worth following,” Snape said. “I would have thought that you would know that already.”

Harry growled softly in the back of his throat. “This isn’t like my training,” he said. “I chose to be vates. It has to be that way. Treat it like a duty, and it doesn’t work, either.”

Snape leaned forward. “You should have learned this truth about me from the thestral incident,” he said. “It seems you did not. In the contest between the welfare of magical creatures and your life, Harry, I choose your life. If what you do endangers your life and not your status as vates, then I would ask you to stop. And if that path endangers you or makes you unhappy, then I would advise you not to follow it.”

Harry growled again. “And if I wish to follow it anyway?”

“Then I would consider it my duty to inquire into the matter more closely.” Snape was far too calm for this discussion, Harry thought. “And stop you, if I thought you were not looking out for your own safety. Meanwhile, Legilimency will guard your safety. Thus it is of more importance.”
If I didn’t have a guardian who valued me for myself, instead of for what I could accomplish, my life would be very different, Harry reflected. Poorer, yes, but easier sometimes. “I am going to use it,” he said.

“Good.” Snape sat up briskly. “The Dark Lord will find it harder to combat than your Occlumency.”

“I don’t understand why,” Harry said, coming to the heart of a frustration he couldn’t express to Draco. “The Dark Lord is a master Legilimens. Doesn’t that mean he should get through a block like this more easily?”

Snape shook his head. “It has to do with the nature of the branches of the magic,” he said. “Occlumency is defensive, and ultimately more passive. It guards its boundaries and does not attempt to pass beyond them.”

“I knew there was a reason I liked it so much. It’s just like me.”

Snape gave him a pained glance, and continued. “Legilimency is more offensive, and active, and alert. It not only guards its boundaries, if it is used this way, but patrols them, and looks beyond them for threats, and attacks the threats as they manifest. You may think of it as a sentry, while Occlumency is more like a snare. Thus the Dark Lord, Legilimens or not, will have a hard time passing a barrier made of your active and reaching will.”

Reaching at least sounded better than dominating. Harry nodded. “I am going to search for a potion that will enable Connor to carry some of the visions while I attack,” he said quietly. “Is there anything else that you would advise me to do?”

“You must want to defeat him,” Snape said, enunciating every word carefully. “If you do not, Harry, then you will not put up enough of a fight. Do you understand? You must want to win.”

To dominate him.

The words sent a slick shudder of revulsion up Harry’s spine, but he was determined. He nodded, his eyes never looking away from Snape’s.

“I promise.”

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Now, Harry let his breath out, and tried to calm the rapid beat of his heart. He had to do this deliberately, even though he wanted to hurry through it when he felt Connor’s determination increase, and stop his brother from suffering. He chose to participate in this, Harry reminded himself. He knew what he would bear. He’s not an innocent victim that you have to hurry to spare, but an individual fighter whose sacrifice you must honor. Use the time he’s buying you.

He pushed his will forward, scraping it like a hook through the layers of the scar connection. He was picking them up like fallen leaves from a forest floor, stirring them, rearranging them. Voldemort, not understanding why his attacks didn’t make Harry falter, and baffled by the Occlumency cloud under which Harry sheltered, kept striking in the wrong direction.

Harry paused, swallowing nervously. In the next moment, he must rise, and exert his will to overpower and control another person.

He was afraid of the secret he could feel churning in the back of his mind, like the stir of a hidden beast in oily, dark water.

He took one more moment to remember how Connor had agreed to bear the pain of the visions for him, and to remind himself that his brother didn’t consider him an evil creature for using Legilimency like this.

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“Of course I will, Harry.”

Harry frowned slightly. “Connor, you don’t understand yet. I’m asking you to—“

“To use this Switching Potion, and to make sure that you don’t have visions of pain and death and blood while you’re attacking Voldemort.” Connor reached across the library table and latched his hand onto Harry’s arm. “I understand perfectly, Harry. You have to have your mind clear while you do this, and I’m the one who has the perfect connection to you, according to the Potion. So I’m doing this.”
“But the pain—“

“I know the pain,” Connor said quietly. “I saw the way your face twisted in pain when you were in the hospital wing fighting off the visions so hard you almost burst your heart, Harry.” He managed, as did most of the people around Harry, to make this sound as if it were bigger than it was. Harry wondered that, after he’d come so close to death so many times, the people who loved him were still affected by each one as if it were the first time. “I know that it will hurt. But I want to do this, Harry.”

“Why?” Harry asked.

Connor looked at him as if he were mad. “Because you’re my brother, and I love you,” he said, speaking as if to a very slow child.

Harry had shaken his head and lunged across the table to hug Connor, because there were no words he could offer that were adequate next to that.

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Now, in the scar connection between his mind and Voldemort’s, Harry closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

*I can do this.*

And out he lashed, driving his Legilimency as a hook that tore up the tunnel, destroying the sides of it that he controlled, using the material of the connection itself as the material of the plug.

Voldemort sensed him at once, of course, and attacked with pain again. This time, he could see it slide past Harry’s charging form and into the bond that connected him to Connor. Harry knew it wouldn’t take him long to try another tactic, probably clamping down on the magic that flowed between them, so that Harry didn’t have as much strength available to use his Legilimency.

Harry wasn’t about to let that happen. He pushed forward, and when the attack would have faltered, he dropped pure will behind it, the same will that had made him shatter the egg-shaped stone in first year and rescue Draco, the same will that had led him to plan the Midsummer battle, the same will that had driven him to free the thestral. This time, the only difference was that he was commanding someone else. And if he didn’t let himself think about the full implications of that, he could avoid being sick.

*Back.*

The plug of Legilimency rolled up behind him, demanding obedience, a snarling force at Harry’s shoulder that tore into the vulnerable parts of Voldemort’s mind. Harry went with it, and saw memories and thoughts sleet past him like autumn leaves that Voldemort certainly didn’t intend for him to see.

He made out one, gleaming and white, that was different from the rest, and grasped it, tugging it with him. Inside the jaws of the Legilimency probe, he had time to study it without Voldemort knowing he studied it.

The white bulk was the vampire hive queen, as Harry had thought it might be. And she hovered above a map of Hogsmeade.

Harry swallowed. *That’s where Voldemort intends to send her, then. And soon. I will have to find help to face her.* Not even a Lord-level wizard could face a hive queen alone. It had once been the most common way for Lords and Ladies to die.

He ripped into Voldemort’s mind after that, deliberately vicious, using the thought of innocents dead in Hogsmeade and Hogwarts to propel his anger. He commanded Voldemort to back off, to lie down, to stop sending visions to him. Those commands would not all last, but while Voldemort reeled and fought for the will to obey, the scar connection was tearing itself up, hopefully beyond repair, behind him.

Harry was watching all the while, because his mind was divided into quarters. One part led the attack. Another examined the occasional captured thought within the Legilimency, hoping to find useful information. A third reached back to the tunnel and Connor, checking the progress of destruction in one and fear in the other. And a fourth hovered, keeping an eye out.

He felt it when his secret tried to rise, when the Legilimency probe shifted its nature.

Suddenly it was less about making sure that his enemy could not hurt him or others, and more about taking revenge. Suddenly he found himself half-enjoying the power of command he had over Voldemort, even liking the picture of someone who had hurt him so much cowering at his feet, and he knew the enjoyment would grow if he waited.
Harry rolled, snapping the Legilimency probe back towards the tunnel and his own mind, and leaving Voldemort to repair the ravages Harry had just created as best he could. It would not be so easy next time, Harry knew, if there were a next time. Voldemort was poor at Occlumency, and that meant he’d left large regions of his mind undefended, relying on offense instead. Besides, he’d never thought Harry would do something like this. Now he knew, and Harry expected him to repair the holes in his defenses.

He could feel Voldemort’s wary respect following him, mingled in with the rage and the hatred, and a certain excitement. He would think that there was more chance of luring Harry to his side, now that he had seen that dark power of domination that flourished in him.

The chance was no greater than it had ever been, Harry thought, as he examined the tatters of the scar tunnel and nodded in satisfaction. Voldemort would not be using that to access his mind again unless he somehow mastered enough Occlumency to disguise the Legilimency’s claws. And Harry was more likely to feel the claws before he could do that.

It seemed so easy. He could have done this before, if he’d wanted to.

Harry hadn’t wanted to, because of that easiness.

He knew he needed to return to his body, to full consciousness, and to Connor, but he spared a moment to look into the part of his mind that contained his secret. He felt the dark part surge forward at the attention, whining, eager, wanting to rise from its pool and control everything it could.

Hermione had given him some Muggle quote a few days ago, something about looking into the abyss and having it look back into you. Harry could have told her he didn’t need to look into abysses. He had his own personal one in his head.

He stared into the darkness, and the darkness stared back. This was the part of him that other people didn’t want to believe existed, Harry thought, clinically. This was the part of him that usually manifested only as Dark rage, and only when he was pushed beyond endurance. Other people thought those were only flashes of temper, and they were always telling Harry not to worry about them. They didn’t understand that the darkness that produced them was not a flash, it was there all the time, and it was the part that fed on stories of Lords and Ladies and whispered that Harry could be like them if he wanted. It would be so easy. It would mean that he could accomplish so much more, and so much faster, than he could with the persuasion and bargaining and dancing that were his usual tactics.

He could use compulsion to make wizards feel what it was like to be a house elf, and that would convince them as nothing else could. He could “persuade” people with nightmares, with dreams that intensified their emotions such as Falco had used, with private threats that would make them nod in fervent agreement with his principles and think it was all their own doing. He could trick people into oaths tighter than any he had taken. He could surpass his boundaries, sometimes, just a bit, and that would see all magical creatures freed in a few years. And didn’t they deserve it, really, when they’d been chained for centuries, and wizards had been greedy and arrogant enough to bind them in the first place? And didn’t he deserve to see some of his enemies writhing in pain for what they’d done to him?

Harry breathed in and out, carefully, his eyes on the darkness. He knew it was here. He couldn’t get rid of it, because that would involve destroying some essential parts of himself, or, at best, returning to the training that had estranged him from so much else that was good, and convinced him that he didn’t deserve pleasure along with revenge. He couldn’t suppress it, because that would result in the box or the ice again, and an eventual breakdown. He couldn’t let it out, because in even a few moments of freedom it would hurt so much, and undo so much that he’d tried to do.

He had to live with it, and keep it in its pool. It wasn’t so different from what other people had to do. Everyone had the potential to do immense harm, if let free. Harry just had more power than most to make his damage lasting, even permanent.

The darkness whined at him. Harry shook his head, and turned, striding rapidly back into his own mind, and his own body, and then a pair of blinking eyes, as he sat up—for just a moment, before Draco’s exultant kiss knocked him back into the pillow.

“How are you feeling, Harry?” Snape asked quietly, when Draco let him up again. His eyes were guarded, dark, but the tension in his face eased as Harry nodded and told him about the process of destroying the scar connection, without mentioning the darkness. All of them were so convinced that the darkness didn’t exist, and they would try to convince him of that, too, if he let them. Harry couldn’t afford to forget that it existed. So he let them think what they wanted to think, while he knew the reality, and the darkness slept and was his.

He glanced across to Connor, relaxing when he saw that his brother had his eyes open and that they were sane. Parvati was
gripping his hand, but Connor looked at Harry first, and gave a little nod.

“We were both right,” he said. “You were right that it hurt. And I was right that I could bear it because I love you.”

He closed his eyes and fainted then, and Madam Pomfrey came bustling forward to give him the pain potions.

Harry, meanwhile, picked up the half-vial of Switching Potion that was left and swallowed it before Draco or Snape could object. It was right that things go back where they belonged, whether that was the capacity for visions of blood and pain returning to his mind, or the darkness sliding back into the abyss.

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**Intermission: The Bad Seed**

Indigena sighed, and gently touched the flower on the end of her right wrist, which wept cold, soft dew, to her Lord’s forehead again. There was little else that anyone could do for him. He had been speaking to them as normal an hour ago when his face had begun to twitch, and then his hands, and then he’d collapsed. Indigena supposed it had something to do with an attack by Harry. She’d been close enough to hear him snarl, “Legilimens!” and could think of no one else he would need to use the spell against. The captive Death Eaters were all firmly chained, without the need to repeat it.

“What do you wish me to do?”

Indigena glanced up at Lucius Malfoy. *Would that he had been this compliant all his life. My Lord’s return to power might have been achieved more easily.* “For now, stand guard,” she replied. “If someone approaches the burrow without permission, then let me know at once.”

“Lieutenant.” Malfoy bowed to her and mounted the packed dirt stairs that led to the light of the upper world. Watching closely, Indigena saw one leg jerk out of alignment, as though he were struggling to walk in a different direction than the one she’d chosen for him. But it settled again, and he climbed the steps without looking back. Indigena let out a small breath. At least she was in no immediate danger of being left alone with five Death Eaters who were no longer under her Lord’s strict bridling.

Adalrico was brewing, Hawthorn was asleep, Lucius was on guard duty, and she would order Feldspar on his mission to the Ministry in a moment. The other Death Eaters were away on missions of their own, mostly trying to get another vampire hive to join Voldemort’s ranks.

“Lieutenant.”

And the fifth Death Eater she had to be wary of, Evan Rosier, was edging closer to the Dark Lord’s bed. Indigena gave him a patient glance. He still moved as though there were something wrong with his arm, though Adalrico had reversed the blackfire his own daughter had cast. Indigena thought he did it purely for pleasures, or perhaps to remind her of the injury. She’d laughed for an hour when he returned with that limb dragging behind him. It would be like Evan to assume that therefore his keeping an arm at an odd angle would bother her.

“What do you wish, Rosier?” she asked.

Evan paused reflectively. Indigena waited, not in the least afraid. Her Lord had imparted a vision of Evan’s mind to her through a Pensieve, when she’d expressed concern, yet again, that he might break free and attack them. He’d had months to study its labyrinthine ways while they controlled and manipulated Evan, their bad seed, and Severus Snape, their healthy test plant, from last July until this June. Now he knew the weakness that had let Evan break free, and it was the only one of its kind. Even that freedom had needed a push, from Harry and his *vates* powers. He was their tame dog with a muzzle on this time, going where he was told to, expressing his madness in carefully chosen ways.

Indigena still regretted, somewhat, that they’d not been able to snare Snape. He was a skilled Potions maker, with a native cleverness that Adalrico could imitate, once he knew the steps of brewing a potion, but not equal. And they had worked on him so long. Her Lord had been taking information from his mind about Woodhouse and Harry’s knowledge of the Horcruxes, and passing it to Evan so that he might lure Connor Potter out of hiding, long before he had attempted full possession. And it had been Harry’s fault, again, that Snape had become a wild seed.

*Harry is annoying*, Indigena decided.

“What do you wish me to do?”
One advantage of a conversation with Evan, Indigena thought, was that one could think about anything one wanted until he actually made a mad pronouncement. He let minutes slip by between his sentences, sometimes, and then they often didn’t connect with one another. His mind wandered in wild, tangled ways, and Indigena sometimes felt the same pleasure in following those paths that she did when threading someone else’s garden.

“Evan,” she repeated, and started to stand. She should go to Feldspar and order him on his mission. He probably would not be killed. He was only supposed to establish contact, intrigue his target, and then come back. Of course, that target had guards around her. Indigena would not be surprised if her nephew died. She rather hoped he lived, but only so she could continue to make him feel badly about what he had done, and how helpless he was, and how all of this was his own fault.

“I have a secret,” Evan said, trotting to catch up with her.

“Do you.” Indigena scanned the burrows around her for a moment. Ah, there Feldspar was, brooding in a corner. He couldn’t even use the time productively as the other captive Death Eaters did, sleeping or practicing spells. That was the kind of spoiled child her sister had raised him as.

“It’s a large secret,” said Evan solemnly.

This is the child-like side of him. “I’m sure it is,” Indigena told him, and started to turn towards Feldspar.

“You can see it, if you like,” Evan said, and then moved his hand out from behind his back. Indigena had a tendril at the ready. He was probably going to draw his wand and cast a spell at her, but she could fend him off. The thorns on her back simply moved too fast for any ordinary human to counter, as Percy Weasley had learned to his sorrow.

But he didn’t hold his wand in that hand. He held one of her Lord’s Horcruxes, Helga Hufflepuff’s cup.

Indigena only stared for a moment, too paralyzed to do anything, and his wand, which he held in the other hand, flicked, sending one of those damn internal spells he was known for through her defenses. “Bruma interna!”

Inward winter, that curse meant, and it worked well enough. Indigena felt her tendrils slowly wither, curling close, as the torpor of cold seized her and convinced her plants it was winter and they should sleep. She dropped to one knee, struggling, but her mind had turned as sluggish as the sap in her veins and the leaves that shivered under her skin. She could observe, but not think or feel.

Evan held up the cup, solemnly. “I felt the wards on it fail when Harry attacked our Lord,” he said. “I know he will restore the spells as soon as he wakes, but for right now they are down. And you don’t have a mental link with the captives as the Dark Lord does, so you can’t call the others to stop me.”

He smiled at her, the smile that told Indigena, from a distance that prevented the revelation hitting her full force, that Evan Rosier was not quite as mad as they had all thought he was, and therefore not quite as restrained. “I know that you would ask what I am going to do with it if you were yourself, and so I will oblige you with an answer. I am going to cause trouble.” His smile widened. Then he Apparated out, and with him went the Horcrux.

Indigena knelt where she was, trying to recover, desperately seeking the warm air around her and reminding herself it was June, not December.

And through her body at the deepest levels, down at the soil, ran a whisper of premonition. This is not good.

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Chapter Ten: Safehouses

“Harry! Wait.”

Draco considered it unfair that someone just out of bed after spending most of a day fighting Voldemort in his mind could outwalk him. Harry heard his call, though, and turned around, smiling at him. Draco hated how absent the smile was. Harry’s eyes were half-glazed, his thoughts obviously swirling around the list of names and houses that he clutched in one hand.

“I thought about what you said to me this morning,” Draco said, when he’d recovered his breath enough to stop panting. Malfoys did not pant. “And I agree that I’m unlikely to live in the Manor in the near future. Its biggest value to me at present is storing the treasures my family’s accumulated, so that the Ministry would have a harder time touching them than my Gringotts account.”
Harry’s jaw actually fell. Draco didn’t know whether to feel proud of that or not. He had wanted to surprise Harry, but he wasn’t sure if the nature of the surprise was the best that it could have been.

“You’d—you’d actually let Malfoy Manor be used as a safehouse, Draco?” It seemed that Harry was having trouble breathing.

“Yes,” Draco said softly, and put a hand on Harry’s shoulder, stroking a bit. Even that felt incredibly good. They really hadn’t had enough time for each other lately, and it was driving him mad. “You said you needed strongly-warded magical houses, ideally ones that you wouldn’t have to cast an Unplottable Charm on because they’d already have it, and that you’d want to have them extensive enough for as many refugees as possible to live there in comfort.”

Harry shook his head. “I was only explaining the specifics of the safehouses we needed because you asked, Draco. I don’t expect you to give up your ancestral home to become one.”

Draco’s surprise steadied. So Harry really was gratified. He wasn’t thinking that Draco was so selfish that there was no way this offer could be sincere. “I’m willing to,” he said softly. “Of course, I’ll need to move my treasures into one room and ward them off, and I need to change the wards on the outer shell of the Manor, which only permit family members or invited guests, so that other people can actually enter it. But I’m willing to do that, Harry.”

He bit his lip to keep the earnest tone in his voice as he finished, and the earnest look on his face. Harry was looking at him as if he’d made the sun rise, or his dreams of Voldemort stop.

“Thank you,” he said. “I—that relieves a large part of my mind about where we could send—“ He stopped and shook his head. “Thank you,” he repeated, and his eyes shone in a way Draco hadn’t seen since the beginning of June. “I appreciate what it cost you to offer this.” He leaned in and gently kissed Draco on the cheek.

Not as much as you might think, Draco thought, his eyes fastened hungrily on Harry’s face as he drew back again. I want you less stressed, Harry, and not only for my own reasons. Anything that relieves that stress is a good thing. And it’s true that I’m not going to use the Manor in the near future, unless you move there, because I’m never going to be far from your side.

Harry went on looking at him for a moment more, then abruptly jumped and glanced down at his wrist. Draco saw a yellow line there, tugging at his hand. “Bloody time spells,” Harry murmured. “I’ve got to meet with the Rosier-Henlin family and ask if they would prefer to stay here or go to one of the safehouses. And then I need to speak with Regulus about which Black house would be the most suitable.” He threw Draco an apologetic glance. “I’ll speak with you later. And thank you again, Draco!” he called, as he broke into a trot up the hallway.

Draco stayed where he was for a moment, soaking up the remnants of that smile. Then he turned determinedly in the direction of Gryffindor Tower, where Connor was staying. He’d made a promise to himself, and he’d continue as he’d begun.

He needed advice about changing the wards on Malfoy Manor, and he knew the wards on the Potters’ ancestral home of Lux Aeterna were closer to the ones he’d want. So he would speak to Connor and receive as much advice as he could towards constructing new wards for the Manor. Apart from having the intended practical effects, that would show Harry that Draco could work with his brother, and remove a potential source of stress for the future.

Draco knew better than to ask for sex when Harry was like this. Harry would do it, but out of duty, and his mind would be elsewhere attending to a million other duties at the same time. Draco preferred to relax him as much as possible before he asked, and put him into the kind of mood where Harry would be inclined to look favorably on him anyway.

Meanwhile, it had the effect of binding him more closely to his future brother-in-law and actually improving the war effort. Everyone gained, from what Draco could see.

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Harry knocked gently on the door in front of him. “Mrs. Rosier-Henlin?” he called, because he knew that they weren’t close enough for him to call her “Medusa.”

The door opened, and Harry blinked a bit when he realized Michael was standing there. But he nodded and asked quietly, “Are they awake? I can leave and come back again if they’re asleep.”

“Eos is asleep,” Michael murmured, and moved out of the way. All the while, his gaze was intent and burning on the side of Harry’s face. Harry pretended to ignore it. They’d had their troubles, with Michael thinking he would make a better partner for
Draco than Harry would, but those had fallen quiet several months ago. “But Mother is awake. You’ve come to speak to her about the safehouses?”

Harry nodded, distracted from speaking by the sight of the room in front of him.

He didn’t think he’d ever seen so many warding spells. They cut the air like the glitter of swords, and most of them focused on the cot where Medusa’s four-month-old daughter, Eos, lay sleeping. Medusa herself sat beside the cot, her head lifted, her wand in her lap, and her face haggard.

Harry tensed, then let his breath out slowly. Yes, their involvement in the war had cost the Rosier-Henlin family, but he hadn’t forced them to become involved. Given that Charles had joined him after Voldemort’s return, it had been a calculated risk from the beginning. He would not start feeling guilty over it, not now, when there were more productive emotions he could be feeling.

Medusa seemed to realize he was there, then. She sat up, and her knuckles turned white on the wand. “What do you want?” she whispered.

“To keep you and Eos and your sons safe,” Harry answered, and drew the list of safehouses out of his pocket. “I wanted to know if you would prefer to stay at Hogwarts or go to a safehouse. I’ve had ten volunteered.” Eleven now, he thought, given that Draco had volunteered Malfoy Manor, but he preferred not to count on that one yet. He still didn’t quite understand why Draco had done it, and it was possible he would change his mind later, or Narcissa would make him change his mind. “All of them have powerful wards.”

“Not as strong as Hogwarts?” Medusa whispered.

Harry shook his head. “No. On the other hand, they’re also less central to the war, and Voldemort is less likely to attack them than he is to attack Hogwarts, given that I’m here and he wants me.”

“But if an attack happens on a safehouse, we’re likelier to die.”

“It’s a possibility.” Harry watched her, heart aching, and wished there was something more he could do. The failure of the wards on her home seemed to have inspired Medusa with a paranoid distrust of all defensive spells, unless they were outlandishly strong. Harry thought he could have talked her out of it with a month of silence and quiet and phoenix song.

They didn’t have a month. They had, perhaps, a few hours, if he snatched them around all the other tasks he had to accomplish. And so far, Medusa had given no sign that she wanted that kind of help from him.

Harry forced himself to remain silent while Medusa thought. “An attack on Hogwarts is a sure thing?” she whispered at last.

“Eventually, yes, if I remain here.” And Harry had no plans to move in the near future. Here were Snape’s potions labs, Madam Pomfrey’s hospital wing, McGonagall’s strong and backing presence, the Founders’ wards, and enough room to shelter many of his friends and allies. And a Horcrux, too, though damned if I can find it yet. “The safehouses may fall victim to an attack more easily, but an attack at any single one of them is less certain than an attack on Hogwarts.”

“If we moved from sanctuary to sanctuary—” Medusa began, and then shook her head. “No, no, that’s not possible. The Dark Lord could attack us while we moved, and I do not think Eos would survive.” Her hand drifted out and caressed her daughter’s forehead.

“There’s no need to make up your mind immediately,” Harry said quietly, and placed the list of safehouses on the table near the bed, the one place in the room not extensively warded. “I simply wanted to see if you already had. Do think over it, ma’am. I only want to make you comfortable and safe.”

“You can’t do that,” Medusa whispered, and bent over her babe again.

Harry sighed, though he made sure to keep it silent. What wearied him more than anything else was the sight of someone else’s despair. And, lately, it was also the burden that hung heaviest around the neck of his commitment to keeping his darkness at bay. He saw Medusa like this, and the vengeful impulse went clawing and rearing up in him.

Save, of course, that the one who had done this to Medusa was Millicent’s father, once an ally and friend, and that Harry still had hopes to win him free if he could.

He started to turn away, only to find Michael standing behind him. “I’ll walk you out,” said Michael, in tones that said he meant
to say something else and Harry had no choice in the hearing.

Harry frowned. He nodded, though. Michael was over his infatuation with Draco; he had made no move that could be attributed to that in months. So perhaps he wanted to give Harry advice on how to approach his mother in the future, or share his concerns about the safety of his family. Merlin knew that everyone could use a sympathetic ear and a shoulder to support them, Harry thought, his mind presenting him such a strong image of Snape that he lost track of his movements until he found himself in the hallway with Michael, the door of Medusa’s room shut behind them.

Michael led him a few steps down the corridor without speaking. Harry followed right behind. Michael turned back around again, gave a deep breath, and started.

“I want you to readmit me as a sworn companion.”

Harry shook his head and stepped past him, intent on finding Regulus. He moved back and forth between Grimmauld Place and Hogwarts so often these days, talking with Snape and Peter, that Harry wasn’t entirely sure of where he’d be at the moment, but he’d look in Snape’s rooms first.

Michael snatched his arm and spun him around. Harry blinked once, then blamed himself for being caught flat-footed. He would have to maintain his alertness in case Death Eaters broke into the school or a traitor turned up.

“That’s another thing to speak about with McGonagall—escape tunnels for when Voldemort does attack. I don’t want everyone trapped the way they were last Midsummer.”

“You owe me an explanation,” Michael hissed.

“No, I don’t,” Harry said, a bit irritated at being forced to speak on a subject he’d considered finished. “You didn’t make a good sworn companion. Your family needs you right now, since Owen isn’t there often enough. And I don’t trust your motives for asking to retake the oath.”

Michael’s jaw actually fell open. Then he shook his head and spoke in an oddly wistful voice. “What will convince you I’ve changed? That I don’t—that is, I’ve accepted that I can’t have Draco as my own partner and that he’s not in love with me, and that I only want to help you at the forefront of the war?”

“To be with your twin?” Harry guessed. He knew there were points in his life where Connor following an oath like Owen’s would have been impossible for him to live with, unless he took the same oath. He watched narrow-eyed as Michael gave an eager nod. I don’t think he’s lying, but there may still be other motives mixed in with his love for his brother, ones he’s not even aware of.

The temptation to use Legilimency to read Michael’s mind and see if that was true struck him suddenly, so strongly he almost pushed his will forward before restraining himself. Harry clenched one hand into a fist. He knew the mental battle had been necessary to restrain Voldemort, but it had given an unnecessary push to the part of himself that enjoyed dominating and controlling. He would have to watch, to make sure he did not start thinking that was moral.

“I’ll have to speak with Bill, Charlie, and Syrinx as well as Owen,” he told Michael. “If they don’t think they can work with you, then I won’t let you swear the oath again. And Draco will at least be consulted.” He wasn’t sure he should let Draco’s opinion rule the day, since Syrinx was the one assigned to stand at his shoulder, but he deserved some warning about what might happen. “And I expect some commitment to your duty this time, and not just a commitment to pulling Draco’s pants off.”

Michael flushed, and nodded. “I’ll remember, Harry.”

“Good.” Harry eyed him, then started towards the dungeons. This time, Michael didn’t call him back, but Harry looked over his shoulder to see him standing with his arms wrapped around himself, as if he were cold.

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“I don’t think you can.”

Draco frowned. This wasn’t the reaction he’d expected to his noble quest of working with Connor and learning what kinds of wards would make Malfoy Manor more hospitable to guests. “What?”

“I said, I don’t think you can.” Connor was leaning on one of the hideous red-and-gold beds in the Gryffindor sixth-year boys’ room, staring patiently at Draco. Weasley’s bed was the only other one currently occupied, since Longbottom, Thomas, and
Finnigan were at home with their families. Draco supposed he was glad that Weasley wasn’t here at the moment to witness the argument; thank Merlin for small mercies. “Lux Aeterna’s wards depend on intent. They welcome people whom their owner likes, and keep out those he dislikes. And it depends on unconscious motivation, as well as conscious motives. They sometimes offer nasty surprises, such as when it turned out that my ancestor didn’t trust his wife and the wards prevented her from entering, even though she’d committed no crime. I’m fairly welcoming, so the wards should keep out only my enemies. But if you try to put the same kind of wards around Malfoy Manor…” Connor shook his head. “Malfoy, how many people do you hate and despise? Anyone who’s not a pureblood. Anyone who’s a Light wizard. Anyone you think might be possible competition for Harry. What would happen if Calibrid Opalline wanted to shelter there, or a Muggleborn family? Would you actually let them do it?”

Draco lifted his head. “I could learn to lower my prejudices.”

“No, you can’t.”

“Yes, I can.”

“No, I don’t think you can.” Connor leaned forward and tapped him hard on the chest. “Living with Harry should have lowered those prejudices if anything could. I expected either you’d change your mind to please him—“

“I most certainly would not,” Draco said, outraged that anyone could think such a thing of him.

“Yes,” Connor said, without remorse or backing down. “You would.” Then he paused, and his voice softened. “Or, at any rate, I thought that about you, once. I don’t think it now. You’re stronger than that.”

Draco glared at him.

“But that just makes it worse in this case.” Connor shook his head, eyes fastened to Draco’s. “Don’t you see? The very strength of those prejudices could bounce someone off the wards while she’s being chased by Death Eaters, and that wouldn’t do. I don’t think you should use these wards on Malfoy Manor, Draco. Much better to go with ones that would defend your home and the people who shelter there, but don’t link to either blood or belief. You’re—pardon me, but given this war, you’re a misfit in both of those.”

That hurt more than Draco had expected. “Just because my father has betrayed Harry doesn’t mean I will,” he said, making sure to sculpt his response as quiet dignity. “For one thing, I have no Dark Mark.”

“But a lot of people will think of you as Lucius Malfoy’s son, and therefore as part of the opposition,” said Connor. “Untrustworthy, at best. And if you remain as prejudiced against Muggleborns and Light wizards as you are, you won’t earn a good reputation for yourself, either. They’re part of the war effort. And since Voldemort wants to exterminate Muggleborns, this war is largely about them. People will judge you on what you say about them, whether you want them to or not.”

Draco gritted his teeth. “I won’t change my mind just because it would make things easier.”

“Sometimes I feel more Slytherin than the Slytherins,” said Connor, rolling his eyes. “No one’s asking you to change your beliefs, unless you actually will use wards based on intention. Lie, you great git.”

“You’re encouraging lying?”

“I’m a Gryffindor,” said Connor. “I follow the rules—except when it comes to enemies, or when the rule is a stupid rule. I’m not Hermione, and I’m not even Ron, who has a whole Light pureblood tradition to live up to. Being halfblood makes you exempt from things like that. I’m saying lie, pretend you’re making a great sacrifice by opening your home up to people you scorn, and you’ll win a better reputation. After the war, you can go back to being a bastard, if you want.”

“I shouldn’t have to change even that much of my behavior,” Draco pointed out. “Harry doesn’t care.”

“But Harry’s allies will. And should. And you’re the one who’s supposed to be his major political and personal support.” Connor sat up, staring into his eyes. “I love my brother, Draco. I’ll do what I can to make sure he wins this war. Sometimes that’s fighting in battles, and sometimes that’s bearing Voldemort’s visions for him, and sometimes that’s making sure the people in his life who should know things like this already don’t do stupid or silly things and tangle up our war effort. So, choose. Hopefully you’ll choose to lie, and this is one less thing I’ll have to worry about. If you don’t, then I’ll deal with you later.”

Draco raised an eyebrow. This close, staring into his eyes and talking in that soft voice, Connor Potter was somewhere near
impressive.

“Harry will know the truth.”

“Yes, but others won’t, and it’s those others you’re trying to impress,” Connor said impatiently. “You won’t have to spend the rest of your life with them, just a few months.” He paused, then added something entirely unfair. “And it was the Malfoy pride that got your father dragged off, wasn’t it, Draco?”

Draco ground his teeth together, then nodded stiffly. “Fine. A lie in public, and no wards based on intention.”

“Good.” Connor hopped off the bed. “I know that Thomas Rhagnara is researching those stones that destroyed the wards around the Maenad Press and the other places the Death Eaters attacked. Let’s see what wards he would recommend that you use.”

Draco followed, trying to convince himself that he hadn’t made a bad bargain, and that pride could come after the war. Really, he did know the answer to that, of course. He’d made the decision himself already, when he knew he would do what was needed to help Harry, regardless of personal cost.

He just wished it hadn’t been Connor Potter who pointed it out to him.

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Regulus hadn’t been in Snape’s rooms. Harry finally used the phoenix song to call on him, and Regulus told him he was in Silver-Mirror. But he didn’t mention who else was with him, which was why Harry was more than surprised to walk into a room with three Blacks.

Or four, if you count me.

Harry pushed the thought away. He had never been comfortable with thinking of himself as Regulus’s actual son rather than legal heir, and he would not start now. There were glories in the bloodline he could never hope to match, and beliefs associated with it he would rather not carry. He gave quick nods, now, to Regulus, and to Narcissa, and to the formidable woman rising quietly to her feet from a chair next to the fire. She was Andromeda Black Tonks, he knew, though he’d met her only a few times.

“Ma’am,” he acknowledged.

Andromeda studied him coolly. Harry thought her more reserved even than Narcissa. Of course, that could be because he’d known Narcissa far longer, and impressed her on his first trip to Malfoy Manor enough that she’d dropped the reserve. Harry stood in front of her eyes and awaited judgment.

Abruptly, Andromeda sank into a curtsey. Harry noted the position of her hands on her robes, and the degree to which she bowed her head, and felt himself flush as red as a Weasley’s hair. This was the sign of submission she would probably use to a Lord, assuming she would ever choose to follow one.

“Harry,” she said, standing. “It is my hope that someday you will adopt the Black name and become even more than Regulus’s legal heir.”

Harry eyed her cautiously.

“But, for now,” she continued, sitting back in her chair, “I am willing to help you as matters stand.”

“Good,” said Harry, wondering if he should be relieved. He knew that Andromeda had contacts in France who had proved useful during the rebellion at Woodhouse, and even since, selling them Wolfsbane ingredients at reduced prices. But he also knew she and Narcissa had spent most of the last seventeen years in a constant argument, which was one reason Andromeda hadn’t joined them at Woodhouse. He hoped their presence in the same room without shouting at each other meant a reconciliation of sorts was in the air. He turned to Regulus. “I’ve come to discuss which Black house should become a sanctuary—”

“We’ve already discussed that,” said Regulus, with a wave of his hand at his cousins. Harry was startled to see that some of the dark circles under his eyes had faded, and he looked more cheerful than he had for a month, since the attacks at the beginning of June. “Cobley-by-the-Sea is the only choice. Wayhouse might accept them and change its mind at any moment, there are too many treasures here, and the portrait of my mother refuses to come off the wall in Grimmauld Place. Her shrieking would rather disconcert people who are coming there for peace and safety, I think.”
Harry inclined his head, relieved the decision had been made so quickly. “Then I’ll be at Hogwarts—“

“Not yet,” said Andromeda. Narcissa shot her sister a quick glance, but Harry couldn’t tell what it was for. The cool, commanding tone she’d used, perhaps. Andromeda didn’t appear to notice. Her eyes were locked on Harry. “There is another task appropriate to your station.”

Harry did not like the sound of that, but he refused to let any discomfort show in his face, voice, or posture. This was the very oldest set of rituals he’d been trained to, maintaining composure in front of Dark purebloods, and he returned to it as easily as breathing. “What station?”

“The effective leader of wizarding Britain at the moment, since Acting Minister Juniper continues to issue edicts and prepare for war by alienating those he cannot afford to alienate,” said Andromeda calmly. Harry half-nodded; he’d seen the latest ridiculous announcement in the Daily Prophet, that Juniper was now seizing the accounts of some wealthy Dark wizards or those with tarnished reputations, such as arrests in their backgrounds. The Ministry claimed to need the money for the war effort, but it was only making them enemies. “It is appropriate that the leader of Britain ask for help from other wizarding communities.”

Harry stared at her. Other than for very small and specific matters, like the Wolfsbane, that had not even occurred to him.

He found his tongue a moment later. “You’re suggesting I write to the Ministry of France—“

“And Spain, and Portugal, and Austria, and any other country in Europe with a wizarding community and no immediate conflict draining their resources.” Andromeda gave a serene nod. “Yes. Let them know how matters with your war effort stand. Outline the danger Voldemort poses. At the very least, they might send Aurors to you. You are creating battle-trained wizards, but that will take time. You need more people who know defensive spells already and can take up the work of protection, of assembling forces, of working in groups and giving commands, of dividing resources.”

“I don’t have the right to ask that,” said Harry, a bit aghast. He was thinking of what Juniper would do if he received a similar letter from a sixteen-year-old wizard in France or Germany or Belgium. Laughing and tearing up the letter would be the least of it. He might strike back for the insult.

“Yes, you do,” said Andromeda, her eyelids lifting a bit, making her dark eyes look much wider. “Or do you think the leaders of France, Spain, Finland, and the others so stupid that they do not know what will happen should Voldemort win here and cross the Channel? I promise you, he will never content himself with the British Isles, and they know that. This is their war, too.”

Harry half-shook his head. His thoughts were reminding him of history, though, of the fact that many different wizarding communities had joined together to fight Grindelwald. He was the last Dark Lord, as Jing-Xi had told him, who had tried to extend his control beyond the boundaries of one country. And since Voldemort would want the same thing, the course Andromeda suggested was unsurprising, really, and probably their best chance.

It was hard to let go of the image of the war as being about Voldemort’s Horcruxes and the prophecy, though. He would need help to defeat him, but he had been sure it was help he would find in Britain.

With Juniper as Acting Minister? With opinion shifting about me every time Hornblower publishes a new issue? With so many wizards who are still unsure about me because of Dumbledore and my parents and all the rest, or because they personally lost family to Death Eaters, or because they hate the Malfoys?

Perhaps he was being foolish to imagine that he would succeed without international help. As he had told himself on the Astronomy Tower, his greatest weakness was that he was fighting a defensive war while Voldemort was fighting an offensive one. And that was not likely to change; he could hardly abandon innocents to Voldemort’s spells, even if they had not asked specifically for his help.

He looked Andromeda in the eye. “And you’re sure they won’t be insulted by the fact that I’m so young, and hold no official position, and yet I’m asking them for aid?”

“I can promise you,” said Andromeda, a cold smile sliding across her mouth this time. “Besides, Harry, you forget. You are very nearly of age. Twenty-nine days, now. And the war is likely to continue much longer than that.”

Harry nodded. “Very well. I don’t know any of the languages involved. Will translation spells help?”

“I shall help you,” Andromeda said, standing. “I know French. For the rest, yes, you can use translation spells, or you may use Latin, which is still accepted as a diplomatic language. I believe that your ally Ignifer Pemberley speaks it as her native tongue.”
“Thank you,” Harry murmured, and then turned to Narcissa, who had been abnormally quiet. “Did you know that Draco is considering making Malfoy Manor into a safehouse?” he asked.

Narcissa sat up abruptly. “He is what?”

Harry nodded a bit. He had been sure there were some sacrifices Narcissa would not countenance making for the war, which meant he wasn’t going to accept Draco’s offer of the Manor just yet, not until he knew it wouldn’t change overnight. “He said that he’d have to change the wards and lock his treasures away, but he is considering it.”

“I am going to speak to him.” Narcissa crossed the room quickly and vanished in the direction of one of the fireplaces. Harry stifled a chuckle. She could have used the phoenix song spell, but he had the feeling that she wanted to be face-to-face with her son when they talked about this.

“We shall want to emphasize the danger from Voldemort, of course,” Andromeda said, her hand closing firmly on Harry’s arm. “As well as the fact that you are vates, and your larger task is helping wizards deal with bound magical creatures, not fighting one Dark Lord. If you are ever to negotiate the release of karkadanns, or sea serpents, or that monstrous thing that the Spanish wizards have got chained up in Altamira and have no name for, then you must survive this war.”

Harry looked half-helplessly over his shoulder, hoping that Regulus might come with him and help to deflect Andromeda’s attention. Regulus smiled at him, the smile of someone who had been with two Black sisters for a few hours and was happy for his escape.

Then he closed his eyes and went to sleep.

Harry sighed, and let Andromeda sweep him into the main hall of Silver-Mirror, where a mound of parchment and quills awaited.

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“And we are agreed?”

Erasmus looked carefully around the room. It had taken days of arguments, long persuasive speeches, reading of historical test cases, and debate about the moral rights of prisoners and others, before they could arrive at this point. But, finally, it had been done. And though some of his allies still looked doubtful, none of them could raise good arguments any longer.

Even Aurora looked tired. Erasmus was not surprised, though. She had been one of those to argue hardest against this new edict, certain it would turn more wizards against them than it would win. But Erasmus had pointed out that the edict bound everyone, including the Ministry—he would not sink to the level he had when he captured Snape, Pettigrew, and Black, using Veritaserum without permission—and so could not be considered unfair. And she had entwined her destiny with his. She was in too deep to abandon him now.

Slowly, one by one, heads nodded. Members of the Wizengamot Erasmus felt he could trust, and all those sworn to the Order of the Firebird, were gathered in this private meeting hall. Erasmus wondered if someone would one day make a list of their names, if Hogwarts school-children would recite them, or if they would drown in history and be as forgotten as poor Rufus someday.

Drowning would be a fate that he could welcome, he thought, as long as the changes they made endured.

Harry had been right about one thing. Erasmus and his government could not do morally questionable things and then pretend that they were different from their opponents. In fact, they could not continue many of the regular practices of the Ministry and call themselves different from Death Eaters.

The time was ripe for a revolution. Harry had proven that. He was moving in the wrong direction, though, trying to fling the net so wide that it would include many morally questionable elements in the Ministry’s circle of protection. Erasmus had set his standards, and it would not happen with his ring. This new law was the first step in a bold new direction, one that would act as a winnowing fire and purge the Ministry and the British wizarding community of the laxities that had allowed He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named to arise in the first place.

Not even Rufus could stop bribery and corruption in the Ministry. But then, perhaps he had grown used to such things, complacent in his office. And he was slipping in any case, following the road of good intentions towards a dark bottom. The Ritual of Cincinnatus proved that, and so did his close friendship with Harry and his giving in to his demands. We must prove we stand strong, and that we will not allow things other people may have taken for granted. We are not Rufus’s Ministry, and we are
not the Order of the Phoenix. We are the Order of the Firebird, the older and higher Light. We do what is right, not what is convenient.

He met Cupressus Apollonis’s eyes across the table, and saw that the Irish wizard was smiling, faintly. He had asked many questions during the process of drafting the law, harsh, piercing, uncomfortable questions. Erasmus was indebted to him. Otherwise, his definition of Light might have remained soft, and that was not needed. During this time of war, they needed a definition that would meet He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named like a bared blade.

“It is decided, then,” he said aloud. “Tomorrow we declare martial law, and tomorrow we make Dark Arts illegal in the British Isles.”

Chapter Eleven: Like Shards of Ringing Glass

“Because you cannot.”

His mother was beautiful, forbidding, severe as an ice sculpture, but Draco could be forbidding, too, when he chose. He curled his lip and faced his mother with a lifted head and a carefully still body. He had seen Lucius use the same posture, sometimes, when Narcissa had chosen to argue something he would absolutely not give way on.

“I’m fulfilling the pride of my name in my own way,” he said curtly. “And I think I would know if I were sinking into the shadow that you suggest, Mother, doing things solely for the sake of Harry’s approval and love. I am not. I haven’t since third year, when I realized that his magic could be an unconscious compulsion on me. Since then, I’ve been careful to judge my actions.”

“As you were during fourth year, when you were so careful as to summon Julia,” his mother murmured.

Draco flushed, but forced himself to shrug. “So it was a bit further on in time than third year.” He sat down in the chair in front of the fire. His mother had called on him through the Floo in the hospital wing, and she was the one in the undignified position, kneeling so that her head showed through the flames. There was no reason that he should make himself look undignified by pacing the way he had, when there was a perfectly good seat available. “But I am not asking Harry to accept Malfoy Manor as a safehouse out of some misplaced wish to make up for Father’s actions or because I wanted to see the expression Harry would look at me with when I did. I am doing it because I want to, because we need this, and because if we can change the blood wards, then the Manor will be perfect for refugees.”

“You are sacrificing your own pride,” said Narcissa, the accusation she had begun the conversation with.

“Some of it could stand to be sacrificed,” said Draco, and glared at her some more. When that didn’t seem effective, he tried, “It’s a much lesser sacrifice than blood and lives, all told.”

“Even Muggle lives?”

“I don’t know if Muggles will come to live in the Manor, unless they’re the families of Mudbloods,” Draco began, baffled. *Why would she be worried about that at all*—

And then he understood. He actually was surprised he hadn’t understood in the first place. He stopped himself with a swallow and a gulp, and looked at Narcissa’s perfectly sculptured, mask-like face.

“This isn’t about a loss of pride for the Malfoy family,” he said softly, “or even about the way that you think I’m giving up too much to be with Harry, just because I want him. You’re prejudiced against Muggles, aren’t you, Mother? You don’t want to think of them touching the same chairs that you did, walking between our portraits, looking at our furniture.”

A faint tinge of color graced Narcissa’s cheeks, after which she shook her head. “You misunderstand me, Draco.”

“Really?” Draco didn’t think he did. “Then explain it to me, please.”

“I already have.” Narcissa laid one hand in the fire, so that Draco could see it hovering beside her head. “You are making a mockery of yourself if you do this, Draco. Harry would not demand so much of you, and that means that you should not give so much up. You should retain the Manor to become the graceful home for your future that it will be after the war.”

Draco studied her thoughtfully. “Harry said that Regulus was allowing one of the Black houses to become a refuge. And Harry
did the same thing before the rebellion started, sheltering that werewolf pack he suddenly acquired in Cobley-by-the-Sea and Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. Do you think they disgraced the honor of the Black name? Somehow polluted the houses so that someone like you or Regulus or Aunt Bellatrix could never live there again?”

He’d used the comparison to Bellatrix on purpose, partly to make his mother wake up and think, and partly because he knew that Aunt Andromeda would have no objection to being in a house where Muggles and Mudbloods had walked. He privately suspected that, rather than simply incompatible personalities, was the source of her long quarrel with Narcissa.

“That is different,” said Narcissa stiffly. “After Sirius, no heir could possibly disgrace the line more, and they stand to gain in recovered glory with Harry. For the Malfoys, however—Draco, your father’s name is becoming a taunt and worse in the newspapers. Do not do this, and degrade it further.”

“I think it would recover it, not degrade it further,” Draco said quietly. “Since, after all, it would show that at least some Malfoys are on this side of the war, and willing to make amends.”

“You will be giving up part of a world they can never understand, to be pawed by them,” said Narcissa fervently. “I do not mind fighting beside them. I do not mind planning with them, or acknowledging that they make fine allies to Harry. But you must have some place to go where you may escape their—their prejudices, Draco.” Draco had to fight to keep from laughing aloud. “Some place where the atmosphere is of magic, and the untainted blood shines.”

“And yet, if the Grand Unified Theory is correct, then Grandfather Abraxas was a halfblood, and the Manor accepted him anyway,” Draco said. It was the first time he had ever hinted that he might believe that. The problem was that he had to. He’d looked through the documents Rhangnara had assembled in support of that, and they stared him in the face with evidence that wouldn’t go away. Draco supposed he would feel a certain smugness, once he got over the shock. He was more pureblooded than his own father, since the contamination was a comfortable distance from him.

“Draco,” said Narcissa quietly. “I am worried about you. You need not say such things, need not repeat such things, for Harry to love you.”

Draco rose restlessly to his feet again, aware that it was an admission of weakness, and yet unable to stop himself from making it. “Why does everyone think I would be so weak as to change my mind merely because Harry wants me to?” he asked. “You, his brother, Harry himself, sometimes. I am my own person. I make up my own mind. And giving up the Manor to act as a safehouse is my choice.”

“You cannot know that for certain, Draco.”

Draco stared at her. “And now you sound like Harry did when he feared using unconscious compulsion on me,” he said flatly. “It sounds just as silly now as it did then, Mother, in case you were wondering.”

“I would ask that you keep the Manor in silence and solitude,” said Narcissa, “a refuge that you and I can retreat to when the world becomes too much, a sign that not everything about the Malfoys shall change because Lucius defected.”

“The reasons I’m changing its status are more complicated than you think they are,” Draco said calmly, “just as Lucius didn’t properly defect to the Dark Lord, and it’s more complicated than that.”

“Draco—“

For the first time ever, Draco spelled a Floo connection through which his mother was speaking shut. Then he sat down in the chair and took several deep breaths, closing and opening his eyes now and again.

*I know what I’m doing. What I’m doing is what I want to do. And if it turns out I’m making the decision more because I want Harry to love me than for any other reason…it’s not as though that would matter. Harry doesn’t love someone because of what that person can do for him.*

Draco stood up and left the hospital wing, intent on having a rest, and then a good back-rub from Harry if he could find him.

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Harry wondered, afterwards, if he knew something was wrong even before the owl deposited the *Daily Prophet* in front of him. He dropped a Knut into its pouch, and it hooted and took off. Was there a suspicious softness in the hoot? Did it linger a moment, looking as if it were sorry for the news it delivered?
The problem was that he couldn’t be sure. The moment his eyes fell on the headline, it seemed like he always should have known this would happen, and his reactions before the fact became near-impossible to distinguish from ones after the fact.

**DARK ARTS BANNED! BY ORDER OF THE MINISTRY**

*Acting Minister calls the decision ‘a step in the right direction’*

By: Rita Skeeter

Harry heard gasps all up and down the table, and guessed that most of the professors and the students who had stayed at Hogwarts had seen the headline by now. He didn’t glance up, though, but drove straight into reading the article. His heartbeat sounded in his ears like the ocean heard through a seashell. There was the faint, elemental hope that he might somehow have mistaken the sense of the headline, and if he could read the article, and the truth, everything would be set straight.

That didn’t appear to be the case.

In a surprise announcement early this morning, Acting Minister Erasmus Juniper, flanked by some members of the Wizengamot and the newly-organized Order of the Firebird, said that Dark Arts have been banned in Great Britain.

“This news is long in coming,” he said. “Of course, some Light wizards have wanted to take this step for years, but the prominence of Dark wizards in British social life prevented them. Now, though, we’re fighting a war against an enemy who wantonly uses Dark magic for his own purposes. I don’t think anyone sane could argue that now is a time for us to ignore this issue.”

The Acting Minister clarified, in response to questions from the press, what he meant by “Dark Arts.”

“We drew on the old definitions of Dark when we composed this law,” he said. “Thus, magic that creates compulsion, that is savage and wild, and that promotes subterfuge, in the very broadest distinctions, is banned. This includes pain curses, the compulsion gift, and most glamours and illusions that are used for a harmful purpose instead of an aesthetic or educational one.”

Juniper denied that the definition is too broad and that the law will snare more innocents than criminals or Death Eaters.

“That’s simply not the case,” he said. “Most people don’t use Dark Arts in their day-to-day lives. And of course defensive magic like the Shield Charm and most Transfiguration goes untouched. We’re trying to encourage our people to fight a just war, a Light war. We wouldn’t take weapons out of their hands. But the Dark Arts are more like swords than shields. They’re designed to strike, to hurt, to cause pain. That’s why Death Eaters use them. No ordinary, innocent citizen of wizarding Britain has a reason to use them.”

The Acting Minister acknowledged that the new law will face heavy opposition.

“I don’t expect everyone to welcome the news with open arms,” he said. “Things are changing at last, in the Ministry and in our world, and most people are afraid of change. But this is a great wind, a roaring fire that will burn out all the careless impurities and lazy ways of doing things that we’ve allowed to creep into our ordinary lives. Everyone will follow it eventually, but I don’t deny that following it at first will take great courage, conviction, and commitment to the vision of a Britain free from evil.”

He promised to follow this law with a program to clean up bribery and other kinds of corruption in the Ministry.

“We’ve allowed ourselves to become lax,” he said. “All sorts of perfectly good prohibitions have lapsed, and our children grow up thinking that amoral and even immoral actions are perfectly fine, because they see their elders doing them. I hold to a vision of a sterner, brighter world.”

Harry laid the paper down and put his hand over his eyes, fingers rubbing gently at his brow.

*I can’t believe he would be this stupid.*

Except that, on one level, he could. Juniper had already said he was determined to fight this war without losing any moral ground. That would involve turning away from many actions that some leaders would condone because of expediency, but which Juniper would consider wrong. He was being consistent with his principles, no matter what the cost. It was noble, it was honorable—
It’s consistent with a titanic stupidity at this point in time.

“He can’t do that,” said Hermione, sounding upset. Harry looked up in time to see her fling her paper down and stare at if it were a Horklump trying to crawl up her leg. “He can’t, can he?”

“He’s Minister,” said Zacharias, who sat next to her, his mouth a thin line. “Well. Acting Minister.” He turned the front page over. “And if you look at the second page, you’ll see that he’s declared martial law. Ministers can do whatever they like in times of martial law, with only minimal input from the Wizengamot.”

“But that’s not fair,” Hermione whispered. Harry could see why it was hitting her so hard, even though he couldn’t imagine her using Dark Arts outside of battle. Hermione liked things to be right, proper, fair, and even if the authorities didn’t always agree with her definitions of those things, she trusted them not to go too far outside the boundaries. This had shaken her faith.

“In this case, yes, it’s unfair,” Harry said, and froze for a moment as every eye along the table snapped to him. Then he let out his breath and went on. Prat. Of course they’re going to pay attention to you when something like this happens. Like it or not, you’re in an important position here, and it’s only going to get worse when and if those Ministers answer the letters Andromeda had you write. “But that’s the way Juniper thinks. He can’t allow anything to impede the progress of his morals, even if it impedes the progress of his war. You read it.” He tapped the article again. “He knows that not everyone will support this, and he doesn’t care. He wouldn’t think that the support of those people who object was worth having.”

His mind was finally stepping past the shock of the announcement, and into the consequences of it. The very thought made him ill.

Merlin. Wizards are going to protest this, and turn against the Ministry when they were trusting it to stay strong and defend them from the Death Eaters. The panic that Juniper managed to stave off in the wake of Scrimgeour’s assassination is going to spread now, because people won’t know if their favorite defensive spells are classified as Dark Arts or not—except by asking, which somehow I can’t see many of them doing. The feeling of vulnerability to Voldemort will increase exponentially. I can see many people going into hiding or fleeing the country rather than risk getting killed by Death Eaters or arrested and put into Tullianum. Martial law means they won’t even have the dignity of a trial, unless they’re prominent Light purebloods, maybe.

And the people who do support Juniper will be put on the defensive, trying to justify his choice. The Light will be on the defensive. Merlin knows how the newspapers will stir things. Harry let out a gusty sigh. I think I just got piled with a lot of responsibility I didn’t ask for.

“Harry.”

He looked up. McGonagall was standing, her lips pursed in a thin line and her eyes holding a steely glint.

“Come with me to my office, please.”

Harry nodded, and stood. He was startled when Draco immediately stood with him, and then Owen. Owen’s face was grave, and he was giving McGonagall a look that suggested he suspected the Headmistress of designs to kill and eat Harry. Draco’s expression wasn’t much better.

What the fuck, they know she’s a friend—

And then Harry understood it, and wanted to groan. And she’s a Light witch. They don’t know her as well or trust her as much as I do, and they think she might turn against me because I’ve used Dark Arts in the past. This will set Light and Dark wizards against each other to an unprecedented extent, too, because it will make some people cling to their allegiances and think they have to prove they’re Dark or Light. Wonderful.

“You may bring your companions,” said McGonagall, exactly as if she hadn’t noticed Owen’s tense shoulders or Draco’s eyes, and then swept out of the Great Hall. Harry sighed and followed, taking the Prophet with him. He didn’t much regret the untouched breakfast. He wasn’t hungry.

When they’d crossed through the halls and up the moving staircase to McGonagall’s office—a journey made in absolute, and, to Harry, eerie silence—she sat down and stared at him sternly. “I wish you to know,” she said. “that Hogwarts will remain open, and a refuge to any student and his or her family. It does not matter if the family is Declared Dark, or if the student uses Dark Arts, so long as they do not plan to hurt, kill, or torture anyone else residing here. That is the only absolute law I intend to impose. Those who sow dissension in Hogwarts, of any kind, will have the wind for a companion.”
“Even if they use Light spells to hurt others?” Owen demanded.

“Even if they do that,” said McGonagall.

Owen relaxed, slowly. Draco didn’t. “You know what’s coming,” he told McGonagall, in a flat, calm voice Harry had never heard from him before. “You know what it’s going to make Harry, as an undeclared Lord-level wizard who welcomes both the Dark and the Light and is Voldemort’s main foe.” His hand stroked Harry’s shoulder, then rose and traveled through his hair with that possessive little tug he used so often. Harry wriggled, trying to get it out—this was an intimate gesture he didn’t like Draco displaying in front of other people—but Draco didn’t notice. “Will you stand in his way and make his life more difficult? Or will you do what you can to spare him the torrent that’s falling?”

“I will support him,” said McGonagall, and though her eyes glinted again, she didn’t speak of the inappropriateness of a student calling her out on her intentions towards another student. Harry bit his lip. The announcement hadn’t sent the Headmistress screaming towards her allegiance, then, and eager to prove that she was part of the Light.

“You do know what it could cost you?” he asked softly. “The Board of Governors might not approve of the decision to keep Hogwarts open, let alone all the support that you intend to give me.”

“They can go hang, then,” said McGonagall, and Harry had to blink to make sure he’d got the full sense of her words, so utterly calm were they. “They can say what they like, make what laws they like. It in no way diminishes my support of my students, Dark and undeclared as well as Light. The Ministry has made a mistake if they sought to divide me from them.”

Harry bowed his head, a bit overwhelmed. He remembered McGonagall as scrupulously fair, even a little unfair towards her own House sometimes, in her eagerness to show that she did not favor Gryffindors. “Thank you,” he murmured. “But if it ever costs you more to support me than Hogwarts can bear, Headmistress, I’ll urge you to think about moving away.”

“The principles you represent are the principles I support, Harry,” McGonagall said. “I cannot see that changing. One does not often have intentions that melt and run like water at my time of life.”

Harry let out a little breath. “Thank you, Madam.” He turned to Draco and Owen, and grimaced. “Come with me, would you? I have letters to write, and I think I could stand to have company to make sure I don’t start burning them before I finish.”

Both nodded, and followed him, Draco nearly as grim and silent as Owen was. For some reason, that reminded Harry he hadn’t yet mentioned Michael’s request to take the lightning bolt brand again.

Nor will I, not right now. The next few days, Harry could see, were going to be frantically busy, and mention of Michael would only divide him and Draco. At the moment, he needed Draco’s support to an extent that depressed and frightened him, but which he couldn’t deny.

I cannot afford an argument right now.

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“It will be all right.”

“You say that, but you can’t know that,” Hermione pointed out, even as she buried her head against Zacharias’s chest.

“I can know that.” Zacharias stroked his fingers through her hair, watching as her curls sprang back into place. He wondered if she had the slightest idea how much that simple and silly thing affected him, and decided not to tell her. It would only lead to an impression of her power over him, and she had enough of that already. “And do you know why?”

Hermione shook her head, not looking up. That alone told Zacharias how much she was shaken. Of course, unlike many other people stupid enough to assume it was something to do with a flaw in Hermione’s character, he knew why. She’d always tried to be a dutiful person, always tried to follow the rules, and now she found herself declared a rebel through no fault of her own, since she’d used Dark Arts in the past to defend herself and others and would go on using them. Suddenly she was on the opposite side from the one she’d been following all her life.

“Because I’m Light.” Zacharias bowed his head and touched his lips to Hermione’s hair. He felt old, and strong, and far wiser than most people would attribute to his age. “And Light isn’t what that doddering old fool thinks it is. We’re proud, but we can see the end of our pride and work with other people. That’s an ideal of Light that Juniper’s forgotten, you know—cooperation and communication with others. He thinks he’s so intelligent, cutting the Light off from the Dark, assuming that they can have
nothing in common. But he’s wrong. The first Ministry was Light because we cared about reaching out to people who weren’t like us. We knew we couldn’t purge Dark wizards from the British wizarding population, so we didn’t try. We included them instead, and built something with them that would keep them from their worst excesses, because then they would be destroying something that mattered to them, too.” He smiled, and knew she could feel the movement of his lips against her skin. “And, of course, once we had them next to us, we could sneakily reeducate them and show them how much better the Light was than their puny Dark.”

Hermione’s laugh was watery, but real. She lifted her head and pulled him down into a profound kiss. “Thank you,” she said, when their lips managed to part.

Zacharias didn’t have to ask for what. He was intelligent enough to know what she would have said.

******

Connor wanted to kick things.

Instead, though, he took himself up to his room in Gryffindor Tower, sat down on his bed, folded his hands over his eyes, and counted to two hundred. Then to four hundred, because he had visions of torturing Erasmus Juniper with a Tickling Hex until he cried. Then six hundred, and finally the visions went away, and finally he could sit up and think about what he was going to do, in ways that didn’t involve Tickling Hexes.

One thing was clear to him, one that he knew Harry was probably thinking of but might forget in the midst of all the other things he had to do.

Light will fall behind if we can’t come up with a way to represent it. Harry’s undeclared. He’s Light in his morals—more than he is Dark—but most people wouldn’t see that because of his refusal to Declare. And a lot of his allies who are Light aren’t close enough to him to serve as real representatives of our allegiance. The Opallines might work, since they’re so respected, but they can’t fight except in self-defense.

There’s only one Light person who really backs him enough, and is close enough to him in most people’s eyes, to make a difference.

Me.

Connor gave a single sharp nod, and sat up a little more. He knew he was having to be an adult, and most of the time, he resented that. He would have liked to stay a child in the way that Dean and Seamus still were, at least for a little longer—the way that Harry and Lily had tried to keep him for the first eleven years of his life.

But now he had to be an adult, the spokes-wizard for Light and the single most prominent person to convince Dark wizards that not all Light wizards were insane and to convince people of his own allegiance that they could have a home with Harry, and he was looking forward to it.

He felt, as he had not since he first Declared, the presence of the Light like a burning sun in his heart. He closed his eyes and touched a fist to his chest, savoring the warmth.

Connor had Declared because he believed in and loved what the Light stood for. Especially, he believed in the necessity for not always getting his own way and having to voluntarily limit his impact on some beings in order to let them have free will. That lesson had been beaten into him with a stick by the events of third year. He’d seen what happened when he tried to get his own way with Harry all the time.

No more.

He knew one thing he could do, and so he went to do it—writing a letter to the Vox Populi that he would ask them to print with his name on it. He would speak in the most general terms, as a Light wizard to other Light wizards, so that he wouldn’t bind Harry to promises he couldn’t keep. But he would do this thing, to show Juniper that he was opposed immediately and fervently and by people who believed in the same things he did.

Although Tickling Hexes would still be more satisfying.

******
Snape was amused.

He knew he could not show it. No one would understand. He had to sit in silence after everyone else had departed the Great Hall, except for Flitwick and Hagrid, and eat his meal, and try to keep his laughter from appearing on his face.

He had wondered yesterday, when Harry told him about the letters Madam Tonks had had him write, whether it was possible that Harry truly could take the leadership of wizarding Britain from the Acting Minister. So long as he remained in power, it might be a beautiful dream, and certainly some Ministries would listen to Harry because of his magic and the prophecy, but Snape doubted the depth of their commitment.

Now, Juniper had carefully removed any possible crown he might have worn and all but laid it at Harry’s feet.

*The fool. Has he not studied any trends in wizarding communities in Europe for the last five hundred years?*

There was no country entirely without Dark wizards, though in some they were more prominent than others. In some cases, they controlled the Ministries; in some cases, they competed for the power with Light wizards, as equals; in other cases, they had formed solid voting blocks or actual political parties and insured they kept their voices heard. Even Britain had been more like that fifty years ago. What had truly changed things for them was Dumbledore’s defeat of Grindelwald, which had lifted him into a position of power as a Light Lord and increased the antipathy of Light wizards towards Dark ones. The discovery of Dark wizards sworn to Grindelwald’s Lightning Guard among prominent members of the Wizengamot did not help. And then Voldemort’s First War had exacerbated things, making people come to equate Dark magic with evil and believe that wizards of that allegiance could not be trusted.

The insane dominance of the Light in Britain was a recent historical development, not a natural thing.

*Oh, tides are changing,* Snape thought, lifting the paper and staring at the photograph of the Acting Minister, whose hair blew in the wind around a calm, regal face. *Not in the way that you anticipated, Juniper, but the tides are changing at last.*

Harry sat back and considered the first stack of letters with a weary eye. He was sending them to the governments that Andromeda had already had him contact (and how strange did that sound, to say that he was writing to Ministries around the world as if he had a right to do so?) He’d used the translation spells on them, since he thought a Minister would appreciate receiving a letter in his native language more than in Latin. Owen, who knew German and Russian, was checking those letters for him. Harry wondered if they had time to check the others.

*Probably not.* It was important that the letters go out as soon as possible. There might be a version of panic in the wider wizarding community if Juniper’s news was uncomplemented by some sort of remark from Harry—or, at the very best, scorn, and belief that no one in the Isles knew what to do. Harry wanted to show them that he was, partially, in control of what had happened, or willing to assume control.

He grimaced over the foul slickness those words left in his mind, then turned sharply as he caught sight of a movement under the library tables. The next moment, Argutus had flowed up and was coiled around Harry’s arms and throat, hissing urgently.

"Something is happening in my scales. Look, look, look!"

Harry frowned and picked up a segment of the Omen snake’s body, twisting it until he could see the milky scales and the reflections they bore. The gray-black shapes moving in swift flight through them were familiar—the magical constructs of owls that delivered the *Vox Populi*—but the place they approached was not. At last Harry saw a glimpse of red, and of graffiti, and realized with a start that they were gliding through the dirty alley outside the Ministry’s main entrance and settling into the disused telephone box that would become a lift.

“What in the world is Hornblower doing?” he murmured.

The lift descended as he watched in mystified silence, and opened up again once it reached the Ministry’s Atrium. The owls spread their wings, moving fast. Harry expected them to divide once they started towards the offices of the various people who read the *Populi*, but they didn’t. Instead, they traveled in one concentrated, feathery mass towards the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, or at least the upper level, where the Minister’s office was located.

Perhaps because Harry was interested in it, the scene sharpened, until he could see the inside of the Minister’s office completely. Harry saw Juniper look up from his desk, and had to stifle a growl of frustration. *Idiotic old man. He has to make my life as hard*
as he can, and I swear he enjoys it—

He certainly did not enjoy what happened next, however.

Every single owl banked past the desk and the Acting Minister, and lifted its tail. A mass of white bird-shit dropped out of each with a plop Harry could almost hear, sometimes landing on the paperwork, sometimes on the Acting Minister’s hair and ears.

After that first moment, Juniper began a mad scramble to save his parchments, but it was a losing battle. Every time he managed to gather one sheaf of paper to him, an owl would shit on his head, which caused him to lift an arm, which enabled the next to dart in and do the same thing over a fledgling law or edict. By the time the owls all swirled together and dissipated into the air, there wasn’t an inch of the Acting Minister’s desk and robes that wasn’t white, gray, green, brown, or some mixture of both.

The vision faded. Harry began to laugh. Argutus lifted his head and touched his tongue anxiously to Harry’s cheek. “It was not a bad vision, then?”

“No. A very good one.” Harry stroked the Omen snake’s head. “You’ve brought me some excellent news, just what I needed to cheer me up.” He supposed, in hindsight, that it wasn’t so unexpected. Hornblower was a professional rebel. He changed sides constantly, but he would always be with the one he perceived as the underdog of the moment, unfairly represented. The Ministry had passed a law that he would see as targeting Dark wizards. It wasn’t a surprise that he’d decided to make an example of them in his own inimitable way.

“Good,” said Argutus sleepily, and dropped his head to Harry’s shoulder. “Everyone smelled far too serious.”

Harry stroked him one more time, then turned to Draco. “You can provide me with a list of Dark families who aren’t among my allies right now, can’t you?” he asked.

“Yes, of course,” said Draco, with a little bow. “If you tell me what cheered you up so much that you laughed that hard.”

Harry told him. By the end, Draco had snickered hard enough to twist his face, and even Owen, glancing up from the letter to the Minister of Germany, was smiling.

“I’ll tell the Dark families they’ll have sanctuary,” Harry murmured. He felt more relaxed now, and not solely because of Argutus’s vision, though that had helped a great deal. He was getting used to the idea that Britain had a bad Acting Minister right now, and he would have to fight Voldemort with his allies instead of beside Juniper. Really, it was no more than he had suspected after Juniper abducted Snape, Peter, and Regulus. “In return for support from those who feel competent to fight.”

I am not going to let this edict tear Britain apart. We have to fight, and fight we shall.

******

Owen Rosier-Henlin thought he was ready.

Of course, there would be obvious difficulties in being sworn companion to a Lord-level wizard who had just made himself the sole viable source of opposition to a Dark Lord in the British Isles. There would be many more people trying to kill him, for example. There would be people asking him for things that Harry simply couldn’t give, like absolute safety, and which he would drive himself mad trying to provide. There would be more times when Owen would need to be suddenly on the defensive, and less time to spend with his own family.

Owen found he did not care.

This was what he had had in mind when he asked to become a sworn companion, actually: this kind of intense uncertainty and danger. Other than the Midsummer battle, there had been few times like that for him in Harry’s service. Harry had managed the rebellion from a distance, and during the jailbreak in the Ministry, other people had helped him more than Owen had.

Now things had changed again. And while Owen could not be as solid an emotional support for Harry—his Lord, essentially, though he kept that thought carefully in the privacy of his mind—as Draco or Snape or his brother could, he could offer a slight emotional distance and a clear head where the rest of them might be caught up in arguing about Harry’s safety. And he had special knowledge of Durmstrang and connections he had forged with other European wizarding families during his years there, since Durmstrang had served several countries. That would be important as this war became international, he knew.

Harry might not yet have the scope of vision to see what he would become, though his commitment to it could not be denied.
That was all right. Owen would be his Lord’s strong right hand and advisor as necessary.

He was excited.

******

Harry sighed. It had been a full day, and his hand hurt from writing all those letters. But he knew he couldn’t sleep yet, even if he went to their bedroom with Draco and lay down in his arms. He was simply too high-strung, both from what he’d done and from calling on his allies with the phoenix song spell to hear what they had to say about the general state of things elsewhere in the British Isles.

Ignifer had told him that the news had hit St. Mungo’s like a Kneazle hitting a flock of pigeons. Most of the Healers were worrying over whether certain specialized spells would be declared Dark Arts, and what they would do if that should happen. She intended to move Honoria to Hogwarts as soon as possible, since now she was convinced the Healers could do nothing more for her partner.

Neville had told Harry that his grandmother was furious, and had spent most of the day Flooing back and forth from her allies’ houses, swearing that the Acting Minister would not be the only image of Light that the wider world took away from this conflict. She had also sent a Howler to Juniper to give him a piece of her mind, and a piece of Augusta Longbottom’s mind, as Harry could imagine from meeting her, was a formidable piece indeed.

He’d contacted Skeeter, but the reporter was hidden somewhere in her beetle Animagus form and couldn’t talk. Harry fully understood, and expected an informative article at some point tomorrow.

The Opallines were fiercely delighted, because Paton had finally given Calibrid permission to reveal their presence to Muggles on the Isle of Man itself. He didn’t think that the Ministry’s laws were worth obeying any more, and that apparently now included the International Statute of Secrecy. Harry had spent a few minutes arguing with Calibrid, but couldn’t talk her out of it.

Remus reported no vampire activity in London, but some suspicious movement near flats owned by wizards in the wider area. He thought Voldemort was trying to recruit more Death Eaters. Harry had to accept that that wasn’t unlikely. He wondered how many people would actually join him, though.

The Weasley twins had told Harry somberly that the battle lines appeared to have been drawn straight down the middle of Diagon Alley. Five Light wizard-Dark wizard duels had happened already, one right in front of their shop, with Aurors coming to drag away any participants who had used Dark Arts.

And there were more reports, so many that Harry had finally had to admit that he needed help to coordinate all the different aspects of this situation and create working maps and strategies. He dearly wished for Adalrico on his side again, and not just for the obvious reasons. The man had been good with general strategy, though not magically powerful enough to lead many attacks himself.

All of this had left him far too keyed up to sleep, and so he was on top of the Astronomy Tower again, pacing back and forth. Owen and Draco had come with him, while Bill and Charlie guarded the steps below.

Harry could understand why his sworn companions were willing to skip sleep to be with him, but he couldn’t understand Draco’s presence. He’d even gently encouraged him to go get some rest, since he knew how grumpy Draco got when he didn’t sleep enough. That had only won him a flat look, though, so at last Harry gave in and allowed Draco to watch him while he paced.

The sound of wings above him startled him, and he stared into the sky. Owen was already on his feet, wand out, and Bill and Charlie charged up the stairs. Harry glanced at Charlie, who had paused next to him. “Dragons?” he asked.

“The sound’s too small, except for a Peruvian Vipertooth,” said Charlie, shaking his head. “And the permission battle you’d have to go through to get one of those into the country—”

Abruptly, the clouds overhead partied, and Harry’s mouth fell open as he watched a wave of glittering horses dip into sight, laboring along on wide, feathered wings. Each bore a rider. At first, Harry thought they were Granians, so fast did they move, and he prepared his magic; enemies of his had ridden the gray flying horses before. When they caught and flashed the starlight back, though, he saw they were made of metal, and he knew who they must have come from.

Gloryflower.
The flock halted a distance from the Tower and wheeled around it, close enough to let Harry see that they were made of silver, with manes and tails of what looked like braided pearls. The leader flew steadily towards him. Harry ignored his companions’ raised wands, and lifted his hand.

“Hello, Mrs. Gloryflower,” he said.

“Do call me Laura, Harry.” Laura Gloryflower pulled her horse up to land on the battlement of the Tower, by means of a pair of leather reins that stuck out from the ends of a golden bridle molded to the head. The horse tossed its neck and snorted. Harry eyed it admiringly. Its eyes were sapphires, and it was even more lifelike than the golden horses and the unicorns Laura had sent into the battle last year. “This is a series of artificial animals we’ve just perfected, and we’re going to fight beside you.” She gave him a small, strong smile. “Since, after all, the Acting Minister does make it seem as if the Light wizards should turn their backs on you.”

Harry stretched out a hand and gently touched the winged horse under the chin. It sniffed at him, and he felt a huff of cold air from its nostrils. It was the magic that powered the horse, but it felt convincingly like breath. “Thank you,” he said. “Would you be adverse to putting on a—bit of a show for me tomorrow morning?”

Laura’s smile widened like sunrise across her face. “Tell us.”

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“No,” Indigena said aloud.

She examined the paper for a moment, then cast a spell on it that would reveal any glamours anyone had added. Surely some mischievous child in this small wizarding village where she came, heavily disguised, to fetch food and learn the news had charmed the papers to look as if the Acting Minister had really banned Dark Arts.

There was no glamour. The papers stayed the same.

Indigena hissed between her teeth and shook her head sadly. Her Lord would welcome the news, of course, and it was an addition to the chaos growing throughout the Isles. It might even add to their recruitment efforts. Some wizards had a commitment to practicing the Dark Arts that went beyond occasional use of some dodgy defensive magic or charms and made it a lifestyle. There were even a few members of her own family Indigena thought might join them over this.

But it was a shame that Harry had to deal with this kind of thing.

*It is also a shame that he would not accept my Lord’s offer*, Indigena thought, as she tucked the paper under her arm and prepared to Apparate. *Then he could be in a place where he would not have to deal with such stupidity daily. And he would certainly not be compelled to consider himself a part of that world, and the people who did this equals, and treat with them as such.*

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“Sir? You should see this.”

Erasmus sighed and followed the somber young Auror who had come in to give him the message. After the debacle of yesterday, when more than fifty magical owls had deposited feces on his desk, he did not like to imagine what other “spectacle” he needed to watch, but it was better to deal with it.

*And you expected opposition*, he reminded to himself as he halted in front of one of the enchanted windows of the Ministry. *Perhaps not quite so deep or quite so immediate, but you knew that most wizards in Britain were not up to the standards that you are promoting.*

He looked out the window. It gave onto a perfectly presentable scene of Muggle London in the morning, the Thames running slug-silver between its banks, Muggle carriages passing back and forth over it and beside it.

And above them all drifted a series of what he at first took for clouds, but realized a moment later was a string of silver flying horses.

Erasmus stared, his heart in his throat. It was an amazing display of the beauty and the power of the Light. The horses had been made to flash and give back the sunlight multiplied—not because they had to, or because it was a requirement of their flight, but
solely because their makers loved the sun and had wanted it that way. They tumbled around each other, wings spread wide, and danced like courting swans. Sometimes a pair flew so close together that their sides scraped, and their wings overlapped each other like blankets. Silver bells attached to their tails rang and called across the miles, creating a music that lifted Erasmus’s heart even as it infuriated him. Once, such displays had been common over Britain—once, when Light wizards had been stronger and nobler of heart than they were now.

And they were riding in full sight of Muggles.

“Send the Obliviators to stand along their route,” he told the young Auror, without taking his eyes from the horses. Gloryflower work. I would know it anywhere. “And track them from their end to the beginning. I want to make sure every Muggle who sees them doesn’t remember them. And cast a widespread Fumo, too. We can make the Muggles think they’re clouds.”

“Sir.”

As her footsteps hastened away, Erasmus leaned forward and stared at the horses until his eyes ached. A rich, deep sadness had taken hold of him, and soothed away even the headache that it would be to make sure that Muggles remembered nothing of this, or at best a series of tumbling early morning clouds. At least the Gloryflowers had ventured out before many of London’s residents were awake, while dawn still streaked the sky.

He was sad that he could not have the Gloryflowers as allies. So beautiful, and they had chosen the wrong side.

But this is what I am fighting to preserve: their right to have magic like this, even if they turn against me for it. In the end, they shall owe their survival to me. And I like the thought of leaving a legacy so fair in the world.

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Chapter Twelve: A War of Lords and Ladies

Harry bit his lip as he saw the owls flying towards him the next morning. There were at least twenty of them, and he had no way of telling if the letters they bore were answers to the ones he had sent, offers of alliance, or perhaps traps containing Portkeys, like the ones holding the wooden Snitch and broom that Rosier had sent to lure Connor away. The thought of sorting through them all with spells before he’d even eaten his breakfast wearied him. Of course, that could have to do with the fact that he’d again been awake late the night before, writing yet more letters and making firecalls.

At least I know the Howlers from the rest, he thought, and concentrated on the red, smoking envelopes. Picturing what he wanted, he clapped his hands sharply. The owls who carried the Howlers abruptly pitched off course, hooting in shock as a pair of iron jaws appeared near their legs and ate the parchment and envelopes without touching their feet. That done, the jaws vanished. The owls wheeled around in confusion for a few more moments, then turned and headed tamely back out the windows of the Great Hall.

Someone laughed across from him. Harry looked up at Snape for the moment before a storm of owls came between them, trying to figure out ways to land as close to him as possible.

“What?” he asked, as he floated the first letter off the biggest owl—no owl at all, actually, but a gyrfalcon. He knew that would be from one of the Light families, probably Griffinsnest. It had once been tradition to use the huge, proud birds in place of owls, but as fewer people now knew how to tame them, most families didn’t keep them any longer.

“A year ago, you would not have done that.” Snape sipped at his water, the only liquid he seemed to drink in the mornings, his dark eyes fastened on Harry. “You would have thought it your duty to listen to the Howlers and figure out what objections the people sending them could possibly have against you.”

“I’m tired,” Harry muttered, dodging the implied criticism, and collected the rest of the letters with a scrape of his magic. The owls then all hooted in chorus, seeming to think that if he had taken their letters all at once, he should pay them all at once. Harry sighed, rolled his eyes, and Summoned some of the Knuts he had lying on his bedroom table to give owls who came into the Slytherin common room. When the glittering coins settled into their pouches, the owls took off and shot towards the windows again. In a moment, only feathers settling with a slow swirl into the marmalade, and the strong smell of dust, revealed they had ever been there.

“Is every morning going to be like this?” Draco asked from beside him. He sounded disgruntled. Harry glanced at him with some sympathy, but not much. Draco had insisted on staying up with him again last night. He knew that his temper and his control over his emotions suffered when he did that.
“Until I stop writing to people and can teach them the phoenix song spell, yes, I think so,” said Harry calmly, and began feeling his way through his post, a Shield Charm up in front of him to deflect any hexes from people who were feeling too subtle to send Howlers.

There was one on the letter the gryffalcon had carried, which was indeed from Griffinsnest, and scolded him for not making a public announcement that he intended to follow the Minister’s edict and refrain from using Dark Arts. There were a few others like that, too, mostly from pureblood families or prominent Muggleborns and halfbloods proudly denying that they would ever ally with him. But a few others asked for safety in one of the sanctuaries, and others offered their skills to help in the war—including a Healer, whose letter Harry carefully put aside—and Tybalt Starrise had written, saying his brother’s trial was almost settled and he’d be able to pay attention to other things soon.

There was also one that didn’t—well, it puzzled him, and yet it didn’t. Harry knew exactly who it came from; his signature was bold at the bottom of the letter. But it seemed like he shouldn’t be writing to Harry, and especially that he shouldn’t ask the question he should in the letter. He was supposed to be too confident for that.

July 5th, 1997

Harry:

_Do you think the Light will be triumphant?_

_Cupressus Apollonis._

Harry cast a detection charm on the parchment, to tell him if someone else had concealed his handwriting with what could look like Apollonis’s. The detection charm came back blank, and clean. Of course, Harry had only the faintest memory of what Cupressus’s handwriting looked like, so it could still be someone else using this as a fake name.

There was someone sitting at the table who should know exactly what Cupressus’s handwriting looked like, though.

“Ignifer?” he called, and floated the letter towards her when she looked up from a low-voiced conversation with Honoria.

Ignifer’s eyebrows lifted as she read the letter, and her body grew still and tense. Then she gave Harry a single nod. “That’s his hand,” she said. She turned back to Honoria as if she wanted to forget the parchment, and probably by extension her father, existed.

Perplexed, Harry drew the letter back and stared at it, then cast several other detection spells, this time ones that would reveal the presence of Tracking Charms or other devices on the letter. Perhaps it was meant to spy for Cupressus, who had counted on shock persuading Harry to keep instead of shred it.

In the end, it hung there in the air, an innocent letter, and Harry had to accept that it was nothing more than parchment and ink.

That did not mean he was going to write back. Any statement could be taken and reported to the newspapers, his words twisted to make it seem he was against the Light. He had not said that, and he never would. He welcomed Light wizards if they did not try to dominate others.

_Rather like Cupressus dominated his daughter. He does not deserve an answer._

Harry ripped his hands apart. The letter shredded into a tiny flurry of paper snowflakes, which tried to settle in his cornflakes. Harry set them on fire instead, and then reached for the rest of the post.

Draco knocked him on the back of the head. Harry jumped and glared at him indignantly, wondering if this was another side-effect of Draco’s short temper this morning.

“Eat your breakfast,” Draco muttered. “You’ll have time to deal with the post later. It’s not as though it’s going anywhere. And you’ll have time to use your magic later, too.” He turned back to his own food.

Harry stared at him a moment, noting the pink tinge to his cheeks. He knew his use of magic sometimes aroused Draco, but he’d never thought it would happen at the breakfast table. Draco must be feeling rather hard up.

_Maybe I can do something about that later._ Harry frowned at the mountain of post again as he picked up his spoon. _If I ever have any free time._
“No safehouse is more secure than another, at this point,” Harry said, trying his best to keep his temper. He understood that Snape’s questions were meant to help him, really he did, but having five of them asked in a row that were only slightly reworded variations of the same thing wasn’t helpful. “We don’t know what part of England Voldemort plans to attack next. If he keeps to the same pattern, the attacks will be widely-scattered, and the only thing that joins them will be that they’re against people important to me. We don’t know where his lair is, so if one safehouse is closer to it than another is, we won’t know that. We can only guess. And to say that a safehouse in Ireland is more dangerous than the others is ridiculous. All of them will have powerful wards that Thomas is making immune to those ward-draining stones, guards trained in defensive magic, and a set of Portkeys designed to take the inhabitants to safety immediately in the event of a raid.”

Snape drew back from the map of the safehouses spread on the table in his office and gave Harry a slow smile. Harry blinked. “What?” he snapped, rattled.

“I wanted to make sure that you knew these things,” Snape said. He really was infuriatingly calm. “I did not know if you did.” He stood and moved across the room to the fireplace, leaving Harry to stare at his back. “Tea?”

“Not brewed by a house elf, thank you.” Harry rubbed his face with his left hand, feeling the cool of the silver emblem in the center against his skin, and told himself that he loved Snape, he really did, and killing him would be counterproductive.

“You realize that you may need to give that up soon,” Snape remarked, even as he Summoned a teacup out of a cupboard on the wall and cast a Cleaning Charm on it, leaving Harry to choose what he wanted to Transfigure into the tea. Harry was glad for the Cleaning Charm, at least; Merlin knew what Potions ingredients the cup had once held. “The food that comes in by owl is too vulnerable to attack, and the money that you’ve paid to keep the shop owners quiet about where and to whom they send the food may not be enough to stand against the temptation of greater money. Or torture, for that matter.”

“I’ll do what I have to,” said Harry, concentrating on the vial of water he’d scooped up from the desk. Snape gave him a mild glare, as it would have gone into a potion, but Harry ignored him. It was easy to acquire water, after all, and easy to Transfigure it into tea. “Conjuring or Transfiguration will work if bringing food in by owl won’t.”

“You are stubborn,” Snape said quietly. He gave his order to the house elf’s voice that came through the flames and stood. “There may come a day when you can’t fight this war or be safe without giving up some of your principles.”

“It’s already come,” said Harry, and floated his own teacup towards himself, taking a sip. It wasn’t as good as tea actually brewed and not conjured, but it would do. “The day I had to use Legilimency against Voldemort.”

Snape opened his mouth, looking irritated, but Harry jerked his head up before he could say anything. Someone powerful had come through Hogwarts’s wards, which should have been impossible, given the way McGonagall had tightened them. Harry’s first thought was that Voldemort had come with a ward-eating stone and some way to drain the magic into himself without instantly losing it again.

A moment later, though, he recognized the feel of the magic, and relaxed. It was Jing-Xi, the Chinese Light Lady who had taught him about the etiquette of Lords and Ladies in better days. Harry would have to refuse a lesson if she had come about that, and hope it was not another responsibility that she’d want to lay at his feet. But he could visit her.

“Excuse me, sir,” he said, and slipped out of the room, bearing his teacup with him, because he could. It didn’t take him long to find the room that Jing-Xi had entered, the one she usually arrived in; the magic led him like a beacon. He laid his hand on the door, knocked once, and heard her bid him enter.

When he came in, she stood by the window, her long black hair waving ceaselessly about her in the enchantment that made it look like seaweed moving underwater. Colored ripples of light danced around her, eddying, and the window had transformed into a slowly worked series of amber roses. As Harry watched, yet another edge of the stone became amber.

Jing-Xi turned towards him with a faint smile. “Harry,” she said. “I need your permission to invite a friend of mine into Britain.”

That pulled Harry up short, and he frowned as he tried to work out who this friend was, why Jing-Xi would want to invite him, and why she would need his permission. Luckily, the lessons she’d spent some time drilling into him came back.

“This friend is a Lord?” he asked warily. It was courtesy for wizards and witches that powerful to ask permission before they entered a wizarding community that housed another Lord or Lady.
“Lady,” Jing-Xi corrected him. “I told you about her once before. Kanerva Stormgale, the Dark Lady of Finland—though she was not born there, that was simply where she ended up, so the terminology ‘Lady of Finland’ is sometimes argued over. Regardless, she is currently awaiting my permission, and your invitation, to appear.”

“You also mentioned she was mad,” Harry said. “And that I’d faced her power before, or part of it, when the Dark attacked at Midwinter.”

Jing-Xi nodded, looking at him as if she didn’t see why that would matter.

“I want some assurance that she won’t simply attack me or mine the moment she appears,” Harry clarified.

“I cannot entirely promise that,” Jing-Xi admitted. “But she wants to help you, Harry, because I do. Events have been moving so fast in Britain that I do not think you can face them alone. And I have heard rumors of a vampire hive queen. You cannot defeat her alone, either.”

“And an insane ally is worse than no ally.” Harry folded his arms and met her stare for stare. “I understand that you’re trying to help, Jing-Xi, but it seems to me that that’s forbidden both by the Lords’ Pact and by common sense.”

“For the Pact, I intend to speak to the others, and try to convince them that this situation is different,” said Jing-Xi. She flung back her head, and Harry saw a resonant determination in her eyes he hadn’t encountered before. “As for Kanerva—meet her, Harry. I promise that if she is a threat to Britain, I will face her myself. I do not truly think she will be. She is my friend, and she has never yet turned against that.”

Harry reluctantly weighed the help that two Ladies, one Light and one Dark, might provide against the vampire hive queen and maybe even against Voldemort himself, versus the danger of an all-powerful Evan Rosier. Then he sighed. Kanerva could not be as mad as Rosier, or she would not have waited for permission to come to Britain. At the very least, she must be sane enough to obey the protocols of the Pact. The other Lords and Ladies would probably have destroyed her otherwise.

“I give her permission, then,” he said.

Jing-Xi lifted one hand and gave a shrill whistle which quickly rose beyond Harry’s hearing. He winced and clapped his hands to his ears; it felt as if the notes were still ringing in the center of his eardrums, and he hoped they wouldn’t make him bleed before Jing-Xi was done.

The air in the room began to move, turning like a ponderous wheel around the center where Harry stood. Then it built quickly to a roaring hurricane, and Harry had to slam strength into his muscles with his magic to keep from being blown off his feet. He heard a howl, which seemed to descend from the same high pitch into which Jing-Xi’s whistle had risen and then attain a depth that shook Hogwarts and his bones.

When he could see again, a woman stood next to him, close enough that Harry had to fight not to back off. She leaned forward even more and stared at him. Her skin was the dead-bone color of the Grey Lady, the Ravenclaw ghost, and her hair was black and—trailed away from her head into nothingness. In fact, Harry saw, she appeared to be missing several edges of her body, including the tips of her fingers and boots and the hem of her robe, where they blurred and simply vanished into the air. He supposed that someone apparently able to travel by the wind would have a natural union with the medium the wind traveled through.

Her eyes were blue, and quite the coldest and quietest eyes he had ever seen in his life. They stared, and stared, and stared. Harry looked back until his eyes watered. Kanerva never blinked.

“No need for a staring contest,” Jing-Xi said softly, in a voice Harry thought was amused, though he couldn’t look away from Kanerva to be sure. That would be a show of weakness. “This is the Dark Lady Stormgale. And Kanerva, you’ve heard me speak of Harry, the vates, the undeclared.”

“He should Declare,” said Kanerva, her voice cold and sharp, like snapping ice in winter. “He would be Dark, and perhaps he would hasten the destruction of the world.”

Harry decided immediately that he probably wasn’t going to like her, and not only because she refused to get out of his personal space. He cast Jing-Xi a glance now, and she gave him another subtle nod of reassurance.

“I use Light and Dark magic equally, as a matter of fact,” he told Kanerva. “I’m not sure why you say I would be Dark, Lady.”
She remained silent for a moment, only cocking her head to the side, like an owl. Then Harry felt the oddest sensation, as if a wind had begun by ruffling his hair and had passed inside his skull on its journey.

“You have darkness inside you,” she said, and her voice had warmed and grown friendlier. “You’re afraid of it, but you don’t need to be. When one goes to the Dark, then one ceases to care about such petty matters as the terror of others. I have never been afraid since I Declared.” She ran her hands down her sides boastfully.

She saw into my head. Harry was worried for a moment, since he was sure she hadn’t performed Legilimency or got through his Occlumency barriers, but a thick wind swirled across his sight like a swathe of darkness, and he thought he knew how she’d done it. Sent a wind into my mind, to see that dark place. I always thought Legilimency felt like a wind. I suppose she’s an expert at her own kind of mind-reading, and approached it from the other side, as a wind that works like a thought.

“It’s true that I have some darkness,” said Harry, careful to keep his voice steady. “But I prefer not to let it out.”

Kanerva blinked for the first time. “Why?” she asked.

“He’s the balance, Kanerva, I told you,” Jing-Xi intervened. For the first time, the Dark Lady turned her head to look at her friend, and Harry had the time to study her magic. She was less strong than Jing-Xi, which at least lent some credence to the fact that Jing-Xi could force her back and out of Britain if something happened. She was slightly stronger than he was himself, Harry thought, though her power was in constant, cold motion, and it was hard to be sure. “That’s why I think the Pact might actually agree to let us help him. There has never been a situation like this before, with someone of Lord-level power who simply refuses to Declare, and who has managed to hold off on using compulsion for such a long time.”

“But he could use compulsion, and it wouldn’t destroy him,” said Kanerva.

“I don’t want to,” Harry said.

Kanerva leaned near again, so close that Harry could feel her breath on his cheeks, cold like a Gloryflower horse’s. She stared into his eyes some more, then tilted her head either way and breathed across his ears. The wind that blew back to her probably carried some messages about the state of his earlobes, or from the scent of his skin, that Harry couldn’t even imagine.

“You don’t want to,” she said. “The will of someone so powerful and Dark must be respected. But I do not understand it. I will remain here. Perhaps I will understand.” She turned to Jing-Xi, her winds pacing restlessly around her, forming what looked like a visible hurricane again, with her in the eye. “You wish me to call upon the others, Jing-Xi?”

Jing-Xi nodded. “It’s time,” she said quietly. “We’ve ignored the situation in Britain long enough. Too many things are different. Harry is the only Lord-level wizard who’s come into his powers this young, the only one who’s the heir of another of us, and certainly the only one who’s killed two of his own kind in rapid succession. The others are calling you Lord-slayer,” she added over her shoulder to Harry. “And now we know that Voldemort will not remain in Britain for long, so the Pact cannot remain a policy of strict non-interference. Sooner or later he will cross into your territory, Kanerva, or into Monika’s, and we would have the war the others are so anxious to avoid. If we can concentrate on Britain now and contain the threat, we can avoid that.”

“I am not making my winds bear all that,” said Kanerva, and raised her arms above her head. “I will summon them. It will be enough.”

“What is she doing?” Harry whispered, as he watched the winds fountain around Kanerva’s head, taking on the forms of scraps of cloth. He had never seen magic like this, but then, he had never made the intensive study of magic of the air that Kanerva seemed to have done. “Will she actually pull the others here?”

Jing-Xi shook her head. “She will—watch,” she breathed suddenly, and Harry looked up to see a whirlwind dancing to one side of the room. It paused, then crackled out like a lightning bolt.

Harry found that he could follow its path with his eyes, long after it should have passed out beyond the walls of Hogwarts, long after it should even have left the British Isles. It seemed to draw his sight along with it, and it sped over the Channel, over the Pyrenees, over tall and glistening mountains he knew must be the Alps, and then struck and landed on what looked like the most heavily warded farmhouse Harry had ever seen, in the middle of a thick forest of grim trees. Near the house grazed what looked like ordinary sheep, at least until they looked up, and Harry shuddered slightly to realize they had multiple heads and tentacles in a glistening collar around their necks. On the slope in front of the house lay a dark thing with no visible head or legs, laboring to birth something else, and beside it sat a woman who looked up as if hearing a distant call. Harry could feel the power crackling around her even from this distance and through Kanerva’s wind, strong, musky-smelling magic that he knew must be oriented
towards breeding and reproduction. The wind framed her face as a picture in the air, and then blew on, reaching towards others.

“The Dark Lady Monika, of Austria,” Jing-Xi whispered. “She is the one after Voldemort whom you must be most wary of. I told you about her once. She breeds creatures together for her specialty in magic, and she researches webs, and she does not like the way your very existence melts them.”

Harry shuddered slightly, and, his mind full of Monika, missed the next few Lords and Ladies Kanerva summoned, though he knew her winds were traveling east across Europe and Asia, calling them. When he looked up again, a man with a confusing flicker of glamours around him, now a brown face and now a black one and now the head of a unicorn, was staring inquiringly into the air.

“That’s Brewer, as the English translation of his name would be, the Light Lord of South Africa,” Jing-Xi continued in the same soft voice. “The greatest Potions Master in the world. He won’t let anyone see what he really looks like, or tell anyone his real name.” She snorted. “I think he is a white man who is ashamed of his race’s legacy in that country.”

Harry nodded, watching as Brewer’s face was framed in the air, and Kanerva’s magic traveled on, calling and recruiting, now a Light Lady, now a Dark Lord. For a moment, he caught a glimpse of bright coral and racing waters, and then they vanished. He raised an eyebrow at Jing-Xi.

“There are two brother Lords in Australia, one Light and one Dark, who only care about fighting each other,” said Jing-Xi, a faint smile on her face. “They never come to the meetings of the Pact, and so long as they confine their disputes within their own country, the rest of the Pact does not care. Their magic turns Kanerva’s winds away whenever she attempts to summon them.” She tapped her fingers thoughtfully against her arm. “Even though there are thirty-two of us in the world, therefore, there will be only twenty-nine of us here, including you. The brother Lords never pay attention, and Voldemort is of course not invited.”

Harry watched as the wind sped away across the Pacific, now and then touching on islands, and then blazed into a flash of rich, deep sunlight, and immense trees of a kind Harry had never seen before. Their bark was like slightly cool blood. Sitting under one of them was a black woman with hair so dark it sheened blue, apparently meditating. She opened her eyes and nodded to the call of Kanerva’s wind, though, and rose calmly to her feet when the storm passed on over her.

“One of my dearest friends.” Jing-Xi had a hand extended towards the wind-window, and for a moment the black woman put her hand up to touch it, and suddenly Harry was looking straight into her eyes, not merely a flat image of them. He could feel the magic around her, too, the same as any ordinary witch’s on the surface, but sinking so deep underneath that any enemy would find himself bounced from row after row of shields. “Harry, meet Pamela Seaborn, Light Lady of the United States.”

“A pleasure to meet you, my Lady,” said Harry, and gave the little half-bow that Jing-Xi had taught him, hoping it was correct. It was mostly used only when meeting on neutral ground, not suddenly through a wind-window.

Lady Seaborn smiled slowly, examining him with eyes that Harry was sure saw more than just the surface of his face. For all I know, since Kanerva uses wind, she might use the water molecules in the air to learn more about me, Harry thought, staring back.

“He’ll do, I suppose,” she said. “I see why you wanted to teach him, Jing-Xi. He would require a teacher with much patience.”

Harry wasn’t sure if he should be insulted or not, but before he could respond, a hiss from the side made him swing around. Kanerva’s storm had sprouted yet another window, and into this one strode a woman clad in writhing serpents. She was tall, taller than Jing-Xi, and her dusky face was implacable—a warrior’s, Harry thought, or at least someone who had seen much fighting in her life. She hissed back to the serpents, more slowly than Harry would have expected someone with the speaking gift to do, telling them to be quiet.

“You are a Parselmouth?” Harry asked in the same language, trying to fight down his wonder. He had thought he, Voldemort, and Lucius the only living Parselmouths in the world. The Lady glanced up at him as the window firmed and tugged them both nearer across the immense distance, the way that Lady Seaborn’s window had.

“I do not use that word,” she answered him. “I sink my mind into the minds of animals instead, and learn the language as I would any other.” She glanced past him at Jing-Xi, and her face softened as she greeted the other woman in a swift, springing language that Harry didn’t know. Jing-Xi came past Harry to clasp her hand in turn, and then smiled at Harry.

“And I need to present, in turn, Coatlicue, the Light Lady of Mexico,” she said. She added something in that other language to Coatlicue, who raised an eyebrow and gave a short answer. Jing-Xi flicked her fingers. “That is a translation charm,” she said to Harry. “Coatlicue prefers to speak Nahuatl, the language of her ancestors, but of course there is no reason that the two of you should not understand each other.”
Harry studied the Lady more closely. “You are Aztec?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Coatlicue. “Not all of our people died when the Spaniards came. We took what we could and fled into hiding. We were among the earliest magical peoples in the world to separate ourselves from the Muggles.” For a moment, her lips tightened. “And we do not like the notion of emerging without proper precautions.” She stroked one of the serpents wound around her, an enormous rattlesnake from the shape of its tail, and frowned at Harry. He felt himself flush.

Kanerva’s wind had sped around the world, Harry saw as he glanced up at the moving image again, and now it flashed in across Dover and down towards Scotland. The moment it hit a representation of the room and them, things turned dizzily around. Harry lost sight of the hearth and the window and the walls and the other ordinary furniture of the room. Now they appeared to float in starry space, with the windows through which the other Lords and Ladies looked the only portals onto normal pictures of sunlight and darkness and earth. Harry noticed that each window-border had a symbol carved the length of it; Coatlicue’s was a mass of serpents, for example. He wondered what his own looked like. Glancing down, he couldn’t see it, since he, Kanerva, and Jing-Xi appeared, to him, to stand on a plug of stone in between the others.

“Explain why you have summoned the Pact, Jing-Xi,” said Monika, coming to the edge of her window. Her hands were covered with some thick dark liquid Harry would almost hope was blood, since most of the other things it could be were fouler. “The situation in Britain is that of British Lords to handle, until Voldemort crosses the Channel.” Her eyes came to Harry. He thought they were wider and darker than Bellatrix Lestrange’s, but hers were coolly sane, and therefore far more terrifying. A dark shroud of magic rose behind her, shutting out the sunlight. “I see no reason this situation is different than any other.”

“It is,” said Lady Seaborn, leaning against the border of her window, which had the red trees on it. Harry thought they were probably redwoods. “And you know why, Monika.” She had a mocking tone in her voice. Harry wondered if the translation charm would send that through, too. “All the things Jing-Xi’s been babbling at us for the past months.” Here was a smile that Harry thought was probably teasing, given that Jing-Xi had introduced her as a friend. “Young Lord, no Declaration, vates, in need of training, Lord-slayer, and now with an Acting Minister who won’t be any help to him to boot.”

“So?” Monika had a shrug that she could make frightening. “What does that matter? We have seen worse situations in other countries before, in terms of the human suffering of them—” she sneered those words as if they offended her “—and have not helped. The Pact is for non-interference until a Lord crosses boundaries. Not because we feel sorry for the children and the ducklings and the saplings.”

“There is one thing I am curious about,” Brewer murmured. Even his voice changed from moment to moment, Harry realized. He must a master of glamours as well as potions. “Why did young Harry here slay Lord Parkinson and Lord Dumbledore before Lord Riddle? Why do that, when that is his worst enemy?”

Harry could feel the pressure of gazes on him, from brown eyes and blue and gray and some that were no human colors, from light faces and dark. He put up his head proudly. “Voldemort has made Horcruxes,” he said. “Six of them altogether. Two have been destroyed, but four are either behind Unassailable Curses so powerful that I cannot get through them at the moment, or hidden. To destroy each one, someone who loves me or wishes to destroy the Horcrux must die.”

There was a long silence. Then a Dark Lord whose name Harry hadn’t heard said, “No one makes more than one Horcrux. You would become too corrupt.”

“What do you think he’s like now?” Harry asked, raising his eyebrows.

“And do you have a Horcrux, Alexandre?” Brewer added.

“As if I would tell you,” the Dark Lord said, with a sneer of old and practiced contempt. Just as there were friendships in the circle of Lords and Ladies, Harry supposed, there might also be old rivalries.

“I love the concept of those Unassailable Curses,” said Monika dreamily. “I should have thought to use them on my webs before this.”

Harry frowned at her, utterly unable to help himself.

“You see why this situation is different,” Jing-Xi broke in. “I wish to help Harry, and so does Kanerva. Yes, it means interfering in another wizarding community that is not our own, but I have been helping to train Harry, and Kanerva has always been a wanderer at heart. And we have his permission. What say you, Lords and Ladies of the Pact? Is this situation different enough to warrant interference?”
“I wish an answer of my own before I give one,” Coatlicue said, leaning forward. “What is your stance on wizard-Muggle separations, *vates*?” Harry had the feeling that she’d barely stopped herself from calling him a Lord.

Harry met her eyes and answered honestly. “I have allies who are splitting the barrier, such as werewolf packs who are biting those Muggles who ask and a Light Old Blood family who is trying to spread knowledge of magic across Europe, though they know the Obliviators and the various security precautions in place will make the revelation a slow one. I know very little about the Muggle world. On the one hand, I would like to see those barriers down as I would like to see most barriers down; they encourage prejudice in British wizards, and Merlin knows I have enough to deal with regarding that. On the other hand, I don’t know what the Muggles’ reaction will be, for the most part. But Voldemort is intent on attacking Muggles. I will have to deal with at least the British government’s reaction to that.”

Coatlicue narrowed her eyes at him in silence, while the serpents slid up and down and curled around her neck. Then she glanced around at the windows. “My Lords, my Ladies,” she said. “I propose a compromise. Let Lady Jing-Xi and Lady Stormgale remain in Britain and help the *vates* with defenses against Lord Riddle’s attacks and perhaps the destruction of the Horcruxes, should he manage to find them. They *cannot* help in the war otherwise, and they may not aid in his *vates* work or whatever revelations he makes to Muggles. Is this acceptable?”

“Of course not,” said Monika. “The Pact has always been against such interference. Why should we make an exception merely because of Horcruxes? Or merely for defensive magic?”

“Why should we allow someone else to hide behind the principles of the Pact merely to make life difficult for another of us?” Lady Seaborn remarked, as if into the air. Then she turned around and gave Monika a heavy smile. “Oh, of course, it is different when one’s a Dark Lady and worried about all of one’s precious webs being undone by the *vates*.”

“There are few of my children breeding yet in California,” Monika said softly. “They could come there.”

“There are few redwoods in Austria, either,” said Lady Seaborn. Her hair stirred like ocean waves. “That does not mean they could not cross the ocean.”

“We can settle this, I think,” said Brewer solemnly.

“He always does that,” Jing-Xi whispered to Harry. “He *hates* conflict.”

Brewer’s shoulders tensed as if he had heard her, but he didn’t look towards her. “We can settle this,” he repeated. “I think She Who Wears a Skirt of Serpents has made the best compromise, balancing between the uniqueness of this situation and the principles we have always believed in. I will support it. What say the rest of you?”

A few other Light Lords and Light Ladies nodded immediate agreement. The Dark Lord Alexandre snorted. Harry wondered if he knew how to make any other sound. He was as haughty as Lucius Malfoy, from the look of his face. “And so the Light runs in a pack,” he said.

“Supporting something just because of your allegiance should not happen,” Coatlicue said firmly. “You know that, Alexandre. This is supposed to be about something larger than all of us. Like it or not, ours is the power that enfolds the world, and we must mark what we do.” She glanced keenly at Harry. “You will do your best to find the Horcruxes and destroy Voldemort?”

“With three prophecies running around me, I should think so,” Harry muttered.

Coatlicue gave him a small smile. “I know that prophecies are not toys,” she said, and her eyes shone for a moment with what Harry thought was the shadow of grief. Then she glanced back at the other Lords and Ladies. “My compromise is the best,” she said. “As the Lord Brewer suggests, it will preserve our own neutrality while doing its best to exempt us from future war.”

A few of the others made soft noises of agreement then. Jing-Xi stepped forward. “I will make one more appeal for free reign to fight at Harry’s side,” she said. “Offensively as well as defensively. I believe he is worth it.”

Harry gave her a sidelong look. He hadn’t expected such support, and he wondered what had made Jing-Xi give it.

“You can’t have that,” said Coatlicue. “I love you, Jing-Xi, but I won’t start setting dangerous precedents that could affect my own people negatively, and endorsing our young *vates* completely would do that.”

Jing-Xi bowed her head. “Then I accept this compromise.”
Most of the other Lords and Ladies went along with it, then, until the only one left was Monika, standing with her arms stubbornly folded and a monumental glare locked on Harry.

“He is the Lord-slayer,” she said. “Are we going to allow him to pick us off until none of us are left?”

“I don’t want power,” said Harry, willing his voice to carry the truth. He wasn’t sure how well it would work across that immense distance, through a translation charm, and without Veritaserum, but he would try his best. He sent magic flowing into his words, making them hew to simple clarity. “I’ve never wanted it. I would have been happier not being Lord-level, and that I am is an accident. I’ve only killed two Dark Lords, and will slay a third, because of intertwined prophecies. That’s all.”

Monika stared at him for a moment longer, then sniffed and waved a hand, which sent a large dollop of birthing fluid flying away from it. “Very well, then. I agree to this ridiculous compromise. Simply remember, vates, that I have bred my creatures, and consider them my children. I do not intend to let them go free.” She turned away from the window.

Kanerva’s winds began to dissipate, releasing the faces of the Lords and Ladies one by one. Alexandre gave Harry a final sneer, and he thought Brewer murmured a blessing. Lady Seaborn leaned over her windowsill and clasped his hand almost hard enough to crush it, pairing the clasp with a fierce smile.

“You will have to visit me someday when all this is done,” she said. “I have been trying to awaken my redwoods from the ancient webs a Dark Lord put on them a century ago. They can speak and be sentient and even defend their territory if the web is broken. I look forward to seeing you closer at hand.”

Coatlicue gave him a farewell in Parseltongue, eyes shaded. “Remember that a serpent hatching eggs in one part of the world can send poison falling on another, vates.”

“I will,” said Harry, and watched as the wind unbraided, and left them standing once more in the room at Hogwarts. He shook his head, let his breath out, and faced Kanerva and Jing-Xi.

“You will both help me?” he asked. “In those strictures?”

“They didn’t define defensive and offensive as well as they should have,” said Kanerva, who looked as if Christmas had appeared months ahead of time. “We can help you and slip the boundaries, and argue with them if they complain.”

“They know Kanerva regularly violates standards,” said Jing-Xi, widening her eyes slightly. “But they will not suspect me of it.” She smiled at him then. “So long as we are careful, we can aid you, Harry. No open defiance, of course, and sometimes we must both go home to tend to matters in our own countries. But you will have our help.”

Harry smiled in spite of himself. A little of the crushing pressure on his shoulders had relented.

If nothing else, we might have enough strength between us to face the hive queen. Maybe.

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Chapter Thirteen: Friends and Freedom

Harry hadn’t known it was possible for Hagrid’s face to brighten up quite this much, but apparently he’d underestimated how much the news would mean to him.

“You’re goin’ to free the hippogriffs, Harry?” he said, while waving around a hand that caused Harry to duck. Owen made a sharp movement behind him, as if he had to remind himself Hagrid was a friend. “That’s great news! What made yeh decide on now to free ’em, if yeh don’t mind me askin’?”

“Partly because they’re one of the few species in the Forbidden Forest I haven’t freed,” said Harry. “If the hive queen attacks through the Forest, or Voldemort, for that matter—‘Hagrid tried valiantly to control his flinch.’—the others could flee if worst came to worst, but the hippogriffs’ web would restrain them from going far.” He hesitated, then gave a little shrug. “And because I did hope they might agree to help in the war. As scouts, mostly. I wouldn’t let wizards ride them unless they chose to have riders.”

“They’ll be chuffed to help, Harry, chuffed!” Hagrid’s eyes shone. “‘Course, they’re proud as anythin’, but they’ll agree to a contract of sorts, a promise or a bargain. And as long as no one violates that bargain, they won’t, either.” He gave Harry a
searching stare, a bit of worry returning to his face. “But yeh’ll tell—yeh’ll tell others not to hurt ‘em, o’course?”

Owen snorted. Harry concealed his own reaction to that—it would be more likely hippogriffs who hurt wizards than the other way around—and nodded. “Of course I will, Hagrid.”

“Then come on.” Hagrid grabbed a lantern from the wall and led them out of the hut, towards the darkening Forest.

Harry took a deep breath of cool air and tried to make himself calm down. He had decided to free the hippogriffs for the reasons he said; even if they didn’t agree to help the fledgling war effort, they should be able to fly if they had to, and get out of danger’s way. But he had a private, selfish reason for it as well, one that he hadn’t even told to Owen, though he thought Owen might have sensed it.

He needed to break a web. It always gave him a sense of freedom, the hope that his life wasn’t defined by the war, and that someday he would be past all this and able to return to work for the rest of his life.

And today had been a more trying day in that respect than most. He’d had a fight with Draco this morning. It hurt more than it normally would.

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“What made you study air in the first place, though?” Harry asked. He thought that he might understand Kanerva better if he could just get an answer to this question. So far, though, she seemed extremely unwilling, or maybe unable, to provide an answer to even an inquiry this simple.

The Dark Lady, who sat on a chair in the Slytherin common room with most of her body fuzzed into nothingness, gave him a baffled look. “What else would I give myself to?”

“Does it have to do with your history, then?” Harry asked. Jing-Xi had told Harry that she had no idea where Kanerva originally came from, who her parents had been, or why she had chosen to study wind, either. She had simply introduced herself to the Pact when she was twenty-five as a new Dark Lady, and that had been twenty-five years ago.

“You could say so,” said Kanerva. “But I would not.”

“What would you say?”

“That it is a question whose answer is so obvious you should be able to see it for yourself,” Kanerva answered, and turned her head away.

“If she doesn’t want to answer the question, Harry, then she doesn’t have to.”

Harry turned his head and blinked. Draco was coming down the stairs into the Slytherin common room. He looked half-ill, a sign of how little sleep he was getting lately. Harry didn’t understand why Draco insisted on staying up with him until all hours of the night. Harry was used to cat-naps by now, and he made sure to try for an unbroken night of sleep at least once every few days. Draco simply needed to rest more often than that, but lately he seemed more than reluctant to admit it.

“And if you do not want to walk on the stairs, then you do not have to,” Kanerva told Draco, and a gust of wind picked up the ends of her hair, where they trailed off into fuzz, and made them dance.

Harry concealed a sigh. Kanerva had taken an immediate dislike to Draco. He couldn’t understand why, but Jing-Xi had advised him not to worry about it. Kanerva wanted to stay here and help, because Harry intrigued her. She might not be sane, but she was capable of understanding that Harry would not let her stay and help if she injured his partner.

“I need to,” Draco retorted, his face going ugly now, perhaps simply because someone had contradicted him; Harry didn’t know. “Not all of us have enough power to fly around like you do. My Lady.”

“Wind is more than flying,” said Kanerva, voice gone unexpectedly soft and passionate, the way that Harry knew Voldemort talked about torture. “Wind is destruction, the heart of the howling storm that strikes anywhere it wishes because it does not care about the earth below. The wind is the lover of the sea, not the land. And, someday, the sea will be the death of it all. Stones, and soil, and sand, and trees, they will seek and find an ending in the ocean.”

Harry felt his skin prickle as he listened. Jing-Xi had said something about Kanerva wanting to hasten the destruction of the
world, which was one reason she had added her power to the wild Dark’s the Midwinter when Fawkes died. It was entirely possible, of course, that she would not seek to fulfill that ambition while she was in Britain, but Harry didn’t think she’d given it up, either.

Draco laughed, unpleasantly, the way that he might have laughed at some of Luna’s madder ramblings. Harry knew it was the tiredness that was making him act so. Under ordinary circumstances, he would have known to hold his tongue around a witch as powerful as a Dark Lady. And Luna would only have blinked and asked if he were having a speech problem anyway, the way that she did when students of Ravenclaw called her Loony.

But he did not keep silent now, and Kanerva was no Luna.

In a moment, Draco’s face had gone blue as the air in his immediate area deserted him, while a swathe of wind too cold and hard to breathe circled behind him and scooped him up so that he hung from his ankles near the wall. Harry stood quickly. A fall from that height would mean he cracked his head open on the floor of the Slytherin common room.

“Kanerva,” he said.

“I suppose you want him back unharmed,” said the Dark Lady, sounding sulky. “Even though he insulted me.”

“It would be—nice, yes,” said Harry, while fighting furiously with his instincts. They told him to move right now, that he had to rescue Draco, but he had never faced anyone like this before. He knew he could overpower Evan Rosier, and he could drain Voldemort’s magic, but Kanerva was an ally.

Supposedly.

“And you won’t let me stay here if I don’t comply?” Kanerva asked.

Harry kept one eye on Draco’s blue face, trying to calculate all the while how long he’d been without air, and how long humans in general could survive without it. “That’s right,” he said.

Kanerva sighed gustily, and returned Draco to the floor. A moment later, his chest heaved, sucking in desperate gulps of air. Kanerva herself became a whirling dervish, and then a vortex of black and white wind, and then was gone. Harry knew she hadn’t gone far, though. Kanerva was the only witch he had ever met whose power of shapeshifting involved entirely dissipating her body into an amorphous form. She would be wandering through Hogwarts in various shapes of air, all the while listening and looking for corners where she might appear to ask uncomfortable questions. In many ways, she was the wind.

Harry hurried over and knelt down next to Draco, putting one hand on the pulse in his throat and bending his head so that he could hear his heart and the motion of his lungs. All seemed to be working normally. Harry stroked the hair out of his face, and asked quietly, when he saw that Draco’s eyes focused on him, “All right?”

“How could you let her do that?” Draco croaked.

Harry blinked. “What?”

“I was dying, Harry, not unconscious or deaf.” Draco struggled to sit up, but drew away from the support of Harry’s arm when he tried to give it. “You didn’t yell at her or attack her, the way you’ve always done before when I’m in danger. You spoke to her in a reasonable manner. Is it somehow different when she threatens my life than when anyone else does it?”

“I just feel that you don’t really value me any more,” Draco said. “You barely speak to me when I’m there, you only seek my opinion when it’s about Malfoy Manor or something else that you think I’m already qualified to speak to you about, you don’t seem to remember I’m alive, you’re always telling me to go to bed and leave you alone—“

“Because you’re tired and distraught,” said Harry. “The way you are now,” he couldn’t help adding. “And that matters when it comes to battle, Draco. I understand that you want to stay with me every moment, but making yourself sick from stress and lack of sleep won’t help either of us.”

“I am not tired and distraught,” Draco snarled, which only confirmed Harry’s opinion that he was. “Don’t you dare imply that I need to control myself.”
“You do,” said Harry. “You always do. But lately, that control has been slipping.”

“I’m sorry I’m not good enough for you, then,” Draco muttered, his voice choked with bitterness.

*This is one of those arguments where it only gets worse the more I talk.* Harry decided to back off. He stood up. “I’ll tell Syrinx to protect you today, instead of trading places with one of the others at my shoulder,” he said quietly. “And make sure that you get some sleep.”

“I’m not a *child*, and I don’t need a *minder*.”

“Right now, you’re acting like one,” said Harry, and then he left. Outside the Slytherin common room, he took a deep breath and shook his head. You know it’s just the tiredness. He’ll be better when he actually has some sleep, always assuming that Syrinx manages to convince him to get some. He doesn’t hate you.

It was hard to convince himself of that, though. The bad thing about deciding to rely on others more than he had in the past was that then it hurt more when they were angry with him.

He went to find Owen—Syrinx was already coming towards him, attracted by his desire for her presence—and then to research and prepare for attacks. The first refugees would be heading for safehouses today. He hoped there was yet a chance that he might convince Michael Rosier-Henlin to go with his mother and little sister.

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Hagrid led them by means of a path Harry hadn’t seen before; of course, given all the unorthodox ways that he usually came into the Forest, he would have been more surprised if he *had* seen it, by this point. Hagrid’s lantern flashed and swung in front of them, and Harry had the impression of numerous creatures slinking off just out of sight. He also heard the steady thump of hooves from the centaurs, and guessed they were escorting them to make sure no one “accidentally” wandered off the path. Or perhaps to guarantee his safety, for all he knew.

Harry let out a deep breath and shook his head. He had to concentrate his thoughts if he was going to successfully break the hippogriffs’ web, and that didn’t include thinking about random details.

At last the path played out into a low clearing surrounded by trees whose trunks looked blue in the light. Hagrid gave a high call, something like a screech and a neigh mingled, and Harry saw long, awkward limbs move as a hippogriff stirred up from a mass of the sleeping creatures and headed towards them.

Harry caught his breath as he watched him approach. The hippogriff had an eagle’s head, of course, and a gray horse’s lower body, but his eyes were the dangerous mad orange of a goshawk’s. Harry could see why people would think him dangerous, even without the rituals one needed to use to address him.

“Yeh know what t’ do, Harry,” Hagrid instructed him in a low voice. “Look ‘im in the eye, mind, and bow. This ‘ere is Buckbeak.”

Harry bowed, bending his neck slowly and stiffly, never removing his eyes from the hippogriff’s. Buckbeak stared back at him for long moments. Harry waited. It was only safe if Buckbeak bowed to him in turn. Otherwise, Harry would simply have to give up the notion of freeing the hippogriffs and making a bargain with them, at least with Buckbeak as the representative. Perhaps Hagrid knew another hippogriff who would be amenable.

The hippogriff’s wings quivered as he examined Harry intently. Then, abruptly, he bowed back, great head swinging down as though he were a water-bird stabbing fish on the bottom of a pond. Harry relaxed, and stood upright again, reaching out one hand to touch the tufted feathers. Buckbeak let him, even cocking his head and fanning his wings up and down slightly, in what might be pleasure or simply welcome.

“There yeh go, Harry,” Hagrid said. Owen let out a loud, huffing breath, and Harry suspected he’d just let go of his wand. “Now. They can understand a lot more than they can speak, if yeh get my meanin’, but yeh might want to use that phoenix voice o’ yers, just in case.”

Harry nodded, and softly began to sing, not breaking eye contact with Buckbeak. He showed the web, which he could see coiled in drowsing rings around the hippogriff’s claws, breaking, and the whole flock dancing freely above the Forest and coming down in untamed forests in other areas. In return, they drew back from human prey, both wizard and Muggle, and the other sentient magical creatures, and watched them in amused tolerance. Prey like rabbits and weasels was enough for them.
Harry deliberately didn’t show images of the war. He didn’t want to make Buckbeak think that the hippogriffs’ help was required as a condition of breaking their web. They would be free no matter what, but if they chose to help, they would be welcomed. Harry would like to have more numerous scouts or spies than the Gloryflower flying horses, and especially ones that moved more swiftly and could direct themselves, not needing riders.

Buckbeak clacked a few times, talons scraping slowly through the dirt. Then he made another bow, and turned his head sharply to the side, this time nipping at Harry’s ear almost like an owl. Harry held very still and tried not to flinch. Unlike an owl, Buckbeak could easily tear the ear off if displeased.

“That’s it,” Hagrid breathed.

Other hippogriffs were coming forward now, including a delicate roan one whom Buckbeak promptly draped a wing over—a mate, Harry thought, or maybe a sibling or child. All stared with wild, wary, proud eyes, but when Harry sang the same visions he’d used on Buckbeak, talons scraped and beaks clicked in agreement. Perhaps they were tired of being shut in one forest, Harry thought. He had heard that hippogriffs were great wanderers. So long as they refrained from killing humans or magical creatures, he didn’t think their lifestyle would greatly change as they wandered.

When he was sure he had agreement from every one of them, Harry narrowed his eyes so that only the web existed, and set about breaking it.

He found almost at once that this was the simplest web he’d ever approached—rather like a bridle of old leather that had grown worn and soft with many uses. It had been woven for obvious reasons, to keep the flock in one place and away from humans so they wouldn’t attack, and there was little personal animosity bound into it as had happened with the house elves and even the centaurs. Harry carefully undid the tangles, and when the web would have reared up like a sleepy serpent being disturbed, sang to it. It liked the lullaby, and settled down, sighing. Harry undid coil after coil, looping and draping it over his arms and his feet, and the web didn’t appear to notice that the prisoners it had chained for so long were now going free.

Harry was aware of a deep calm in himself as he worked, bordering on quiet delight. This was what he should be doing all the days of his life, he thought. This was what he had chosen, the one path and the one task not forced on him by prophecy or his training or the vagaries of his life. Dumbledore and his mother hadn’t meant to raise a vates. Voldemort didn’t want him to be one. Even Draco and Snape were against it most of the time. The magical creatures, bound as they all had been three years ago, had been in no position to lay demands on him. This he did purely and solely because he wanted to.

And I will do it again.

At last he held the old web in his hands, watching it sway in its sleep and snuggle and whisper to itself. Then he lifted his hands and blew on them. The web fractured into dust, blowing away entirely. Harry smiled thinly. If only they were all that easy.

He glanced up at Buckbeak, whom he’d continued watching from the corner of one eye, and saw him testing his wings as if he couldn’t quite believe the web was gone. Before he could launch himself into the sky and take the rest of the flock with him, Harry sang again.

This time he filled his voice with the throbbing beat of war-drums, singing the glories and the responsibilities and the sad duties of all of them in a time of such battle. The hippogriffs did not have to join in, but if Harry’s side fell, then there would be less freedom from all of them. Voldemort would not content himself with taking fallen feathers and scraps of skin for potions ingredients, as most people did now. He would hunt the hippogriffs mercilessly, kill them in their prime and in their pride, and take their children away, simply because he could.

Buckbeak screeched, bringing Harry back from the song. He took a step backward, hoping that he hadn’t irritated the hippogriff with the images. Buckbeak might decide to attack the one who’d provided them instead of Voldemort.

But the hippogriff was scraping his talons in the dirt instead, and half-rearing, so that his wings flared around him. Behind and beside him, the rest of the flock took fire, dancing in the same way, calling out as passionately as if there were an enemy before them right now.

“That’s it, Harry!” Hagrid yelled, in the midst of the screaming, which reminded Harry of the way an eagle might call out before diving on an enemy. “They’ll help yeh now!”

Harry bowed again to Buckbeak, and cast a number of quick Disillusionment Charms, the usual means used to keep hippogriffs from the sight of Muggles when people owned them as domestic animals. He linked the Disillusionment Charms to the
hippogriffs’ own magic, though, most of which went towards allowing them to fly. They would not be invisible to each other, and
when they truly needed to become visible for some reason—such as mating or defending their territory from another flock—the
Charms would falter, subdued by the rush of powerful instincts.

Harry sang again, this time holding out images of the first designated safehouse, Copley-by-the-Sea. Could the flock begin their
patrols there, looking for signs of Death Eater activity or Dark magic?

Buckbeak trumpeted importantly, and rose, wings spread all around him. The noises he used to call the others were softer this
time, more like neighs, though still intimidating, considering how tall he was when he reared. Then he flicked his tail at Harry,
bowed one more time, and was aloft, wheeling around with a speed that made the tree branches sag before him.

The rest of the flock had joined him in moments, the delicate roan hippogriff pacing him easily. Harry thought he saw the
moonlight flash once in Buckbeak’s orange eyes before they were high enough that such details couldn’t easily be seen, and the
flock trailed away into the distance, headed for the horizon.

There came a deep snuffling sound to his right, and Harry looked over to see Hagrid wiping at his eyes and nose with a large red
handkerchief. “I’m sorry they couldn’t stay,” Harry murmured, suddenly wondering if Hagrid had really wanted the flock to
leave.

Hagrid blew his nose once, and then shook his head. “I knew they had to go,” he said roughly. “They were miserable ‘ere, most of
the time. They knew the Forest too well, and hippogriffs, the best of ‘em gets restless when that happens. And they might come
back sometimes, right?”

Harry smiled. “Of course they might,” he said, and lifted his head to watch the flock disappearing one more time.

“Harry,” said Owen suddenly, sharply, and his hand clamped down on Harry’s shoulder. “There’s someone here. People in the
Forest who shouldn’t be. I just heard voices.” He aimed his wand over Harry’s head, and Harry heard him murmur a pain curse,
followed by a time-delaying charm that would launch it when their enemies appeared and not before.

Harry narrowed his eyes. McGonagall had refined the wards in the Forest so that they would catch those who approached
Hogwarts with hostile intent, which argued these wizards and witches weren’t hostile, but it was disturbing, nonetheless, that they
had managed to get this close. He lifted his own hand, summoning his magic around him.

A moment later, a slender man stepped into sight around the back side of the hippogriffs’ dell. “Vates?” he asked, with an accent
that niggled at the back of Harry’s mind; he thought he’d heard it before, or a milder version of it, but he couldn’t immediately
place it. He did know that this wizard wore blue robes with a silver symbol affixed to them that he hadn’t seen before, a circle
surrounding a pair of clasping hands. “We thought we would find you here. The hippogriffs rising are a strange thing, and where
there is a strange thing, why, there is Harry vates.” He grinned. He had dark hair and eyes, like Snape, but from that smile, he
hadn’t known a tenth part of the bitterness that Snape had.

“Who are you?” Harry asked, trying and failing to smile. He simply couldn’t trust anyone that easily anymore.

“My name is Xavier Deschamps,” said the man, and bowed, adding a phrase in French that Harry couldn’t translate. That
explains his accent, at least. “The French Minister thought it wise to send me and some of my people to your aid.”

Harry stared. He had hoped for some international pressure that might change minds at home, or perhaps ease Juniper’s crushing
presence. He hadn’t imagined that he might have actual help.

“Not only the French Minister,” added a female voice behind him, and a witch pushed forward until she stood beside Xavier. Her
accent was different, but Harry couldn’t identify it until she fixed him with eyes as sharp as a predator bird’s and said, “My name
is Maria Esperanza Diez Lozano. Call me Esperanza. I prefer this.”

“And you’re from Spain,” said Harry, feeling quite proud for having grasped that much.

“Yes.” Esperanza didn’t seem inclined to provide more information, but simply stood there staring at him. Harry would have
questioned her further, on exactly what her relationship to the Spanish Ministry was and what she was doing there, but still a third
person came up beside Esperanza, and Harry had to turn his attention to her.

The newcomer was a tiny witch, with her head lifted as if to make up for her lack of height, and dark eyes with the faint squint
that Lily had once told Harry marked a long-time duelist, used to peering down her wand to direct spells or watching the minute
movements of an opponent’s hand in hopes of guessing what curse would arrive next. She wore a yellow robe slashed with black,
and yet another symbol Harry didn’t know, this one a pair of towers on a medallion around her neck.

“And I am Leonor Susana Silvas Nevas Andrade,” she said. “From Portugal.” She peered at Harry, and waited.

“Welcome to all of you,” said Harry. He suspected from the voices he heard moving back on the path that they weren’t alone. Of course, if each Ministry had decided to send some Aurors, then they wouldn’t be, he thought, dazed. But he hadn’t yet confirmed that they were Aurors, or what they were doing on Hogwarts grounds at all.

He shook his head and gathered up the shards of his dignity. “Shall we move inside the school?”

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An hour later, with some tea inside of him, the Room of Requirement enlarged to hold a hundred fifty battle-trained wizards and witches, and an Alertness Charm he’d performed when he was relatively sure no one was looking, Harry felt better able to command the situation.

He sat at the central table in the Room, which had four chairs, much to Harry’s displeasure. He’d tried to make it conjure another seat for Owen, but the Room seemed to think it appropriate that only the leaders sit around the table, while the others remained in chairs along the walls. Since Owen refused to move from Harry’s shoulder, he was still standing.

Xavier was leaning back, spinning his wand in his hand and still smiling. Harry wondered if the effect came from a Cheering Charm, or simply long experience. He had told Harry he was the head of Cercle Familial, an organization within the French Ministry which worked closely with the Veela Council. Most of its Aurors had Veela blood, and they’d trained to handle both diplomatic crises and those that required more vigorous exercise with their wands. Since Harry’s major connections with France so far had come through people who had Veela blood, the Minister had appointed Xavier and fifty of his best people to go to England.

Harry had asked him if he’d wanted to come. Xavier had simply smiled and said that yes, he had, and Harry couldn’t quite get any more out of him. For all his continual smiling, he was more enigmatic than he appeared.

Esperanza’s group was more mixed, mostly Spanish Aurors, but with a few cuidadores, who, from what Harry could make out, were those specifically interested in bringing magical creatures into open visibility again in Spain. They’d all almost instantly attacked Harry the moment they were introduced, talking so quickly that Harry had been forced to use a translation charm. The loudest of them seemed to be Bartolomé, who kept hold of Harry’s hand as he explained that he’d tried for decades to convince the Spanish government to free the large, nameless beast chained up at Altamira, but that they hadn’t been interested in slating the money or the people needed to study the web that bound it. He was sure that a vates could get through the bonds that had so far baffled the best cuidadores. Every time they believed they understood the structure of the web, they uncovered another layer. They thought now it might well be magic thousands of years old, which would need a Lord-level wizard’s power to shatter it even if completely understood.

Esperanza had been silent for the most part, but when she had snapped at Bartolomé to stop clutching Harry and sit down, he’d obeyed her instantly. She had hardly spoken at all, though she would respond when asked questions. Harry wondered if he was imagining the sneer that seemed permanently attached to her upper lip, or not. If not for that sneer, she would have seemed entirely regal. She might have made Andromeda Tonks squirm a bit.

Leonor was different again. Harry had the impression that she was too self-confident to be self-conscious. She’d shaken his hand enthusiastically, and admired the decorations in the Room of Requirement, and interrupted Xavier or Esperanza a few times to ask questions about what Harry was doing in the war. Harry couldn’t help relaxing when he spoke to her. She might be overwhelming in day-to-day conversation, but at least she was pleasant.

 Barely any of the fifty Portuguese wizards and witches who had accompanied her were Aurors at all. Instead, if Harry had grasped things correctly, they represented eight or nine different groups in Portugal, vaguely like political parties, but smaller. They had come to make sure their interests were protected. And at least nine of them were Dark. The rest were Light or undeclared, but the Light wizards talked as openly to the Dark ones as if they had no conflict with them at all, and in fact, they seemed more likely to take sides over political issues than because of allegiance.

Harry wished Juniper could see them. It would have made his head burst like a melon dropped from Gryffindor Tower.

He turned now to Xavier. So far he’d tried as best he could to learn the basics, but it was time to ask more probing questions. “And your governments have no problem at all with this?” he tried now. “They don’t care about my age, or the fact that they could be seen as opposing the British Minister’s right to do what he wants with his people?”
Xavier’s lip curled a bit. “The Dark Lord is not to be fought this way,” he said. “By one boy and the people he can recruit? It is wrong. And if the Acting Minister will not give him help, we will.”

“The Channel is not a large body of water,” Leonor broke in, as she had a tendency to do, Harry had noted, sipping a cup of tea the room had conjured for her. She was the only person who’d seemed to want one. “And though the distance from the shores of England to Portugal is a bit farther than that from Dover to Calais, still, this is no comfortable thing. We know that the Dark Lord will strike for us when he is finished with you. And the only Ladies in Europe are Dark, and not inclined to protect us.”

“We have the right and the grace to be here,” said Esperanza. “Accept this.”

Harry briefly entertained the thought of what would happen when Esperanza and Snape met, then pushed it out of his head. “Very well, then,” he said. “I could use help to guard the safehouses, which will be more vulnerable than Hogwarts will be. But the cuidadores and those members of the Cercle Familial who prefer diplomatic conflicts to armed ones—well, I could use you to guard the magical creatures. I expect the Ministry to try and enforce the idea that I’m more committed to magical creatures than humans soon. That might result in attacks against magical creature communities by enraged or frightened wizards and witches. It might not, and if it doesn’t, then certainly I’ll ask for help somewhere else. But in the first place—”

“Consider it done,” said Esperanza, again making it a command.

Harry nodded and glanced at Leonor. “Tell me, ma’am—“

“Leonor, please.” The small woman shook her head fast enough that her hair spun around her. “The title makes me feel so old.”

Harry hid a smile. “Leonor, then. Do—members of the various groups prefer not to work with each other?”

“I have a list here of whom you should and should not assign together,” said Leonor briskly, and pulled a scroll out of her robe pocket. At a tap of her wand, it unrolled, and Leonor leaned over it, touching one symbol. “In particular, be wary of matching—”

Harry settled in to listen, his shoulders slowly sinking down from their tense position as well. He’d expected someone to interrupt at any moment and declare that he wasn’t meant to lead, that a mere boy couldn’t do so, that he should hand the leadership over to someone more experienced and with better ability than he had to organize and strategize.

But, so far, the compromise of leading while listening intently and taking into consideration all he was told appeared to be working. Harry supposed he could trust in that until something bad actually happened.

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Harry stepped inside the bedroom, shut the door lightly behind him, and listened. A moment later, he rolled his eyes. Draco had never been good at faking either snores or the relaxed stillness that came with sleep.

“I know you’re awake,” he said, striding across to the bed and sitting on the side.

Draco popped his head out from underneath the blankets, glaring at him. “And did it ever occur to you that I might be awake, but not desire your company?” he asked, his emotions grinding under the surface of his voice like broken glass in sand.

“No,” said Harry. “Because I was under the impression that it was desiring my company too much that kept you awake.”

Draco flushed. “You still didn’t need to let Kanerva do what she did earlier.”

“You think that was a punishment for staying awake?” Harry asked in befuddlement. It truly puzzled him, sometimes, the things Draco’s brain came up with. Of course, currently he had the excuse of sleep deprivation, and Harry knew—very well—that hallucinations were one effect of sleep deprivation, but still.

“No, for bothering you.” Draco rolled away as though he would go back to sleep again, but Harry knew he wouldn’t.

He put a hand on Draco’s shoulder and rolled him back over. Draco sneered and opened his mouth to make some cutting remark, but Harry silenced him with a kiss.

Draco stiffened in surprise, then pushed at Harry’s shoulder. “If you think you can avoid the argument by using sex—“
“No,” said Harry, drawing back to look him in the eye. “I think that you’re simply worried that you’re losing your place, your relevance, in my life, because I don’t speak to you all the time and we aren’t as close as we used to be right now.”

“And so my place is just as someone you fuck, then?”

_Merlin, Draco, you can be difficult sometimes._ But, perhaps because he had the success of the hippogriffs and the meetings with the other countries’ Aurors to buoy him up right now, or perhaps just because he knew Draco and loved him for whom he was, rather than whom he wasn’t, Harry didn’t feel weary. Just calm. He twined a finger in Draco’s hair, and shook his head. “I was under the impression that you were my partner,” he said. “My lover, but also someone who shares as many aspects of my life as you comfortably can, and who’s involved in a three-year ritual with me because you love me, and who’s been patient and understanding with me many, many times. And someone who needs this right now.”

Draco hesitated, then said, as if admitting it somehow made him weak, “I have missed this.”

“So have I,” Harry murmured, and pressed a kiss to his temple this time. “But I didn’t want it rushed and hurried.”

“Sometimes, rushed and hurried is better than none at all,” Draco pointed out, and started tugging at his pyjamas.

Harry was startled into laughter as he removed his own robes. “I’ll remember that next time,” he said.

By the time they were both naked, Harry could feel his calm translating into desire as gentle as his pride after freeing the hippogriffs had been. He rolled over on top of Draco, something he didn’t often do, given that it reminded him too much of controlling people. Tonight, though, he didn’t think that he could do much wrong, and he didn’t want Draco to bear the burden of being the one who took the lead.

Draco certainly didn’t seem to mind, if the way he was arching and wriggling and panting against him was any indication. Harry slowed him down, however, deliberately giving the kiss his full attention until Draco relaxed and stopped moving so frantically, and then began to rock, coaxing Draco to follow him.

Harry didn’t think they’d ever had sex this much like embers, so far from the sharp, blazing passion of the rituals, or the fiery need to comfort Draco that he’d felt in the wake of traumatic occurrences. Dim light and warmth flickered across his mind, now and then giving way to an unexpectedly clear moment of contact between their chests or cocks. Harry felt sweat sliding and snaking between them like tears, or Draco’s hips arching hard enough to press their groins impossibly close, or Draco’s arms clenching on the back of his neck and shoulders like a moving vise, shifting their grip as if Draco didn’t know what the best way to hold him there was.

But, for the most part, it was simply motion, heat, light, warmth, dim as a room in summer with all the curtains drawn, even though now and then Harry caught a glimpse of light from the lamp or his magic, which was unwinding in lazy flowers all around them. Harry felt as if he watched from a distance, but he was also bound, body and mind circling in one endless ring, more than he ever had been before.

Draco moved a little faster as he neared his own orgasm, and then abruptly he cried out, body stiffening and trembling, little aftershocks of the motion they’d shared together so far, his eyes so tightly closed and his neck so arched that Harry would have assumed he was in pain if he didn’t know better. He made sure to keep rubbing himself, lowering his own hand to stroke Draco and help him through the shock.

When Draco had finished and collapsed, nearly boneless, Harry followed him into quiet, gentle release. For some reason, he’d also imagined it’d be silent, but a groan forced its way past his lips, and he spasmed strongly, probably helped by the fact that Draco had chosen that moment to kiss him again and it felt like he couldn’t get any air. For a moment, heat ate him inside and out—breathlessness in his lungs, pleasure pulling tight in his belly like the warmth of good exercise, Draco’s passion claiming and drawing his own.

Then it was done, and Harry felt his own tiredness coming in on him like a rising wave. He managed to mutter a cleaning charm, but that was almost it. His eyes were already closed, and trying to open them was like fighting against Imperius.

He did manage to say, his voice not as weary as the rest of him, “The next time you need that, Draco, just ask. It’s not as though I don’t enjoy it too.”

“I didn’t want you to treat it like a duty,” Draco said. Or at least Harry thought he said that, around all the yawns. He found the heat continued as Draco pulled him closer to his chest.
“Wouldn’t,” Harry denied, half-heartedly. He’d been up so late the last few nights, and felt so satisfied right now, that he honestly wasn’t sure that sounded as clear and confident as he meant it to. “Like doing it…would make time if I had to—“

And then Draco kissed him on the forehead, and then he was rather deeply asleep. Or maybe it happened the other way around. Harry wasn’t that concerned about it.

It had been a good night.

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Chapter Fourteen: Wind and Light

Harry spasmed awake. He didn’t know how long he’d been asleep, but he knew the sound of the alarms ringing in his head, and that was all that mattered.

As he listened to the distant buzzing, like a stirred hive of bees, and threw on his robes over his pyjamas, he whispered the incantation to begin the phoenix song spell. A voice answered him from his left wrist moments later, without a trace of sleepiness. For all Harry knew, Peridot Yaxley didn’t sleep. He had met her only once, when he established the set of wards now ringing in his head and asked for her help, and that had been in the company of Lazuli, who’d done most of the talking. “Yes, my Lord?”

Harry didn’t bother correcting her on the title. They had more important things to worry about right now. “The hive queen is approaching Hogsmeade,” he said.

“How long since the wards started ringing?” Still no emotion came through her words. Harry shrugged as he ducked his head through the robe collar. He supposed that was better than someone collapsing in screaming hysterics, the way that most wizards and witches would have been after that statement.

“Less than a minute.”

“Then she is coming up the road towards the village yet,” said Peridot. “I will arrive soon.”

Harry said, “Yes,” since she couldn’t see him nod, and then cut off the communication spell. He Summoned his glasses and turned around in time to see Draco sitting up, frowning at him. The wards in his head were up to the maddened buzzing of a kicked hornets’ nest by now, but Harry couldn’t really blame Draco for not reacting. He wasn’t linked to them as Harry was.

“What is it?” he murmured.

“The hive queen is coming,” said Harry, controlling the impulse to bolt out the door. If he didn’t tell Draco what was happening, then Draco would follow him to find out what it was.

Draco blinked, then reached for his own robes. Harry shook his head and caught his wrist. “Only four of us are going to be in this battle,” he said. “Peridot, because her magic can let her resist the hive queen’s desire, and Kanerva, Jing-Xi, and I. I hope that’s going to be enough to face her.”

“And what about the vampires that are going to come with her?” Draco demanded. “Won’t someone need to handle them, since you’ll be occupied fighting the queen?”

“Hogsmeade’s mostly been evacuated,” Harry reminded him. There had been some stubborn wizards and witches who refused to leave their homes, despite the knowledge of what was happening, but most had been sensible and fled. Jing-Xi had filled the houses with illusions so that it looked as if the villagers still remained and went about their lives. No need to warn Voldemort of what they knew. “The vampires will barely find anyone to hurt, and Peridot will use her magic to protect and shelter those who remain.”

“Does that mean I can do nothing?”

“You told me that your possession gift didn’t work on the vampires,” Harry said.

Draco snorted. “No, but my Killing Curse does.” He flung back the covers and spelled his robes out of his trunk. “And if worst comes to worst, then I can give you magic if you falter.”

Harry stared at him for a moment, weighing the chances of how much Draco could help him in the battle against the chances that
Draco would be overcome by the queen’s desire and become a liability.

“I want to,” Draco said quietly. “You’d have to tie me down or put me under Imperius to keep me here.”

Harry clenched one fist. “Then come,” he said. “But Peridot has my permission to Stun you in seconds if you succumb to the queen.”

“Handle her, and she won’t have to,” Draco said flippantly, and then knelt to retrieve his robes.

Harry reached out to Kanerva and Jing-Xi, to make sure they stood ready, though they had also been linked to the wards and should have felt the disturbance. He found Jing-Xi, who was calmly readying herself, but could not find Kanerva.

A blast of wind tore past his head, and whispered into his ear, “I am here, and I am ready.”

Harry gave the breeze a small smile, and felt it blow ahead of him, towards Hogsmeade. Kanerva would prepare the battlefield for them, then, and monitor the hive queen’s progress.

Harry did take a moment to think ahead, beyond the battle and what they must do to secure it, and how Juniper would react when he found out that there were two Ladies in Britain, adding their power to Harry’s in order to turn back attacks that the Acting Minister wasn’t able to prevent.

Then he shook his head and forced off the smile blooming on his face. They had to survive the battle first.

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Indigena walked quietly among the hive vampires, feeling a bit disgruntled. She understood why her Lord had sent her to supervise the attack on Hogsmeade. She was the most trustworthy of his current servants—though he was beginning to recruit some new ones who might do, those Dark wizards turned in his direction by the Acting Minister’s outlawing of the Dark Arts—and the only one the vampires wouldn’t attack, given the sappy nature of her blood. She was also, likely, the only one immune to the desire the queen gave off, although her Lord’s control might be firm enough on Hawthorn to make her so. She had abandoned humanity so completely that her sexual instincts had also changed, and plants did not reproduce at the same times or in the same ways that animals did.

Still, though, this was an undignified position to be in. Indigena was coming to realize that she preferred the reality of clean battle to anything else, if she could not choose to simply retreat into her greenhouses and gardens and ignore that the outside world existed. No torture, and no sneak attacks at night for the purpose of turning the village of Hogsmeade and the school of Hogwarts into a queen’s nest.

Indigena stopped walking for a moment and tilted her head back to take in the giant, pale shape that moved quietly beside her. It floated above the ground like a swollen moon, supported by hundreds of crooked human legs, the remains of vampires absorbed into the queen for the purpose of transporting her. The belly was grub-white, and stretched wider by the curled shadows of unborn blood-drinkers. Queens were the only vampires that could produce living young, as opposed to doing it by draining someone else and turning them.

At the top, somewhere far above everything else, was the vampire’s human head. Indigena had only seen her close once, a distorted, stretched woman’s face—as everything about the queen was distorted and stretched—with bulging white cheeks and long red hair that glittered too much to be real. Her eyes had been squashed brown slits, hazed with the desire that she carried with her as a cloak. She had a pair of tiny, useless arms left, which gesticulated now and then when she was making a particularly important point. She did the thinking for all the vampires of her hive, and she was the one whom Voldemort had made his true bargain with, promising her a nesting site in return for her workers and drones attacking in certain specific places, sparing his servants, and leaving Connor Potter alone and alive.

They should never have allowed a queen to become established, Indigena thought, gazing ahead to the school and the village. They were doomed the moment they did. The most populated wizarding village and the school with the most children in the British Isles were always going to be targets.

Of course, this queen had been cleverer than most. Most of the time, the Ministry noticed signs of a vampire hive developing and sent in Aurors to burn and smoke the vampires out, taking especial care to kill the queen. It took more than a year for a queen to fully form, and most of the time she gave in to crazed lust before that and let her workers and drones drink and rape freely. Then wizards would notice, and the hive would end.
This queen, though, had hidden herself in the sea, both as a way to avoid detection and to support her body when it grew too weighty for land, and had drawn more and more vampires, with the exception of especially wary and independent ones like Vermillion, into her web. Indigena’s Lord had been aware of her, of course, but she hadn’t been formed enough at the time of the Midsummer battle for him to use her. Now she was.

Indigena looked ahead to the village and shook her head.

_Not a chance._

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“I understand the queen’s magic,” said Peridot Yaxley, calmly removing the hood that had covered her face when she first appeared to Harry, Jing-Xi, and Kanerva. “It is a deeper manifestation of the kind that I practice. However, I cannot guarantee you total protection against it, _because_ it is deeper. I made these amulets for you, however. Hang them around your neck, and do not remove them.”

She handed a medallion to Harry, who took it carefully. It felt like bronze in his hand, thick and metallic and cool, but quickly absorbing heat from his skin. He squinted, but the design traced on it was faint, and he couldn’t make it out in the light of the _Lumos_ charm. He ended up slipping it over his head anyway, of course, and then he felt the chain clasp around his throat, drawing in until he felt it would choke him.

He blinked. The air felt fresher and clearer, and he realized the medallion was shielding him from the magic of lust that Peridot projected. He shook his head, and then looked up as Peridot said, with a frown, “You did not tell me that you would bring a fourth person, and so I have no fourth amulet.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Draco stubbornly. Harry glanced over to see him standing with his arms crossed, his wand already drawn, frowning at Peridot as if he imagined that she would cease to exist if he did. “I only want Harry in my bed. That ought to be enough to protect me against the queen.”

Peridot laughed, a laugh as deep and red as the lovemaking Harry and Draco had shared three nights past, and spoke with real emotion in her voice for the first time. “And is it enough to protect you against me now, little one?” She stepped forward, and stretched out a hand. Harry felt only a prickling rush of sensation, which seemed to wash over him until it met the amulet and then stop, but Draco gave a choked gurgle and staggered towards her, eyelids fluttering.

“He is very sweet,” Peridot told Harry, and the wash of sensation stopped. Draco promptly snapped his eyes open and jumped away from her, clutching his wand. Peridot ignored him as effortlessly as if he really had ceased to exist, watching Harry all the while. “And that is only a touch of the magic the queen brings. Tell your partner that he cannot withstand her if he cannot withstand me.” She turned, her gown snapping around her and revealing a large portion of bare back, and strode towards Hogsmeade.

“What was that?” Draco snarled.

“The truth,” said Harry, with a sigh. “That’s what the queen’s desire is like, Draco, only a hundred times stronger. She makes everything in the vicinity want to—well, mate. And that will make you easier prey for the vampires that follow her, as well as the queen herself.” He took a step forward, staring into Draco’s eyes the while. “Are you sure that you want to stay here?”

Draco took several quick, gasping breaths. Harry thought for a moment that he might ask to share his amulet, but then he shook his head and stood firm. “No. I said that I would fight with you, Harry, and I will. She has to see me to influence me, doesn’t she? So if I’m hiding—”

“No,” Harry said. “It’s a general influence, like a miasma or a mist. Once she comes near enough—” he glanced towards the Hogsmeade road, where he could already see the moonlight gleaming from the queen’s bulk “—then you’ll be following the pull of your instincts, no matter what happens.”

“He can have mine,” Kanerva offered, sticking one hand beneath the bronze medallion and holding it away from her skin with a scowl, as if she disliked even that faint weight resting there. “I will be in the form of wind most of the time, and winds do not mate.”

“And what happens when you return to your body, Kanerva?” Jing-Xi asked in a patient voice. “Then you will feel the pull of your desire. Harry and I can resist young Mr. Malfoy’s magic if he turns on us. We cannot resist yours.”
Kanerva seemed to consider this for a moment. Then she smiled, and the smile made Harry want to take a step away from her. “Then I will simply not return to my body,” she said, and unslung the amulet from her neck, tossing it to Draco.

“Kanerva,” said Jing-Xi sharply, and moved forward, but the Dark Lady had already shed her body, rising in a torrent of black towards the sky. Harry lost sight of her a moment later, as the flapping edges of what could have been robes and flesh melted, scattering her into the air. Jing-Xi sighed.

“Is she right?” Harry asked, watching the sky for a moment, even though he knew it was useless. From what he understood, Kanerva melted completely when she was like this. There was no way to find her in all the mass of moving air unless she wanted to be found. “Can she resist the queen’s desire?”

“It operates on the body,” said Jing-Xi. “Those who have no bodies, such as ghosts, can resist it, yes. But she is—wild when she is like this. I fear that she will not listen, and wander in many directions while you and I try to combat the queen. Hopefully that will not happen, as I am confident that only two Ladies and a vates can resist a hive queen, but it might.”

Harry sighed in turn, and reminded himself once again of the perils of inviting wild Dark allies to his side. “Well, I suppose that we’ll have to trust her, as much as we can,” he said, and turned to check that Draco had slid the amulet’s chain over his head. Then he faced the Hogsmeade road again. The queen’s desire was tangible now, a wave of heat that flooded Harry’s arms like tickling fingers and made his groin feel tight and his breath come short. He knew it would have been far worse, though, without Peridot’s amulet. “You’re ready?” he asked Jing-Xi. “As we planned?”

“As we planned.” Jing-Xi nodded, and held out a hand. Light began to beam from her palm, glinting golden sunshine that refuted both the rising storm of Kanerva’s making and the foul white cave-light that came from the queen. “And let us hope that Kanerva takes her part in our symphony when the moment comes.”

Harry swallowed, then called his own magic. Draco gripped his shoulder with one hand hard enough to hurt. Harry wondered if that was just to let him know he was there, or because the manifestation his magic was taking was one that Draco hadn’t ever seen before.

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Indigena lifted her head sharply. Yes, she could feel the queen’s desire breaking over her, and she had learned to ignore it by now. But she could feel something else now, and it was not the reproductive drive to produce children which the hive mother projected. This was more like the normal human desire for fucking, and that could still capture her.

Indigena knew only one person with enough of a grasp of that kind of magic to continue to affect her and enough daring to come out and use it in the middle of a hive attack. Given that this person had allied with Harry, that argued that Harry had known about the attack ahead of time.

She touched her Dark Mark and closed her eyes. Her Lord’s reply came as a snarl in her head. It was only a few days since he had awakened from the wounds Harry inflicted on him in their mental duel. He was still angry that it had taken so long, and any distractions from his latest revenge-plotting annoyed him.

“My Lord,” Indigena whispered. “Harry knew about the hive queen. He is waiting, and my sister Peridot is here.”

Her Lord hissed like his flesh-snake, and for long moments there was otherwise silence in Indigena’s head. When his voice did return, it carried the command that Indigena had feared above all others. “Do not let her escape, Indigena. Your family must be shown the futility and the folly of opposing me. Do you understand?”

It was hard to swallow. But she had expected it, Indigena told herself. Of course she had. The Yaxley family was powerful, and even if most of them had no special interest in the wars of Light and Dark, nearly all of them were interested in pursuing esoteric branches of magic that would make them of interest to the Light and Dark Lords. Indigena had attracted her Lord’s attention because of her expertise with plants. Of course Harry could not be allowed to have Lazuli on his side, or, for that matter, Peridot, and Peridot was the weaker, without Lazuli’s strange nonhuman mate to defend her.

So she must kill her sister. She had desperately hoped to be spared that fate, but she had known it might happen.

*Vita desinit, decus permanit*, she reminded herself again. It was her honor that was more important than her life, and than Peridot’s life, too, since she had chosen to follow an opposite kind of honor. And though Voldemort could have ended her sister’s life with a thought, causing her to burst into flames, that was not what he wanted. It was not messy or painful enough for him, and it did not test Indigena’s loyalty to him as this did.
“Yes, my Lord,” she whispered.

“Good,” he said, and then he cut off that special communication line with an abruptness that warned Indigena not to abuse it. She was the only Death Eater with a way to interrupt her Lord like that. It was only to be used for emergencies.

She settled herself, took a deep breath, and gripped her wand. The vampires were flowing into Hogsmeade now, behind and beside and around the immense bulk of their queen, hunting for human prey. Indigena could hear their wails of disappointment when they found none, and see them lunging at people who flickered and vanished when touched. Illusions, Indigena guessed. Some of them might have been real, but then, that was the reason Peridot was there, probably. She would have removed the last few stubborn people who might have remained to make the illusion of habitation seem more real, or who had not believed there was going to be an attack.

Indigena stepped forward, and murmured a small spell that her grandmother had invented, one that let Yaxley blood distinguish Yaxley blood. Almost at once, she felt it around the corner of a house, and then Peridot paced into sight. She wore a variant of the red gown she had worn when Indigena met her at Lazuli’s house, and her aura and the way she moved made Indigena’s mouth go dry.

Peridot turned her head and saw her. She gave a smile that had nothing of amusement or fondness in it at all.

“Hello, Indigena.”

And then she hit Indigena with a wave of lust.

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Jing-Xi, Kanerva, and Harry had planned this carefully. Kanerva’s commitment to the wind could not be changed, and Jing-Xi’s raw magic functioned best as Light, although her specialties were changes, in both Transfiguration and glamours. That left Harry to find some way to link his magic with theirs, and he did not think ice would do. It was too heavy, too solid, too unmoving, unable to join the fluid dance of Kanerva’s element and Jing-Xi’s shaping.

So he had reached into himself, and found a connection that he had turned his back on for more than a year now, but which was still there, waiting for him, embedded not just in his bloodline or a heritage that could be forsaken, but in his memories.

Once, he had been drowning in darkness after the loss of his hand, and the unicorns had come, and rescued him, and taken him swimming in the sea off the Northumberland beach where the Potter ancestors had sailed boats into the Midsummer sunrise for centuries.

It was the sea Harry called now, the endless motion of the waves, the gray water rising and falling, the response of the tides to the moon, the ocean that, Kanerva had said, would swallow all the land up and make an end of them someday. The air around him shimmered and turned thick, moist, just on the edge of being too heavy to breathe. Harry felt his legs lift from the ground, and his hair floated around him the way that Jing-Xi’s did in the enchantment that had been a gift from Kanerva. Draco gasped behind him. Harry looked back to make sure he was well, and saw his eyes wide, his throat straining against the clasp of Peridot’s amulet as he sucked in air.

Harry reached out, and his magic swirled around him, flowing higher than the roofs of the houses in Hogsmeade before subsiding, turning into a pale mass of water illuminated by the sun and ruffled by the moving air that Kanerva was summoning in greater and greater quantities. The alliance of three elements, wind and water and fire, the three that could move, against the heavy stillness of the earth that the queen bore with her and wanted to dig into, should work better than any other combination of their unalike powers that they’d been able to devise on such short notice.

He turned and looked down the road, and the hive queen was moving through Hogsmeade now, accompanied by the scurrying black carcasses of humans who should have lain down and died already. Harry could feel the desire pouring off the queen even now, crashing like waterfalls into his sea-magic—where it was swallowed. Kanerva’s winds blew and tattered it like clouds, and Jing-Xi’s light burned it so that the magic recoiled back on the queen like cockroaches running from the sun.

“Now?” Harry mouthed, looking at Jing-Xi from the corner of his eye. Jing-Xi nodded, and took the first step in the dance, raising her hands above her head and then bringing them down towards the ground in a triangle.

The air in Hogsmeade turned to fire. Beam after beam of sunlight slanted from her fingers and stroked the vampires, transforming them into puffs of colliding ashes. Then they hit the hive queen and burned deep slashes across her belly, frying the embryos
curled there, making the very air shiver with a stink that the winds at once tossed away. Harry shuddered in revulsion at the queen’s keening cry, like nothing human, but knew it was not enough to finish her. One Lady could not stand against the hive queen, and if she got closer, then the amulets Peridot had made would probably not protect her against the queen’s might.

Harry took the next step of the dance, and the ghost of the sea dashed forward at his command, its currents catching the still-living vampires and bearing them off their feet. The smell of foam and salt breasted the stink of the roasting queen, and the wind seemed perfectly happy to carry those odors. Harry saw walls of darkness briefly obliterate Jing-Xi’s sunbeams, and then catch them and gleam like waves illuminated on a summer day, and then crash down around the queen, rupturing that swollen belly with the sheer force of water, which was tougher than stone when it grew that strong, as Harry had reason to know.

She screamed again, and this time her magic fully concentrated on answering them, instead of spreading a fog around her. Harry felt as if his feet were trying to grow roots. Every hair stood away from his body, yearning for union with the ground. He wanted to stop moving, to just stay still and be fucked. His body strained against the pull of the water, and he heard himself utter a deep groan.

Draco groaned into his ear in response, and his arm slid around Harry’s chest, drawing him back to rest against him. The waves that curled past them made the movement slow, dream-like. That, and the contact itself, was distracting Harry from his fight with the queen.

“Who are they?” That was Jing-Xi’s voice, and it seemed faint and far away, but the flash of the sun in Harry’s eyes made it important that he stop paying attention to the way Draco was nibbling on his neck for a moment and concentrate. He lifted his head, blinking wearily against the temptation to close his eyes.

Four figures were heading for the remains of Hogsmeade at a dead run. It was very hard for Harry to see the one in the lead; shadows jumped and boiled around him, fending off Jing-Xi’s sunbeams. But the others were clear enough, if only for the utter strangeness of what accompanied them, and that strangeness—and maybe a wavering in the queen’s attention towards the newcomers—woke Harry from his daze.

One figure, a man, had enormous black creatures galloping beside him, with mysterious ivory gleams near their mouths. When they separated from him and pounded forward, then Harry could make them out: boars, dark as midnight, with the ivory gleams their tusks. They squealed, enormous, grating sounds that overwhelmed the noise of their trotters, as they slammed into the side of the queen and ripped her open with those tusks. She tried to kick out at them with her human legs, but the great pigs wheeled away with deadly grace and attacked again, every stiff hair along their spines bristling.

Harry thought he was beginning to figure it out now. The shadow-cloaked figure would match Vermillion. And he had told Harry that one of his companions was called Adonis—Adonis, the lover of Aphrodite who had died when a boar he was hunting cut an enormous wound in his side. It made sense that a vampire named Adonis would have created or tamed or grown magical boars as weapons, at least if his name was anything more than an idle boast.

A chorus of women, transparent as ghosts save for their long, trailing dark hair, wailing in unearthly voices as they swam around him, surrounded the second visible male vampire. At first Harry thought they were swimming in his sea-magic, but then he realized they actually ducked in and out of the earth, curveting back into sight like dolphins only to vanish again. They came up right under the human legs of the queen and chopped at them, trying to tip her over.

Tammuz. That second vampire with Vermillion was Tammuz. And Tammuz had a lover named Ishtar associated with the earth.

And last came the vampiress, whom Harry knew Vermillion had called Psyche, unwinding a glittering skein of red and silver from her arms and flinging it wide. It opened into the wings of a hundred, a thousand, an exploding cloud of butterflies, all of which had serrated blades sticking out from their wings. They made for the vampire queen’s side, and then up her sides, and from the next screech, Harry thought they must have attacked her human head.

For a moment, the vampire queen absolutely could not concentrate, wracked as she was with pain and confusion, the boars spinning around her, the transparent women grabbing at her legs, the butterflies sawing at her.

And then Kanerva finally, finally took her place in the pattern of wind and light and water.

******

Indigena was thinking of the curses that she should use on her sister. She would swear to it. And yet somehow she was noticing the way that Peridot’s hair shone in the light of the fires in the village instead, and she was taking one step forward and then another, and then she stood in front of Peridot while her sister raised one hand and traced the curves of her face.
“You have strayed so far from true honor that you would not recognize it if it embraced you, Indigena,” Peridot said softly. Then she smiled, and the smile made Indigena moan. “I suppose that I’ll have to do this in its place.”

Indigena struggled to move, wanting her Lord to send a bolt of pain through the Dark Mark so that she would have an easier time resisting this. Of course, that didn’t happen. Of course, she only moved closer to her sister instead, and Peridot kissed her, foully, sweetly, with an open mouth and a tongue that touched Indigena’s like the shock of a needle going home.

Indigena felt her thorns slide out of the sheaths on her back, but instead of lunging, they swayed above her, gentled. She had gone too long without pleasant contact, unless one counted the love she felt when her roses and her tendrils wound around her. They would not strike, Indigena realized in growing despair that only deepened when Peridot pushed at her and she fell to the ground in a tangle of robes.

The fall itself was dreamlike, the ground a harsh contrast, the earth slamming into and impressing on her back and shoulders. Indigena tried to stand, but Peridot knelt over her and laid one hand on her breasts, keeping her in place, and Indigena was aware as she had not been in years of the tightening of her skin, human skin, over the shadows of leaves and flowers beneath it.

Peridot kissed her a second time, and stroked her neck, and laughed as if thinking about something else. Then she said, “I could humiliate you further, sister, but I see no need to do that. Only remember that your contempt for your sisters’ magic makes you weak, and always will.”

One more kiss, almost enough to remove all trace of shame and dishonor from Indigena’s mouth in the twist of dizzy pleasure, and then Peridot Apparated away with a snap. Indigena dropped her head against the earth and panted, clenching one hand in the dirt. Her thorny rose fluttered and wanted to dig into the ground. If not for the fact that she had larger duties to face and an honor debt to consummate, Indigena would have let it.

I will tell my Lord to annihilate Peridot with the Meleager’s Fire potion the moment I return, she thought, standing shakily. She is too dangerous to be left living.

She was in time to turn and see the utter failure of the attack.

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Kanerva’s wind came down from the sky like the living hand of a beast.

Harry remembered what Jing-Xi had told him once. She wants the destruction of all living things...

And it certainly seemed like it, as the storm’s shriek quickly built to an outraged howl. The wind struck underneath the vampire queen, bearing her from her legs at last, and making her collapse with a thump that Harry’s water and Jing-Xi’s magic had to work hastily to cushion, so as not to send them down with her. Vermillion’s vampires rolled and jumped neatly out of the way. The hive vampires running around the queen were not so lucky, and many of them died in her fall. Harry did see Vermillion grab one of the few survivors and tear him apart the way someone might take the different pieces from a jigsaw puzzle, devouring the blood that dripped from his opened throat and, it seemed, at least half his flesh.

Kanerva’s wind turned, coming back around, and Harry blinked as he remembered what he was supposed to do now. Jing-Xi’s magic was rising, a wall of sunlight. He hastened to join his water to it, in the form of a wave that rose at the far end of the village and began running towards the downed queen. The sunlight rode it, dancing and sparkling in its crest.

At the same moment as the wave arrived, Kanerva’s hurricane descended and met it.

Harry gasped. Magic rang and shuddered through him, grasping and shaking him so violently that for a moment he could understand why Voldemort would grab and drain everyone he could. There was no place for morality in the face of power like this, only the consuming desire to have more and more of it.

Light and Dark and undeclared, water and fire and air, the three paths of power mingled together, and Harry could feel Jing-Xi and Kanerva close to him in ways that only Connor had been before. Together, they poured all their magic down on the hive queen writhing on the ground. One wish guided all of them, a wish that Kanerva articulated, because she was the one who wanted it most.

Die!
And the hive queen wailed, and tried to fight back, but too many signals were striking her divided mind at once, as Vermillion and the other vampires ruthlessly reaped her children, made them feel pain, drained their blood, killed them, and she also tried to respond to her own danger. Harry could feel her spasming, convulsing, the way he thought an ocean wave might feel those crushed to death underneath it. Still their magic crashed and burned and blew, and the hive queen wailed once more and finally died like a squashed bug.

Then came the harder part: calling his magic back to him. Harry sagged, quietly trembling, and pictured the sea withdrawing at low tide. The waves would ebb out from the shore, and reveal sand that had been hidden under water before. He wanted his magic to come back to him in the same way, and leave the houses of Hogsmeade alone, as well as whatever vampires might still be racing around as prey for Vermillion and his companions.

The magic did not want to listen to him. It danced and tugged at its leash, begging to stay out and play. Didn’t Harry think it felt wonderful? Didn’t he want to crush other things, and send his magic flowing across Scotland, to rouse sleeping witches and wizards out of bed with the sound of the sea?

No, Harry told it sharply. Come back here, now.

The magic whined, but in the end, Harry was the one who held the leash, and it was what must obey. It tagged back to him, sullen, and curled up in his body. Harry slammed down walls of desire around it. He did not want to control others. He did not want to let it out to play. What it had done was quite enough. Killing a hive queen didn’t happen every day. Couldn’t it be still now?

At last it was, though Harry could feel a final flicker of defiance before it lost its separate personality and blended into his. He opened his eyes, shook his head, and found himself leaning against Draco. He stepped gently away, and smiled at him.

“All collected again, I think,” he said.

“That’s almost too bad,” said Draco, and Harry saw the desire burning in his eyes. He stifled a laugh. At least they could say it was the reflection of the lust that the vampire queen had engendered. He glanced up as he heard a triumphant howl, and saw Kanerva appear briefly on the roof of a house, dancing there, her robes and her swirling hair and her skin of one piece with the motion of the wind. Then she was gone again, unbraided and unwound and taken up into the air. Harry supposed that could be another reason his magic was reluctant to come back. It had seen what Kanerva’s magic was free to do, and it wanted the same unrestrained playground.

“All right?” Jing-Xi asked him. Harry turned and looked at her. She, of course, was perfectly calm and composed. The magic of the Light was tamer than any magic mingled with Dark, Harry thought.

“Yes, I think so,” he said, and glanced out at the battlefield, searching for a trace of Vermillion and his companions. They were gone, though. Harry shook his head. He did say that he would be my ally whether I wanted him to or not. I suppose this was an example of that.

“Kanerva?” he asked, when a breeze blew past his ears that was far too cold for a July night.

“Let her play,” Jing-Xi said. “She would be sullen if we called her in now, and she will not damage anything, I think. There has been enough killing to content her. She will dance in the highest heavens.” She tilted her head back and looked up at the stars with a fond little smile.

Harry followed her gaze, seeing a whirlwind that formed, obscuring one constellation and then another, soaring up and then up, and then vanishing and losing itself in the general darkness of the night.

“She joined us,” he said. This time.

Jing-Xi smiled at him. “Yes,” she said. “We worked together, three Lord-level wizards acting to defeat a single enemy. It is the first time in centuries.”

Harry could see why. The Pact, of course, was wary of each other, and had the rule about non-interference in other countries. But, more than that, the sheer addiction of such powerful magic pounded in the back of his head and still soared like a second heartbeat through his blood.

You have the gift of acquiring more, if you should choose it.
Harry shook his head and pushed the thought away. It was one that had come from that darkest part of him that others preferred to pretend didn’t exist. He knew how to quell it, too, and how to shed the exultation of battle: go and look at the corpses, clean them up, and hope that no villagers had died before Peridot had been able to evacuate them.

“Come on,” he said, and moved towards the center of the village, hearing Jing-Xi follow and Draco mutter about him always needing to ruin the moment.

Above them, Kanerva danced and danced, the winds bearing laughter to Harry’s ears sometimes, throughout and within the endless expanse of sky.

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“I suppose you have read the text of the Ministry’s recent edict.” Juniper leaned back in his chair. “And you know that Dark Arts are illegal for anyone in the country to practice, even Lord-level wizards. I must ask that Lady Stormgale refrain from using them while she is in the British Isles.”

Harry swallowed his laughter. Juniper simply didn’t understand. Or, more likely, he did, but he didn’t care. He would only think that those people who couldn’t obey the edict were his enemies, and there was scant loss in their support, even if he had to wait until the end of the war to put them in Tullianum.

But perhaps it was possible to make him understand. Harry still didn’t want open warfare with the Ministry if he could avoid it. The tense neutrality they’d maintained so far suited him fine. The only thing he truly regretted was the Ministry’s Aurors sitting idle, or only arresting ordinary citizens who used Dark Arts, rather than joining them in their battles. When Juniper had sent him the invitation-cum-command this morning, Harry had known the neutrality was splintered, and they would have to deal with one another head-on.

“How much do you understand about the transition that a Dark Lady or Lord goes through when giving herself or himself to the wild Dark?”

“I am pleased to say that I know very little about it,” said Juniper stiffly. “Mortals were not meant to understand such things, boy.”

Harry nodded. He had expected as much. Scrimgeour had told him once that Juniper believed even Wolfsbane shouldn’t be studied, because understanding more about the werewolf curse only increased the risk of corruption from the knowledge.

“The transition takes them away from Light magic,” he said. “For many, it makes them incapable of accessing it any longer. That is the case with Lady Stormgale. Even if she could still use Light magic, I doubt she would. She defended Hogsmeade and Hogwarts from the vampire hive queen yesterday using Dark spells. Do you really want her protection to wane or prove useless, sir, because she wasn’t allowed to use Dark magic on Britain’s shores? Or do you want her to become insulted and strike out at those she thinks responsible for the insult?”

“It is not necessary to use Dark magic in order to win this war,” said Juniper stubbornly. “And if we allow one person to use it, then we have taken one step down the road that ended, last time, with suspects tortured rather than brought to trial.”

Harry stared into Juniper’s eyes. There was a kindred spirit there, after all, one spark of the same fear shared between them. Harry didn’t want to indulge his taste for revenge out of fear of what he might become. Juniper didn’t want to permit Dark magic in Britain for fear of what the British wizarding world might become.

It softened Harry’s voice, and increased his hope that compassion and sheer pragmatism might make their way through Juniper’s walls where defiance would not. “Sir. Please. Listen to yourself. It is necessary to use Dark magic to win this war, if only because some of those who fight with you will use it. Would you rather see the war lost for lack of Dark magic, when by permitting those to use it who would use it anyway, you would win? You would not have to use it, nor anyone else sworn to the Order of the Firebird. Allow them to use it, the ones who don’t believe in the danger of corruption, and you would be far more likely to win.”

Juniper tensed. Harry could see the battle raging in him, and he made his voice yet softer and more coaxing.

“Many people are fleeing to Voldemort rather than surrendering, because they fear what their lives will become under your government. You mean to avoid tyranny, but they see it as tyranny now. Reverse the edict, and you will welcome more people than you drive away. Few want to serve Voldemort. They want to serve their magic, to use it to the fullest extent possible. They’re only going to him because he might permit that freedom, and they know your new edict won’t. Please, sir, reconsider. Can you?”

Juniper turned his head, surprisingly, staring out the enchanted window of his office for a moment. Harry followed his gaze. The window looked out on a view of the Thames, which Harry didn’t doubt was at least part of what the real view looked like at that very moment.

“How can I?” Juniper whispered.

“How can you what?” Harry responded at once, pitching his voice to the same level of lowness. “Please, sir, tell me what you need to hear.”

“How can I abandon some of my people to darkness, and save others for the Light?” Juniper shook his head, his eyes fastened on the window. “How can I condemn some people to doing things I know are wrong, only because it’s expedient?” He turned back to
Harry, face haunted. “The Light is an ideal, I know, never to be lived up to completely by us, but we can come nearer to it than this. And I cannot sanction the use of Dark spells when I know that the people using them could have lives that were so much better.”

Harry ground his back teeth against the frustration that wanted to rise, and said softly, “Sir, Lady Jing-Xi is of the Light. If you will not listen to what I have to say, will you listen to her?”

Juniper did not nod or shake his head. He simply looked at Jing-Xi. So did Harry.

Jing-Xi’s face was calm, and she looked straight ahead, not quite locking eyes with the Acting Minister. “Sir,” she said. “I am more than sixty years old. I have lived in many different places in the world, though my home has always been China. I have had friendships with many different Ladies and Lords located in Light or Dark, and some people, like Harry, who are undeclared. And I have had enemies in the same places. What that has taught me is to look, first, to the nature and temper of the human heart involved, not the allegiance it has sworn itself to. There are Dark Ladies who would never sanction the use of torture, because it goes against personal ideals. There are Light Lords who could, and did, sanction the use of child abuse, because they honestly believed it was the right thing to do. Few people believe they are serving evil. Even Lord Riddle does not believe it of himself, though his fear of death has destroyed his reason.

“I say to you, sir, that if your heart is committed to your ideals, you will not drown yourself in darkness because you chose to trust your people, including those who practice Dark Arts. You will not be tainted by corruption if you remain true. And if someone around you is, that is not your fault, not if you did not encourage it. We cannot be responsible for every single response someone else makes. We cannot know what consequences we engender, sometimes. That is why we urge people to live with the consequences of their actions, not prevent them. Preventing them all would require a foresight greater than any of us have—including you, sir.”

Harry let out his breath in a soft little sigh. Surely what Jing-Xi said would get through to Juniper. She was of his own allegiance, someone who had made a commitment to the Light her life’s work, voluntarily limited her power to a certain set of spells. Surely, this would work.

But Juniper whispered, “I must at least try.”

Harry’s fists clenched. Juniper didn’t appear to notice, though, but simply looked at them with the eyes of a drowning man.

“I see darkness threatening my country. I see shadows creeping out to take the hearts of a good many of our people. I see people giving in to practices they would have hated a generation ago, simply because they get things done more quickly. Am I to put up with that? Am I to really grant that that is happening, simply because I feel helpless to prevent it? I can at least fight.”

Harry bowed his head and stood. Juniper would never join them. He had convinced himself this was a worthy fight, even if a hopeless one. You couldn’t argue with someone like that. Harry knew, because he had once had that mindset himself. He had thought that his life was worthwhile even though he fully expected to die serving Connor, because with that death he would buy a few more moments of continued existence for his brother.

He wondered how Juniper had restrained himself all these years, pretending to be mentally normal and stable until the point where he could reach power and then unleash his stern ideals. Or had his obsession not grown to this level until Voldemort returned? It was possible, Harry thought. He could have seen their society as Light enough up until now, without the need for his corrective power.

Harry could feel his heart ache in pity, and in unexpected force of sharing, and in frustration and resentment.

But he would not stand aside and let Juniper dictate his actions, or arrest those he had come to love.

“We follow different philosophies, sir,” he said. “I hope not to see you on the battlefield, but if that is what must happen, then it will.”

“One moment before you go,” said Juniper, already sounding confident again, as if arrogance were enough to win a war. If it were, he would have become King of all the wizarding world already, Harry thought. “I have heard a rumor that Aurors from foreign countries have come to Britain to serve you. Is that true, vates?”

“It is,” said Harry, meeting his eyes. “France, Spain, and Portugal, so far. And I have sent letters to other wizarding governments.”
Juniper’s face tightened. “They should have cleared it with me.”

“They decided that you were fighting the war wrong.” Harry leaned forward. For the sake of the similarity between them—a similarity he had never expected to exist, much less need to be acknowledged—he would give Juniper this one warning. “They don’t accept you as a voice of authority. Your edict against the Dark Arts began it. They don’t think that you can win the war this way, and they have a vested interest in my winning it, so that Voldemort does not cross the Channel.”

“Not every Minister will send troops to your side,” said Juniper, softly, as if it were a threat.

“I don’t expect them to,” said Harry calmly. If nothing else, he knew he could not count on Austria; they would not feel the need to, since Monika would fight Voldemort if he moved into her territory. And others further away would probably refuse as well, though they might mock Juniper. So long as they did not openly oppose him, Harry didn’t think he needed to worry. “But I will pursue this war with the help that’s been offered, Acting Minister, and in my own fashion.”

“That cannot continue forever,” Juniper said.

This was the part of him that Harry didn’t understand, the part that seemingly expected Harry to give up or give in because he should owe some kind of ultimate allegiance to Light or the Ministry. And Harry simply smiled, and dealt with that part of Juniper as he had other times before.

“You’re right. It will continue until Voldemort is dead, or I am.”

He turned and departed from the office, casting another muffling spell. Jing-Xi walked at his side, her face a study in sad wonder. Then she shook her head, and her face returned to normal again.

“Back to Hogwarts?” she asked.

“No,” Harry answered. He could feel a kind of twisting sensation in his chest, but he had known from the beginning of this that he would need to go where he was going now sooner or later. It was not fair that Voldemort could attack Muggles and they would have little or no notice as to what was going on. At the very least, Harry could create an advance warning system among them.

“You’re going back to Hogwarts, since the Pact declared that you couldn’t help me in what I was about to do. I’m going to summon a few people to guard me, and then I’m going to Surrey.”

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Aurora halted and glanced around, narrowing her eyes in annoyance. At the very least, if he’s going to play games of spies and what not, then he could be on time to the secret meetings he has arranged.

Then a movement ahead of her, in the shadows, reassured her. Aurora drew her wand and cast the binding spells that prevented the speaker from getting anywhere within twenty feet of her, and the spell that would break his wand if he tried to cast a spell of his own. She supposed it wasn’t fair to complain about his timing. He was the one who had to come through several dozen guards and wards to get inside the Ministry. She only had to await an owl, and then go, with Juniper’s blessing, to a certain place at a certain time.

“My lady,” said his voice, soft and half-defeated, the way it always sounded.

“Feldspar.” Aurora nodded. “And what information do you bring this time?”

She had hardly been able to believe it when Feldspar Yaxley presented himself to her—he hadn’t had an easy time of that either—and claimed that he wanted to betray Voldemort. But he had explained it enough times that Aurora believed him now. He had betrayed his whole family by fleeing away from the Dark Mark’s claim during the First War, and that had sent his aunt Indigena into the arms of the Dark Lord and caused irreparable harm. He was trying to make up for it now, especially since Voldemort had called him back but had no interest in doing anything but torturing him. That torture made his hold over Feldspar weaker than it was for the other recalled Death Eaters.

“The man who calls himself my Lord,” said Feldspar, touching his left arm where Aurora herself had seen the Dark Mark faded and discolored, “has gathered two other members of my family into his fold.”

Aurora caught her breath and stood straighter. Voldemort recruiting any Yaxley was bad news. “What are their names?”

“Sylvan and Oaken,” rasped Feldspar. He was often tortured until he coughed up blood, Aurora knew, and then his chest was
rarely repaired properly. “They are twins. Distant cousins of mine.”

“And what are their powers?” The Yaxley family was well-known for studying obscure branches of magic, and achieving proficiency in arts that no one in the wider wizarding community cared about. Aurora often wished the wider wizarding community had not been forced to care about which Yaxley did what.

“They became interested in werewolves’ near invulnerability to magic and many kinds of physical wounds.” Feldspar paused to cough again. “They decided to see if they could induce that same invulnerability in themselves. And they did find a way, but, of course, there was a price. Essentially, only one twin exists in our world at a time. The other waits in a different plane beyond him. When the twin in our world is injured, he can retreat into that stronghold, and his brother comes out to fight. And that other plane works to heal their injuries much faster than even a potion. They were content to simply live at Briar-Rise for a long time, but they have come forward now, because all the spells that sustain them are Dark, and they dislike the imputation from the Ministry that merely by existing, they are immoral and illegal.”

Aurora shuddered for a moment, and wished bitterly that she had not given in out of weariness and allowed Erasmus to pass that law that made Dark Arts illegal. At least, then, they would not be facing a pair of invulnerable Yaxleys. “Is there anything else you can tell me?”

Feldspar shook his head. “They leave me out of most discussions now, and what I can overhear is getting rarer. I think I will soon die.”

“Then why not flee?” This was the center of Aurora’s suspicions about Feldspar, which had almost convinced her that he was coming to her on Voldemort’s orders. But there was no reason that Voldemort would allow such valuable information to spill into their hands if he knew. And, so far, it had all proven true. They had even foiled an attack on a small Irish village last week, thanks to what Feldspar told her.

Feldspar’s lips lifted into a dark smile, and Aurora saw that his teeth were blood-stained, the gums cracked and leaking. “Because of honor,” he said. “Vita desinit, decus permanit. I forgot that once. I never will again. I am not allowed to forget it again.”

Aurora looked at him in silence for a moment. But it was true that that was the Yaxley family motto, and they went to insane lengths to fulfill it, and Feldspar’s information had all proven true. What could Voldemort be getting out of this, if Feldspar was a double-crosser? None of the Ministry’s information was compromised. Voldemort’s attacks had been.

“Stay as safe as you can,” she said. “And know that you will have died doing the right thing, if you die. The Ministry is grateful.”

Feldspar mutely nodded and blended back into the shadows. Aurora left the small storage room. She did not know how Feldspar slipped in and out of the Ministry, but she did know that, every time, the most prominent guards and spells and wards were subtly changed, with Erasmus using the Unspeakables’ help. Feldspar might be their spy, even a useful one, but he was not allowed to compromise their security.

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Harry nodded to the others who had come with him—Snape, Regulus, and Narcissa. “I’m putting you under a Disillusionment Charm,” he told them. “She’s going to be nervous enough with me there.”

“I am coming with you,” said Snape.

Harry scowled at him. “You’ll intimidate her.”

“You should have one wizard in the house with you,” said Snape, curling his lip. “In case the Muggles go mad.”

Harry sighed. It wasn’t worth arguing about. He did cast the Disillusionment Charm over Regulus and Narcissa, however, and then glamours on himself and Snape, so that their robes looked more like Muggle clothes. Snape surveyed the dark shirt and trousers this appeared to give him with deep disapproval.

Then they turned, and Harry took a little breath, and walked down the street that he had last seen on a night he’d been sure Voldemort was trying to kill the people he was now going to see—Privet Drive, in the town of Little Whinging, Surrey.

It still looked much the same as it always had: neat Muggle houses with neat gardens, with exactly the same fences separating neighbor from neighbor and only slight variations in the cars that sat in front of most of them. Had it not been for the twitching curtains that accompanied his and Snape’s progress up the street, Harry would have thought the place dead.
He turned in at Number 4, Snape so close behind him Harry could practically feel his guardian’s breath on the back of his neck. He knocked on the front door, and heard the sound of loudly stomping feet. That would be his cousin Dudley, coming to answer the door. Harry wondered how Dudley would react to seeing him.

Not well, it appeared. Dudley tore open the door, stared at him and Snape, let out a long wail, and shut it.

Harry blinked, and knocked again. This time, he heard his aunt’s voice, demanding to know why Dudley hadn’t answered the door. Dudley wailed back, “It’s Harry at the door, Mum!”

There was a long pause at that. Remembering how much reason Petunia had to hate Lily, Harry winced at the thoughts that were probably going through her head. But he remained firm. Petunia was his best chance for establishing a network that would warn the families of magical people that they could be at risk from Voldemort. If she refused that role, then she would at least know of the danger.

At last, heavier footsteps than should be the case for a woman so thin crossed the floor towards them, and then Petunia opened the door and stood looking at them. She looked askance at Snape, but, to Harry’s secret awe, didn’t spend a long time on him. She stared down at Harry instead, and said, “You.”

“Me,” Harry agreed. He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “May we come in, Aunt Petunia?”

He could see his aunt glancing up and down the street, as if judging what would happen should she be seen letting freaks into her house against what would happen should she be seen conversing with freaks on the front step. In the end, she jerked her head and said shortly, “Come in.”

Snape snorted under his breath, and snorted again when they reached the entrance hall, crowded with pictures of Petunia, Dudley, and Petunia’s dead husband, Vernon. Harry’s cousin cautiously watched them around the corner. Harry wondered if he had lost weight since the last time he’d seen him, and then had to shake his head. He really couldn’t tell.

“What do you want?” Petunia demanded, crossing her arms.

Harry forced himself to focus on her, and remember more things about her than just the angry, poisonous speech she’d made about Lily last time, and how much she resented losing her sister to the magical world. Yes, it wasn’t fair that Lily had been born a witch and corrupted by Dumbledore, but the fact remained that Petunia and Dudley were Harry’s Muggle family, and Voldemort could attack because of that.

“The Dark Lord is attacking again,” he said quietly. “Voldemort, the wizard whom I thought was trying to kill you last time. The one who gave me this.” He lifted his fringe to display his scar. He heard Dudley make a soft noise of fear, but Petunia’s stare didn’t waver. “He hasn’t started systematic attacks on Muggles, but it’s only a matter of time.”

“Why should we believe this threat is any more real than the last one was?” Petunia asked, frowning at him.

“Because he’s made one attack in the Muggle world,” said Harry quietly. “A Muggle family in London was found torn apart and drained of blood.” He watched Petunia’s face drain of blood in turn, and her hands clenched on the towel she held; she must have been washing dishes when they interrupted. “That was him. Vampires.”

“Vampires?” Dudley squeaked.

Petunia closed her eyes. “And you think he might send vampires after us?”

“Vampires, or something else. He hates Muggle families that produce wizards and witches.” Harry took a step forward. “I wanted to warn you. I don’t know if you’ll think it best to flee the country, or—I can offer you sanctuary in one of the safehouses I’m establishing, under the protection of magic—”

“No,” said Petunia flatly. “I’m not—I refuse to go anywhere near you people. Anywhere nearer than necessary, at least.”

Harry nodded. He had half-expected that. He put up a hand instinctively to restrain Snape, who fell silent with a glare that Harry could practically feel flaying his neck. “Then I was hoping that you could help me pass the word to other families who might be at risk because their sons or daughters attend Hogwarts, or because they have siblings and cousins in the magical world.” He touched his pocket. “I have a list of them who live in Surrey. At the least, it would be an early warning system, in case anything strange started happening. And there are Muggle ways of protecting yourself, I know. Snap a wizard’s wand, and he’s practically
“useless, most of the time.”

Petunia laughed. It was an ugly sound. “Why would I want to become involved in this?”

“I didn’t think you would,” said Harry. “But other people are in danger too, Aunt Petunia. People who, just like you, didn’t ask to have a witch or wizard born into the family. It’s no fault of their own, but Voldemort will treat them like it’s their fault.”

His aunt looked at him closely. “Why would you want to open your world up to us like this? My parents had to sign a document saying they wouldn’t talk about it, and I had a hex cast on me so that I couldn’t even say my sister was a witch to anyone who didn’t already know. Not even as an insult.”

“You can talk to people who know,” said Harry. “And, well, the magical government doesn’t want me to open up our world like this. But I think the most likely targets do deserve to know.”

“That family who died,” said Petunia. “Did they have wizards or witches attached to them?”

Harry shook his head. “Not that I know of. They were simply chosen as targets to make me run away from the bigger battle I was fighting. It was werewolves who defeated the vampires.”

“Werewolves?” Dudley interjected.

“Hush, Dudley, Mummy will tell you later,” said Petunia absently. She was studying Harry with eyes so narrow they almost vanished, by now. “From what I remember, the magical government doesn’t love werewolves, either.”

“No so much,” Harry said dryly. Snape snorted again.

Petunia flicked a glance at him, but otherwise did a simply marvelous job of ignoring him. “Setting yourself up as savior of the downtrodden, are you?”

“I’ve already been set up that way, thanks to Lily and Voldemort and a prophecy,” said Harry. “And yes, I will do what I can. But I know almost nothing about the Muggle world, and you’re one of the few people in it with a reason to listen to me. If you don’t want to do this, I understand completely. But I wanted to bring the proposal to you, and see if you would agree. Warn you, and give you a means of contacting me, so that if Death Eaters did attack you, then you could call for magical help.”

Petunia’s eyes widened again. “So you would actually—help?”

“Of course,” said Harry, wondering what she took him for. Lily’s son, probably, or a wizard. Neither of which she has reasons to expect good out of. “But I didn’t know if it would be possible, especially if you agreed to go into hiding. You still haven’t said that you’ll do it, after all.” He pulled an amulet from his pocket. It was modeled on the one Rita Skeeter had given him, which he could squeeze if he had a story for her and wanted to summon her. “This is what you would squeeze if there was trouble. I can deliver a few more to you for other families.”

Petunia shut her eyes and bowed her head. Harry waited. Snape started to say something. Harry pinched him.

Then Petunia looked up. “The magical world is always going to be trouble for us,” she said harshly. “But at least we stand some chance of helping decent people who didn’t ask to have magical children.” She held out her hand.

Harry passed her the amulet and the list of names of Muggleborns’ families in Surrey, never forsaking eye contact. He couldn’t help feeling that, prejudices and all, Petunia was a better person than his mother in many ways.

Petunia nodded at him once she read the list of names, as if they were concluding a business transaction. “And all these people already know about the wizarding world, of course? No one’s had their memory taken?”

“No one,” Harry confirmed. He knew that had happened a few times in the past—in cases where Muggle parents refused to let a magical child go to Hogwarts who wanted to attend, they were sometimes Obliviated and the child taken anyway, perhaps given to a childless wizarding family—but there had been no record of it happening during Dumbledore’s term as Headmaster. Perhaps his focus on me prevented him from stooping to certain levels.

“Good.” Petunia nodded at him tightly. “At least, if you insist on having a connection to us, you can make up for what Lily did to me.”
Harry nodded back, not taking offense. He was never going to be lovingly close to his aunt and cousin, and it was unfair that Lily had grown so apart from her sister. At least he might help save their lives. “Goodbye, Aunt Petunia. And thank you.”

They left. Snape began to speak as soon as they were down the walk. “That odious woman—“

“You’re only saying that because she wasn’t afraid of you,” Harry pointed out, feeling light and almost happy as he tilted his head back and closed his eyes. “She—“

“Harry!”

Regulus’s voice came from under the Disillusionment Charm to his right. Harry spun, one hand flying up, expecting to see Voldemort himself floating and cackling at the end of the path up to the front door.

Instead, he saw Evan Rosier standing there, smiling, hands clasped around an object in front of him. If it hadn’t been full sunlight, Harry might have mistaken it for something else. That wasn’t possible, though, not when the sun gleamed on the gold and Rosier’s hands were ostentatiously arranged to display the cup’s handles, shaped like badgers.

Hufflepuff’s cup. The cup Voldemort was holding. That’s a Horcrux.

Harry sprang forward, but Rosier simply laughed at him, softly, and then vanished with a sharp pop of Apparition. Harry stopped running, twisting to the side to avoid Snape, and swore under his breath.

I don’t think Voldemort would have allowed a Horcrux to get away from him like that. Rosier stole it, then. How, I don’t know, but I think I know why. He did it to mess with both me and Voldemort.

Rosier’s back in the game. And he’s got a powerful playing piece.

And Merlin knows how I’m going to get it away from him.

~*~*~*~*~

Intermission: Poison

“The formula did not survive the transition.”

Indigena winced. If she heard the words one more time, she thought she would go mad. But since she was the one her Lord had told off to tend Adalrico, she would have to hear them at least several times more.

Cautiously, she opened the door of the small holding cell—her Lord had constructed stone portals between the rooms once he had enough Death Eaters near him to work magic—and stepped inside. Adalrico lay slumped against the far wall, on what had started out as a pallet but was now more like a shredded mess of straw and feathers. Indigena sighed, then put down the basin of water she carried and shook out the cloth draped over her arm.

“Adalrico,” she said.

The man shivered and tried to curl in on himself. Indigena took a deep breath and ignored the shimmer of blood on his shoulders, because if she did not then she would begin to think about the fact that one reason her Lord had tortured him so badly was his anger at her over the failure of the hive queen’s attack.

“I’m going to clean your wounds,” said Indigena. “Our Lord has forbidden healing spells, but he doesn’t want you to sicken from the infection.” She patted her knee as she would for a dog and clucked her tongue, wondering if non-verbal signals would work better for him than words. The only person she had ever truly spent time around in a state of weakness was her Lord, and his illness had been different—drifting in his own mind as he tried to establish connections with his followers’ Marks again, not injuries. Indigena felt more than half helpless, and she hated feeling that way.

Adalrico peeked up at her. Indigena winced. Something essential was missing from his eyes, some sanity that her Lord had broken or buried. “The formula did not survive the transition,” he whispered to her.

“I know,” Indigena whispered back. “Come here.”

Adalrico stood, slowly, and helped himself towards her with a hand on the wall. Indigena actually thought that was a hopeful sign.
If he wasn’t crawling like an animal, then he wasn’t entirely broken.

She carefully dipped the cloth in the water and ran it over the marks on his shoulders—marks left not by whips or blades or flames or pain curses, but by teeth. Indigena had not seen what her Lord had done to him. No one had. But they’d all heard it, the sounds of teeth opening and closing and crushing flesh, and the screaming.

“The formula did not survive the transition,” Adalrico whispered again, and then he fell asleep under her hands.

Indigena had to roll him over several times, so that she could reach all the bites, but in time she thought she’d cleaned them well, washing out the dirt and the straw he’d lain on. As she worked over him, she tried to hold back the uncomfortable sensation that most of this was her fault.

It was one thing when she could disassociate herself from the pain around her by knowing she caused none of it, except for Feldspar’s entirely justified squirming on a mental hook he’d baited himself. It was another thing to be sure that part of the reason Adalrico’s wounds were so bad was because of her, and not only her failure. When she’d come back from the attack, she’d advised her Lord to use the Meleager’s Fire potion on Peridot at once. He had.

And found it could not be done.

The variation of the potion that Adalrico had brewed and smeared on the letter so that Peridot would absorb it through her skin hadn’t survived the flight by owl or the smearing. When her Lord had examined his memories of Snape’s creation of the potion more thoroughly, he’d discovered that it needed to be ingested, not absorbed. It would have worked only if Peridot had licked her fingers thoroughly after reading Indigena’s letter.

So that hold over her sister was gone, and Voldemort’s wrath had been terrible to behold. Or hear.

Indigena wished more strongly than ever, now, that her nephew had not betrayed the family honor, and she could have refused her Lord’s service. But regretting what had gone before never grew a rose. She gently arranged Adalrico in a sitting position, and piled some of the dirt from the walls around his torso to hold him up, so that hopefully he wouldn’t sag over again and get earth in the wounds.

“Cousin.”

Indigena stiffened and turned, nodding reluctantly to the man—who waited in the doorway. “Sylvan.”

The Yaxley twin who occupied their plane of existence right now nodded and smiled, as if happy that she had his name right, at least. He had dark brown hair, the color of mahogany, and brilliant green eyes. Tremors and ripples of light danced about him, signaling that Oaken would be arriving in an hour or a bit more to take his place. “Our Lord wants to see you now.”

Sighing, Indigena gathered up the cloth and the basin and followed Sylvan out the door. He talked quietly as they made their way down the tunnel, about the Ministry’s latest foolishness of trying to take properties away from Dark pureblood families to “keep an eye” on what they were doing with them. Indigena wished irritably that Sylvan were more hateful. Instead, he seemed intent on easing her pain over Adalrico. Oaken was a bit quieter, but not that different from his twin.

Sylvan left her outside Voldemort’s throne room, with a little pat on her shoulder. Indigena straightened her spine and strode into the room.

She found the Dark Lord sitting with his hands clasped around a wide, clear, oddly-shaped vial. Indigena eyed it cautiously. The bottom was almost flat, but the sides were sharply curved, and in the vial sloshed a deep purple liquid that resembled the poison Indigena knew Snape had brewed and used in the attack on the Headmistress.

“My own,” said her Lord, and from the sound of his voice he was in a much better mood. “Adalrico did one useful thing before I punished him. He created a variation of Severus’s poison that can be combined with the incantation for the flesh-devouring rain I have shown you. When this rain falls from the sky, it will carry not only foulness but death with it, to both earth and humans.”

Indigena knew without asking that she would be the one responsible for creating the storm. Her Lord could not yet risk himself in open battle, and the others were not trusted enough for it.

She accepted the vial, watching as the potion inside shimmered and slithered like liquid amethyst. “How wide a storm should I create, my Lord? And where?”
Voldemort began to explain. Indigena listened, and with each word she felt as if she were standing at the edge of a vast well, watching any chance of still behaving honorably sinking out of sight in a lowered bucket.

But true honor is fulfilling one’s promises. I know that. I must stay true to what I said I would do.

_Vita desinit, decus permanit._

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Sixteen: Storm-Raiser

Harry dropped to one knee as the spell crackled past overhead, and looked briefly over his shoulder to see that it had made a smoking dent in the wood. He was impressed. Draco hadn’t been able to manage that strong a _Cremo_ last year, and not only because of the wards that littered the Room of Requirement when it was transformed like this and prevented any consequences of a spell from being too damaging.

“Not that powerful, are you, Harry, if you can’t even block a spell that simple?” Draco crowed, and started to try again.

Harry raised an eyebrow and deflected his next hex with a Shield Charm. “I usually use wandless magic, Draco, and it’s rarely confined to specific spells anymore,” he said.

“Then you should try some.” Draco was dancing, panting and sweating, his face flushed and glowing, his hair sticking to his cheeks. Harry loved watching him like this. Draco often insisted that Harry relax and let go of his emotions, but the times he followed his own advice were rare. And since he shone with joy now instead of anger, he looked even better. “Come on, Harry, use some spells!”

Harry nodded a bit. “As you wish. _Levicorpus._”

Draco flipped over and hung upside down in midair. Harry grinned as he dropped his wand from the shock, then stood and sauntered towards him.

“Now, now, Draco,” he said. “You shouldn’t allow yourself to be so distracted. What would happen if you faced a Death Eater and he used this spell?” He shook his head and picked up Draco’s wand, which was warm in his hand from both the unfamiliar core and the sweat that had coated Draco’s hand. “He could take your wand and bring you to the Dark Lord like this.”

Draco, his robes falling around his face, glared. “I thought we were practicing so that I could get better,” he muttered.

“And you are,” said Harry. “Better, I mean. And we were practicing for that reason. But this is a spell someone _could_ use against you. Snape invented it, but most people in Hogwarts knew it by his fifth year, he said. A simple but effective trick if you aren’t expecting it.” He ended the spell, but used the air to gently cradle Draco and set him on his feet. “Now you’re expecting it, and the next time you can avoid it.” He tossed the wand back to Draco.

“Does that mean that you think I’m good enough to be in battle beside you the next time you go?” Draco pushed his hair out of the way, and straightened his robes, this time trying to hide a flush of embarrassment.

“It depends on the battle,” said Harry quietly, as he always did whenever Draco posed questions like this.

After the battle with the vampire queen, Kanerva had remarked in Draco’s presence—not that Harry thought that made a great deal of difference to her, as she would have said what she believed regardless of who was there—that she thought he should not accompany Harry to battle, as he was only a distraction and could not help. Draco had erupted, first in ranting that simply made Kanerva stare at him and turn into wind, then into vows that he would show Harry’s allies he was every bit Harry’s equal. Harry had tried to calm him down, to explain that, in this case, spells and his possession gift hadn’t helped, and that _he_, too, had been taken off-guard by the queen’s surge of lust, but Draco wouldn’t hear of it. He went away to study obsessively instead, and to attend some of the dueling sessions that went on throughout the castle, even if he did have to learn from a Weasley. Syrinx, for a time, had nearly been run off her feet trying to keep up with him.

And it showed, Harry had to admit. Draco was quicker with his wand now, because he was facing adults who were determined to defend their homes, who knew spells already that they could combine in unusual ways with the new ones, and who didn’t hold back for fear of hurting someone they knew. He would be a great asset when they faced wizards who held wands in battle.

Unfortunately, Harry had no idea what the next battle would be like, and thus he couldn’t say for certain whether Draco’s new
skills would come in handy.

“But you wouldn’t hold me back?” Draco pressed now.

Harry shook his head. “For the same reason I didn’t hold you back in the vampire battle, Draco. It would be a violation of your free will.”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Merlin, Harry, don’t knock me down with your enthusiasm to have me beside you.”

Harry turned abruptly. Draco jumped back and stood watching him warily.

As well he might. Harry had been struck with a new idea. If Draco would not believe him so far, because Harry had been too gentle, then he might believe a blunt statement.

“I do want you there,” Harry said, intensely enough that Draco actually flushed again. “I will always want you there. But the way Voldemort fights from now on might not always permit it, Draco. He fought with Death Eaters in the Woodhouse and the Midsummer battles. But he fought mentally when he took control of Snape’s Dark Mark, and so far he’s used proxies that are too powerful for most magical creatures to fight, never mind wizards who just turned seventeen. It took Jing-Xi and Kanerva and me to defeat the hive queen. Your not being able to help equally in that kind of battle has nothing to do with training or my wanting you there, and everything to do with magical strength. There will be some things that you just can’t do, because you’re not Lord-level. Connor and Snape can’t do them, either. That doesn’t mean I value any of you any less. It just means that I don’t need everyone in my life to be a Lord.”

Draco narrowed his eyes and swallowed, flushing further. It was a moment before he spoke. Harry watched him, perfectly willing to wait. If what he said got through to Draco and made him both stop blaming himself and blaming Harry, then waiting was all to the good.

“I made a vow once,” Draco whispered. “That I wasn’t going to be the suffering little wife, that I would come with you and not be left behind to wait for you like a good little boy.”

“And you think that’s what happens to Connor?” Harry asked steadily. “Or Regulus? Or, Merlin forbid you ever say this to his face, Snape?”

Draco shook his head impatiently and took a step forward. “I know it doesn’t. But their situation is different, Harry. They can have roles in relation to you that aren’t exactly equal. Connor seems to have accepted his rather well,” he added, with a touch of malice. “But I’m your lover. I want sunlight love. I want to be as equal to you as I can, in as many aspects of our life as I can. Magical strength isn’t one of those planes, but presence in battle is.”

“Draco,” Harry whispered, and leaned forward to kiss him. When he drew back, Draco looked a bit dazed, which was flattering. “I promise you, I love you no less, and I don’t think you’re weak, and there’s no saying that I need to leave you behind next time. Voldemort might not ever attack with a hive queen again, though I think he will if he can find one willing to risk herself for a nesting site now. But if your presence there distracts me and makes me less than equal to my enemies, surely that’s a reason to remain behind?”

“I fear what it would mean,” Draco murmured, controlling himself rather than shouting. Harry was reluctantly impressed, despite its meaning he could lose the argument. “What if it started a trend of your leaving me behind just because you were afraid, not because I would limit you? I’m afraid it would. You’ve always been a bit too protective of me, Harry, to the point of disdaining protection for yourself.”

“And I am trying to get over that.” Harry said. “I am. But you also know that someone seizes you and I freeze, Draco. That has to be taken into consideration. Ignoring it doesn’t make us equals. It makes us both stubborn children.”

Draco bit his lip and opened his mouth to argue back. Harry waited, curious to hear what he would say.

He never did hear it, or, at least, not that exact variation of the argument.

Alarms in his head, linked to the wards on Hogwarts, went mad. Harry staggered back, lifting his hands to his ears even though the sounds weren’t physical and wouldn’t be blocked out that way. He felt Draco catch his arm, and saw his lips move, but couldn’t make out anything save the worried expression on his face.

Harry shook his head and tore free, focusing on the shrill clanging so that he would know where the wards had been violated. The
grounds, it seemed. Someone was approaching the castle from the front, from the direction of the Hogsmeade road.

He frowned as he began to run. *Stupid place for an attack. They should at least have come through the Forbidden Forest, and then they’d have some cover.*

Of course, Voldemort did not always do intelligent things. And if he had brought another hive queen, the cover or lack of it would not matter.

He tapped his wrist as he ran for the doors, speaking to McGonagall. The ward alarms were finally beginning to die, now that they’d made enough noise to wake the dead. “You’ve felt the breach, Madam?”

“Not a breach.” McGonagall’s voice was strained enough to deepen Harry’s frown. “Harry, they have—a hostage on the lawn. Two hostages, as a matter of fact. One of them is Xavier Deschamps, the French Auror leader.” She drew a deep breath. “The other is Hawthorn Parkinson.”

It didn’t take Harry long to make the connection.

Tonight was the full moon.

And what would torment Hawthorn more than killing someone else as a werewolf without Wolfsbane? Which Voldemort would never have bothered to give her, of course.

“Shit,” Harry breathed, and changed his direction. The Room of Requirement was closer to the Tower battlements than the entrance doors. He would step out of the school and see what he could from the top.

Draco appeared beside him, and then Owen, and then Michael. Harry fought not to hiss that he should have been with his mother and little sister. This was more important.

“What is it, Harry?” Draco asked.

“Hawthorn Parkinson is out there without Wolfsbane,” said Harry shortly, and then the steps to the Astronomy Tower were in front of him. He began to leap up them, touching his wrist to call on Laura Gloryflower. The majority of their winged horses were patrolling Cobley-by-the-Sea, the one safehouse that had been deemed secure enough to inhabit as yet. “Laura? Can you hear me?”

“My Lord?” Her voice was startled, hence the slip-up in the title. Harry gritted his teeth and also ignored that. *More important things in heaven and earth…*

“How soon can your horses get here?” he asked. “I’d like to have as many as possible circle in behind Hogwarts and come in for an aerial attack.” It was the safest way he knew to take on a wild werewolf. The thestrals were closer, but Harry had no way to reach them or command them to rise from the Forest, not with Hawthorn, Xavier, and whichever Death Eaters had captured them between the castle and the Forest.

“A detachment of them is coming,” said Laura. “My nephew Zephyr leads them. I sent them when it seemed as though there was little danger around the safehouse tonight. They may be there in an hour.”

*Not enough time,* Harry thought, as he came out on the top of the Tower and looked to the east. The sky was quivering with sunset, quivering with moonrise. He nodded, even though Laura couldn’t see him. “Thank you.”

“Is it in time?” Laura asked anxiously.

“It won’t be.”

“I could have them land, my lord, and Apparate the horses—“

“Could you?” Harry let out a harsh breath. “Can they reappear outside Hogsmeade, so that they’ll have a clear landing area to rise from?”

“I’ll tell Zephyr, *vates.*” Laura sounded a bit more collected now.

“Thank you,” Harry murmured, and cut the communication spell. The Gloryflower horses were his best chance, really. Jing-Xi
was at home in China, attending to trouble there, and Kanerva had turned into the wind that morning and was blowing who-knew-where. There was no way of communicating with the hippogriffs or the thestrals. Their brooms were on the Quidditch Pitch, out beyond the front grounds, and the Death Eaters could easily destroy them as they flew. And Harry would rather that if anyone went in on foot against a wild werewolf whom he could not stand by and see hurt, it were him.

Then, at last, he looked.

Two masked and hooded Death Eaters he didn’t recognize from their body shapes held Xavier. Harry thought he would have recognized him even without McGonagall’s more specific information from the wards. The way he stood, his head half-lifted as though he appreciated his enemies’ efforts at intimidation but would not allow them to affect him, was unmistakable.

In front of Xavier, closer to the castle, stood a man whose shape blurred and wavered with the form of powerful magic. Harry thought it was a glamour at first, but then he recognized some of the spells that maintained the blurring and wavering. He hissed in disgust.

Sacrificial magic. Blood magic.

That man held a silver chain, and at the end of it crouched Hawthorn, naked, the chain wrapped around her neck. Harry felt a clear rage he hadn’t known he carried spring up in him at the sight of her, especially when the Death Eater called up to him, cheerful and unconcerned.

“Greetings, vates! My name, currently, at least, is Sylvan Yaxley. I’m sure you can see the situation here. We’ll turn a wild werewolf loose on your ally if you don’t come down and accompany us quietly to our Lord.”

“I’ve refused before, and I will again,” Harry answered, casting Sonorus so that his voice rang out from the Tower top. Sylvan, who’d been facing the front doors, started and stepped back to look at him. Harry eyed the eastern sky again, and nodded. Allies who can fly are best. People Apparating and coming in on foot wouldn’t get here before the moon rose, anyway. “These are the tactics of a bully. I will not surrender to them, and Voldemort knows that.”

“Truthfully, my Lord does,” said Sylvan, with a nod. “He did think you would enjoy the show, though.”

Hawthorn howled.

Harry felt his heartbeat pick up at the sound. It wasn’t like the controlled—well, relatively—sounds that werewolves under the influence of Wolfsbane made. This was the wild noise he hadn’t heard in almost two years, since Fenrir Greyback died. Black and mourning and yearning for blood, it went ringing up the sky, and told everything less powerful to run and hide its head.

And it was coming from Hawthorn’s throat. Harry barely dared think what she would make of that in a human mindset, or what Pansy would have.

Sylvan unhooked the silver chain from Hawthorn’s neck, and leaped back. At the same moment, the Death Eaters holding Xavier whirled out of the way and drew silver blades—the better to be prepared if the werewolf attacked them, Harry was sure.

Hawthorn’s spine rippled. Harry could see the pale fawn fur flooding across her, obscuring her features and crooking her legs. She howled again and again, madder and madder, as her head shoved itself into shape and a tail sprang from her spine. Harry saw slashes of dirt appear in the grass as the great paws flailed and tore.

He didn’t realize he’d taken a step forward, to the edge of the battlements, until Draco’s hand closed on his right shoulder and Owen’s on his left.

Xavier simply drew his wand, as if he knew running would do no good, as if he had always wanted to test his magic against a werewolf.

Hawthorn started forward.

And moonlight flashed off the silver sides of the Gloryflower horses as a first detachment came winging in over the trees and drove straight for Hawthorn and Xavier, their leader calling out a spell and swinging what looked like a whip of light.

Hawthorn sprang aside from the whip, impossibly fast, impossibly graceful, and then turned and whirled upward. The horse—bearing Zephyr Gloryflower, Harry assumed—barely got out of the way in time. It did turn and huff out a blast of cold air that might have frozen Hawthorn’s fur if it touched her, but it did not touch her. She landed on the other side with a mouthful of dirt and rose again, spitting and snarling, the worse-tempered for not catching anything.
Harry saw two horses come down in a beautiful formation, their readers leaning wide from their backs, and snatch up Xavier from the ground. The French wizard moved as if he’d been trained for this, curling up his legs so that he didn’t swing or dangle beneath the riders, and then slid onto the back of one horse when the second rider handed him off. In moments, they were far too high for a werewolf to leap, and thus out of danger.

Hawthorn simply snarled at the loss of easy prey, eyed the two Death Eaters with silver blades, and charged Sylvan Yaxley.

Even before she reached him, Harry knew she could not hurt him. That sacrificial blood magic, Lazuli had told him, had been specifically guaranteed to insure invulnerability. Her paw screamed through the air and stopped an inch away from him, and when Hawthorn resorted to teeth, her jaws clanged off his robes as if they were made of metal. That made the werewolf scream, a sound that caused Harry to shiver, and then she swung around and made for the Forbidden Forest.

Harry closed his eyes and shook his head. The thought of the carnage a wild werewolf could cause there…

And he was currently the only one in the castle with the magic to face her, at least without a high chance of getting infected or killed—or killing Hawthorn, which would violate his family alliance oath.

He made the decision to Apparate, though it tugged and tore at some of the castle’s anti-Apparition wards. He would make that up to McGonagall later. Right now, wards were less important than lives.

He heard Owen’s and Draco’s cries cut off as he leaped, and then he was standing on the moonlit grass, the trees close at his back, watching Hawthorn as she raced toward him.

She was not as large as Fenrir Greyback had been, but that was not saying much, especially as Harry had never seen her when she wasn’t under the influence of Wolfsbane. Her amber eyes seemed twice as large as they ever had, pools that reflected the moon back. Constant sounds came from her, like something thrashing in nets, snarls and yelps and growls and snaps and screams. She saw him and dropped, belly practically to the ground, before she leaped.

Harry whirled out of the way, even as he saw the werewolf land and turn to stare at her left foreleg with a whimper.

Harry swallowed. A shallow, bloody wound had opened on that foreleg, and he knew where it came from. Hawthorn had sworn a family alliance oath never to attack him or Connor. Of course, the werewolf instincts had made her do it anyway, but it seemed that the oath held even when she changed forms.

The same oath made it impossible for Harry to hurt her. But he could keep her away from the magical creatures in the Forest, and he could do his damnedest to remove the hold Voldemort had on her mind. It had been partly for her importance to him that Voldemort had targeted her, after all, and partly for that same importance that other horrible things had happened to her, like the imprisonment in Tullianum.

The werewolf had either felt the alliance oath’s magic or was wary of an enemy who had hurt her from a distance in no manner she could discern. She still snarled, but the amber eyes fastened on him had a shred of what Harry supposed could be called curiosity.

“Hawthorn,” Harry said quietly, hoping against hope that this might get through to her, or at least leave the shadow of an echo in her mind when she awoke and went back to being human. “Hawthorn Parkinson.”

She whined, as if she disliked the name, and then licked at the wound on her foreleg, never moving her eyes from him. Harry watched taut, controlled power vibrate and shimmer through her muscles. The wound was bigger now, indicating she hadn’t given up on the notion of attacking him. Harry tried to control his breathing. She might bleed to death before his eyes as long as he was here, but let him vanish and she would ravage the Forest.

And letting his other allies destroy her would almost certainly make him bleed to death, for such a betrayal of the Parkinson family.

“Hawthorn,” Harry said softly. “Do you remember me? Can you feel me?” He hesitated, then reached out and focused on the web that clouded her mind and roused the beast inside the pureblood witch on each night of the full moon. It was seething now, a dark wall of water and fire that wrapped around the vulnerable human emotions and entirely drowned them. Harry winced. Its color was black-red, like old blood and new blood mixed, or magma simmering beneath a crust of dried lava. And it felt him, and it nearly lashed to drive her forward.

Harry struck at the central knot of the web, trying something he’d never done before: to fully unbind someone else from being a
werewolf.

The web screamed. For a moment, Hawthorn tossed as contradictory emotions lashed through her. Harry could feel the web’s desire to kill, its fear of him, Hawthorn’s human shame and disgust at what she had become, and the knowledge, instinctive to both wolf and witch, that going against him now would make its body bleed. A storm tore through her, and Harry could not help.

Pain seared his left arm. Harry glanced down, and knew his alliance scar was opening. He had caused too much pain to Hawthorn, and the oath was treating it as a betrayal.

He swallowed, and began to sing. He didn’t know if the phoenix voice stood a chance of soothing the werewolf, but at the least it might give the werewolf something to focus on and rescue Hawthorn from mental confusion.

It did. The web coalesced in its hatred of the phoenix, similar to but deeper than its hatred of Harry vates, and the amber eyes glittered dangerously. Still it did not move forward, though; Harry thought the web now understood, in a dim way, the limitations of Hawthorn’s alliance oath. Instead, the wolf turned and charged into the Forest.

Harry’s scar had stopped bleeding. He filled his limbs with magic that would let him keep up with Hawthorn, and ran after her.

As he went, he whistled out warnings, projecting them frantically through the warbles of the phoenix song, doing his best to send the Many snakes to their burrows, the centaurs into the protection of their hollow, the thestrals into the air. He did not want anyone to come to harm because of Hawthorn, even as he could not hurt her.

The werewolf howled again, and leaped over a leaning trunk between two stumps, and was lost to sight for a moment. Harry heard jaws clamp down, and a short scream, and a triumphant cry that signaled blood shed. He circled the stumps heavily, panting, wondering what she had killed.

It was a hare, luckily, and not a magical creature, but Harry could only tell that from the pale fur scattered about. Already Hawthorn had so mangled the poor thing’s body that its main color was black and red. She snarled at him now, deep-chested, and crouched over the hare as if thinking he would take her meal away. She ate it with two bites of the huge jaws, and ran on into the Forest.

Harry ducked after her, trying to run through his choices in his head. He couldn’t hurt Hawthorn or allow anyone else to hurt her. He might be able to keep her occupied for the rest of the night and keep her away from magical creature settlements, but he doubted it. And the Gloryflower horses he had been counting on not only to rescue Xavier but to keep Hawthorn occupied couldn’t attack from above, given all the tree branches in the way.

*It will have to be a cage.*

Harry took a deep breath and began to pull magic from himself, winding it into his hands, until they glowed like a sun and the light struck shadows from the trees and revealed Hawthorn’s leaping hindquarters and tail. He formed the image of a cage in his mind that would neither hurt Hawthorn nor allow her to be hurt, and then lifted his hands and breathed on them.

The light struck forward, shaped like lightning bolts but traveling even faster, and a moment later Harry heard a howl that abruptly cut off. He lurched around a log, tripped over a root, and had to catch himself, panting. So much magic had gone into the creation of the cage that he was left without the ability to pass mistily through obstacles.

Then he rounded the next tree and saw it.

The cage had taken form between the side of a hill and three trees, oaks sturdy enough to bear a great deal of damage. It shone like dawn, and seemed to be made of clouds that had decided to linger on earth. Now and then a flash of movement showed from inside it, Hawthorn hurling herself against the sides or lashing a paw through, but the material simply regrew itself wherever she managed to punch a hole, rather like shadows. The top was enclosed with a white cover, since Harry knew how high werewolves could jump.

It would hold her. And no one less than Voldemort himself, or Kanerva or Jing-Xi, was getting through it before dawn.

Harry paused a moment, panting hard, to recover, and phoenix song warbled from his wrist. “What is it?” Harry asked, tapping his left hand to release the spell. Whatever it was, it could not be harder than this; three Death Eaters, even one powerful in sacrificial magic, were hardly a challenge for Hogwarts’s wards.

“The situation at Hogwarts was only a distraction, I fear, my lord,” said Laura tightly. “There is a rain falling in Cornwall that is
eating everything alive—earth, stone, trees. Every attempt we’ve made to stop it is futile.”

Harry didn’t waste time berating himself or asking for more details, because there was no time. He pictured Cobley-by-the-Sea and Apparated.

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He reappeared in the middle of a room set aside for Apparition, but already crowded with several of the witches and wizards who had chosen to enter the Black house as a sanctuary. They backed up when they saw him and stared at him, eyes wide.

“What are you doing here?” someone asked at last, when a breathless moment had passed during which they seemed to expect him to raise the roof or strike at them all with fire.

“Trying to stop the rain,” said Harry. He could hear it now, the sharp *pock-pock-pock* of drops hitting the outside of the house. If it could eat through stone, he could see why the people inside the safehouse were panicking. It would reach them, if not soon. Apparating elsewhere was not the answer, however. They would only be at risk from Voldemort in the outside world again. Harry was sure that he had chosen Cornwall as the site of his attack because he had heard rumors of the safehouse and wanted to make other people feel they were never safe anywhere. “Stay here. Unless it’s already begun to flood the house.” He looked towards a woman near him who was wide-eyed, but seemed to be the calmest of those present.

She swallowed. “No, *vates*,” she said. “I haven’t heard anyone say that they’ve seen that.”

Harry nodded, and strode to the window carved in the wall and covered with a heavy shimmer of wards, peering outside into the darkness.

He saw the rain and its consequences almost at once. The drops were heavier than they should be, and colored a vivid purple that reminded Harry of the poison Snape had used on McGonagall; it wouldn’t surprise him if Voldemort had managed to brew the potion and base the rain on that, actually. The drops impacted on the stone with hissing sounds, and ate holes in it like acid, holes which grew a little deeper each time. Where a rare plant grew on the rocks, such as moss or lichen, the rain had reduced it to little more than a black, smoking mess. There were larger shapes that Harry thought were gulls and other animals, at once burned and poisoned by the rain, roasted nearly black.

“How long since this started?” he asked.

The witch who had spoken before swallowed with a click of her throat and said, “For ten minutes now, *vates*.”

*Shit. All this damage in ten minutes. Shit.*

Harry didn’t even want to think about the wizards—and surely the Muggles—who weren’t under shelter. If Voldemort wanted to force the exposure of the magical world to the Muggles, he could hardly have chosen a better way. This was one of those things that the Muggles would have a hard time either dismissing or inventing a natural explanation for, and should not be left to face alone.

“I am going to turn the storm,” he said quietly. “I need you to stay here, in the meantime. There’s no telling how far the storm extends, whether it’s only over Cornwall or it’s spreading. Remain here. Do you understand?”

“I’ll keep them, *vates.*” The witch who had spoken before was sounding steadier by the second. Harry took another glance at her. She looked Indian, with dark skin and hair, and brown eyes that reminded him of Thomas Rangnara. He gave her a judicious nod.

“What’s your name?”

“Alice Flowflower.” She leaned anxiously forward. “Do you think you’ll be able to defeat the storm, *vates*?”

Harry understood why she’d asked the question. Whether he could or not, it would help if he could appear confident in front of a crowd about to panic. He nodded. “I will.”

There came sighs and mutters of relief from many people. Harry glanced out the window again, then closed his eyes. He could easily picture the sea-caves that were located in the cliff outside Cobley-by-the-Sea; they were the last refuges and escape holes in times of trouble for the people in the safehouse, even though sometimes they were drowned by the ocean. Since it didn’t seem that the rain had succeeded in forcing its way through stone yet, they ought to be safe. He Apparated again.
He staggered as he ended up at the lip of a cliff above the sea, which ran sleekly by under the influence of the full moon. Harry saw purple drops cascade into it, spreading brief, dark, rainbow patterns like oil slicks. He grimaced. He didn’t want to imagine what the rain was doing to the ocean life, either.

With the smell and sound of the spray thick in his nostrils and ears, he touched his wrist and spoke, “Laura?”

“Harry,” Laura’s voice was absolutely exhausted. “We’re above the clouds. We’ve been trying to dive through them, but we can’t. If it starts eating through the stone, I don’t know how we’re going to rescue the refugees inside the safehouse.” Her voice altered, towards a tone of horror. “And we’ve been hearing the screaming coming up through it, too. Those poor Muggles…”

“Let me worry about that.” Harry concentrated on keeping his tone smooth as the surface of the sea. “I need to know something. Does the storm extend across Cornwall? Is it growing or shrinking?”

“All across Cornwall, and spreading along the coast,” said Laura. “I know the center of it is somewhere near Cobley-by-the-Sea, but, as I said, there’s no way that we can descend and look for it without hurting ourselves.”

“And I told you not to worry about that.” Harry layered his voice with all the calm he could. He already knew that he couldn’t handle the storm by himself, but he knew someone who could, if she would come at his call. “I will deal with it. Fly above the storm, and if it starts rising, go back to Hogwarts.”

He ended the communication spell and stepped forward so that he stood on the very edge of the cave lip, before he lifted his voice. “Kanerva! Kanerva Stormgale! Dark Lady, Lady of the Winds! Can you hear me?”

No answer came. Harry thought for a moment of the people and animals that had died, and those that might still die if he could not stop the spread of the storm, and what would happen if Kanerva was up blowing in the winds around the Orkneys and refused to come back, or couldn’t hear him.

Then he tamped down the thought. He would find a way to handle the storm himself if he must, though it would mean lost time and lives. He would call until he was sure that she would not come.

“Kanerva!” he shouted again.

“Yes?”

Harry started badly, and he might have slipped on the wet rock and fallen into the Atlantic if he hadn’t grabbed at the cave wall. When he looked up, Kanerva stood next to him, her body more than half fuzzed into the wind, leaving only a shallow outline below the waist. Her blue eyes watched him with soft, inquiring curiosity.

“Did you just appear?” Harry asked.

“I have been here all this time,” said Kanerva. “Did you think I would not want to watch such an odd storm rising?” She nodded out the cave. “It is a magical storm. Did you know that?”

Harry swallowed bile. Of course, he had not imagined that once he had Kanerva with him, then he would have to persuade her to help.

But he would have to. And he would not do it by panicking and crying, any more than he would have convinced the refugees in the safehouse to remain still if he did that, or Laura not to send her horses through the rain.

“The storm is unusual,” he admitted. Kanerva nodded happily, her black hair billowing around her. Harry sighed and turned to look out of the cave, and fiercely refused to allow himself to think about the people who had probably died right that moment. “But I fear that it’s not a product of natural magic, Kanerva. It’s a product of winds tamed and forced to someone else’s will. And the purpose isn’t even to give the winds something to do, but to bear the poisonous rain.” He shot a look at Kanerva, who had stopped smiling. He shrugged. “I’m sorry.”

“You are lying,” said Kanerva, a fierce frown on her face. “Anyone who raises a storm must love the wind.”

Harry breathed out slowly, to control the impulse to scream, and reminded himself, She is of the Dark, without the compassion to help on her own, and mad enough that yelling at her is enough to make her go in another direction. Be calm. “I’m afraid not,” he said. “This is a product of Voldemort’s, and the only thing he wants is to hurt me, and the people and land I care for.” He forced a
shrug. “Laura Gloryflower told me that it’s centered somewhere near Copley-by-the-Sea. I don’t know where, as I can hardly
venture out into the rain. But—”

“I am going to see,” Kanerva interrupted him, and then she whirled around and vanished.

Harry used the time she was gone to extend his wards beyond the cave. The purple rain promptly ate through them. Harry bowed
his head and closed his eyes, listening to the steam and hiss as the drops eating through the stone came ever closer.

The air stirred around him. Harry opened his eyes. In front of him stood Kanerva, looking completely furious.

“It is caused by someone,” she hissed. “She’s standing holding her wand out above a flagon, and charming a potion to rise into
the winds and make them bear this kind of rain. It is unfair. Only natural magic should be able to make them do that, or me.” She
bent nearer Harry, frowning. “For the sake of the winds, I must stop her. They might forget their freedom and become too used to
being tame air that shifts in and out of lungs, or the control of spells.”

“I—” Harry began.

“And you will help me, because you may be able to tell me who she is, so that I will know if she does this again,” Kanerva told
him, and seized him, and then blended them both into the wind.

Harry heard his yelp die, and then they were blowing out the entrance of the cave and up into the sky.

Harry had for some reason imagined that Kanerva traveled as a single smooth current of wind, shouldering her way up and
through the others. She didn’t. She flung her consciousness from wind to wind, taking one current that was flowing in the right
direction for as long as it would bear her, and then turning to another when that one sheared off, and then leaping again and again
and again at a point near the cliffs where the air flurried and found itself manipulated by the rocks. The only senses left to Harry
were sight and touch, and he could feel constant searing sensations of both heat and cold along the air that had taken the place of
his skin, as Kanerva passed rapidly over patches of land that retained stored heat from the sun and those that didn’t. And all the
while, Harry could see the land flashing past, cliff and cave and rampart and patch of dead grass, and then they were eddying
around a wide, broad meadow—or the remains of a meadow—and looking down on a glass flagon out of which came a purple
steam that mingled with wind and made the rain, even though it couldn’t hurt him without skin to act upon.

He recognized the witch that stood over the flagon, of course. The winds could see through moonlight or darkness with the same
facility, and their sight was perfect.

“That’s Indigena Yaxley,” he said.

“She does not learn, then,” said Kanerva peremptorily. “She should have listened to her sister’s command, and not tried to
command the winds.” Harry found himself abruptly parted from her; her voice had sounded from above him, but now it came
from the side, as if she had pushed him into another current to hover. “I will teach her better. Watch.”

Harry saw the winds begin to turn, including the breezes that had blended with the rain and carried it out into the storm. Indigena
raised her head with a slight frown, but never stopped moving her wand in a circle above the glass flagon.

Kanerva cackled.

A moment later, a wind blew over the glass vial, and it rolled and then shattered on the stone. Indigena cursed, from the
movement of her mouth—Harry could still only hear sounds that were contained within the wind, his voice and Kanerva’s—and
knelt as if she would scoop the poison up into a new container.

There came a sound like a vast yawn, or someone sucking in breath and then letting it out, which Harry thought was closer to
what Kanerva had done.

Wind roared and ripped free of the circle Indigena had forced it into, striking down and around in dizzying movements that Harry
could observe but hardly keep track of. Crosscurrents seized Indigena and tossed her up and down like a leaf, hurling her in a
direction Harry thought was west. Her robes flapped like the edges of bird’s wings and then vanished.

“We will have a true storm,” said Kanerva. “A storm at sea, for the wind is the lover of the ocean.” Harry heard her whistle.

The winds turned, plunging like a herd of wild horses. For just a moment—perhaps Kanerva’s Transfigured mind had brushed
against his and lent him the image—Harry had a glimpse of the disordered harmony that they created together. Their whole was greater than the sum of their parts, an endlessly changing complexity that his brain had to fight to grasp even a piece of. Add to that how they joined in with the movement of the planet and the winds swarming over the sea and the winds on the other side of the world, and Harry thought that perhaps it was the study of the air itself and not the Dark that had driven Kanerva mad.

Then they turned and streamed out over the ocean, carrying the clouds and the rain with them. Harry called out to Kanerva, whom he thought was going with the storm. “Has the poison faded from the rain?”

“In a moment,” Kanerva’s distracted, disinterested voice replied. “The rain will go, too. We want a storm of wind and sea and fire. Like the one we made when we defeated the hive queen.”

Harry staggered as his human body formed around him again, and he landed on his knees near the shattered flagon. He hastily pulled his hand back from any chance of contact with the purple potion, and then cast a bolt of fire forward. He wanted to burn whatever remained of it, just to lessen the chance of it running into the rocks and emerging again in water.

Then he glanced around. He could see no sign of Indigena.

On the other hand, there were plenty of signs of the devastation that her rain had caused. Fist-sized holes gaped in the stone. Boulders looked slagged and half-melted. Harry knew he was kneeling in what looked like the place where a large fire had burned, but which was in fact the remains of grass.

He closed his eyes. He did not like to see this, but someone had to see it—both to serve as a witness to the dead, and to have an idea of how large the problem was for Muggles and wizards alike.

Wings scraped the air above him. Harry looked up to see a Gloryflower horse touching down near him. Laura was on its back, and she started to hop off, peering anxiously at him.

Harry shook his head and held out his hand. “I need to ride,” he said quietly. “To see what it has done. Take me up?”

“My lord—“

“Please.”

Harry was glad that he had some practice at that calm tone which forced aside tears. Laura would certainly have hesitated to take him if he was half-hysterical and crying. As it was, she gave him a slow glance, nodded, and grasped his arm. Harry slid onto the horse’s back behind her.

Up they went. Harry could feel the wind pulling at the horse’s wings and tail, making the silver body sway, but for the most part all the swirling air had been drawn out over the sea. He saw blue lightning leap and gleam, and the already lifting waves of white water. There would be a spectacular storm, but without the rain that had been the death of so many.

“You said it spread along the coast,” he murmured into Laura’s ear. “Take me there, please.”

Laura’s spine stiffened, but then she sighed and cast one arm up in an imperious gesture. The horse soared higher, and higher, and then they broke through the cloud cover and into a deceptively peaceful gray world. Harry looked down as Laura murmured a spell that rolled the clouds back like a curtain.

The effects of the storm could be seen as black, jagged lightning bolts from this height, carved ravines of destruction next to the sea, running roughly north, but bending to follow the bends of the coast, as Laura had said. Harry saw nothing moving on the cliffs they followed. He tried to convince himself the height had something to do with that, and failed.

They reached a Muggle road, and Harry could see lights gleaming over piled husks of metal, and hear sirens. He cast a Disillusionment Charm on the horse, and asked Laura to descend closer.

“Harry, what good will it do?” Laura whispered. “They are dead.”

“Please.”

She made the horse stoop, until they were only a few hundred feet above the cars, and Harry could have a better view of the accidents. It seemed that many of the drivers had panicked when the rain began to fall, and lost control of their vehicles. Harry couldn’t count the number of twisted doors, the motionless bodies, the blood sprayed here and there across the pavement where
the rain hadn’t managed to wash it away. The living Muggles who walked back and forth from the cars to emergency vehicles barely seemed to know what to make of it, either.

Harry focused on the injured and set about whispering what healing spells he could, *Integro* to close wounds and other incantations that would slow the rate of bleeding. He didn’t dare try more, not when he hadn’t made a complete study of medical magic. Besides, there was probably delicate electrical equipment nearby that the presence of magic was disrupting. They had to leave.

“Higher again,” he told Laura, and up they soared.

They were coming near villages and cities now, and Harry forced himself to look at carved-in and caved-in roofs, the blackened corpses of adults and children and animals who had run, the rank abysses of what had been gardens. In some places cars had driven into houses. In others, dazed survivors stood with heads lowered and feet shuffling, moving aimlessly back and forth. If other Muggles came up to tell them what to do, they blindly went and did it. Everything was stained red with blood, white with unconcerned moonlight, yellow with electric lights that went on blazing as if nothing was wrong.

Harry tried to estimate how long the rain had lasted. *Fifteen minutes? Twenty?*

One thing was clear, though, the further Laura flew and the more ruin Harry saw. He could not keep things secret any longer. This necessitated a visit to the Muggle Prime Minister at the very least.

*And who’s going to make that visit?* he wondered. *The Minister of Magic is traditionally the one in contact with the Muggle government, but I doubt Juniper will go to him, and in any case he won’t say or do the right things if he does.*

*It will have to be me.*

*Well, that’s what I signed up for when I accepted this burden to fight Voldemort.*

“You can go back now,” he told Laura, and she turned her horse with a little grimace and exclamation of relief. Harry leaned his head on his hands and closed his eyes for a moment, gently massaging his brow.

*If I can find and destroy the Horcruxes—*

*Yet who can I ask to die for them?*

When he opened his eyes and looked beneath the horse again, he had to wonder if there weren’t people who would willingly give their lives to prevent things like this from happening.

*I am willing to die. Perhaps others are, too.*

~*~*~*~*

**Chapter Seventeen: Come Into the War Zone**

“I’m sorry, sir, but I don’t think that will be possible.”

Erasmus felt his spine stiffen. But he knew he could not show panic or even anger in front of his people, not now. Enough of them had broken into sobbing and crying when the news of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named’s latest attack had come to the Ministry. He made sure his face was wintry and turned back around. “And why not, Obliviator?”

He expected at least a show of respect, but Lethe Amarantha, the Head of the Obliviator Office, just raked a hand through her waist-length brown hair and gave him a weary look. “Too many Muggles saw this, sir,” she said flatly. “The cameras were here before we were. We can change the memories of locals, but we can’t possibly find everyone who saw this—disaster.” A jerk of her head took in the ruin around them. Erasmus had noticed that she had yet to look at most of the piled cars and dead bodies directly. “Even if we came up with one explanation that satisfied everyone here, other people would come in and investigate it, and we don’t know what facts the Muggles have devised. Something would always match the story of a deadly rainfall. So, I’m sorry, sir, but I don’t think Obliviating the memory of purple rain that ate metal and stone and living things will do much good.”

Erasmus breathed out, and reminded himself that he needed Amarantha. The Obliviators were more crucial than they had ever been now, and they followed only her.
But he would not forget that, on the eve of the greatest crisis ever to strike their world, she had disobeyed him and refused to even think about the worse consequences than the disturbance in a few Muggles’ memories—the possible exposure of their world to them.

“Then seek out anyone offering hints of a magical explanation,” he ordered. “Anyone who might have seen or overheard a true witch or wizard.” Some of their people had come to gawk, of course, and might have been less than careful, just as they had been on that long-ago day when He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named fell at Godric’s Hollow and they thought he was gone forever.

Amarantha nodded, and turned, whistling two of her Obliviators to her. They came like obedient dogs, confirming Erasmus’s perception that who dominated Amarantha dominated them. At one point, he had been sure she would not balk at anything he asked of her—she was Declared Light, and had broken with family tradition to do so, demonstrating her dedication—but it seemed that gross reality weighed more with her than he had anticipated.

And then the idea hit him, and unfolded with surprising speed, like a rose charmed to grow and die in a few seconds.

Harry appealed for help in guarding safehouses to the other Ministers, and they answered him. But what if I were to appeal for help in keeping the Statute of Secrecy intact? This is certainly something that concerns them—that should concern all of us. If a British wizarding world were revealed, it would be only a short time before they discovered our communities all over the planet. And Harry’s actions have been reckless enough to threaten international law. Yes, they should care.

Erasmus turned, scanning the darkness, lit by flashes of Muggle emergency lightning, behind him. His secretary, a young man related to the Griffinsnest family, caught his eye, started, and hurried forward, stepping around oblivious Muggles who hadn’t learned to see beneath a Disillusionment Charm.

And thank Merlin for that, Erasmus thought. The day they do is the day we can bid any safety in our world farewell.

“You wanted me, sir?”

Erasmus nodded. “I want you to begin drafting letters to the Ministers of Europe,” he said. “I’ll prepare the translation spells for them. But you will need to look up appropriate phrasing for them.”

The young man’s face went pale, but he gulped bravely and shouldered on. Erasmus approved of him. “What are they going to be about, sir?”

Erasmus looked again at the long ravine the rain had carved in solid stone. And this had taken only a few minutes of destruction, from what the Aurors told him. Erasmus shook his head. If anything could expose their world to the Muggles, it was this. One would think Harry would take his duty of killing You-Know-Who more seriously, when their safety from the Muggles was at stake.

“They should be about the International Statute of Secrecy,” he said, “and preserving it for the sake of our community, against both Dark Lords and mad undeclared wizards alike.”

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Indigena Apparated, and then nearly collapsed. She heard a snarl in front of her, and quickly, shakily, lifted her head.

A pale fawn werewolf crouched there, and its amber eyes seemed to dominate the whole of the world. Indigena fumbled for a chain around her neck that her Lord had given her when she Apparated back to his burrow and then here, feeling as if she used the last of her strength.

Hawthorn roared and charged. Indigena held the silver chain up in her hand, though, and began to swing it around her head. It blazed with radiance as fierce as moonlight, and the werewolf halted and slowed, intimidated by either that or the presence of silver itself. She whimpered, turning her head away and actually becoming docile.

Indigena’s breathing slowed again. It seemed the potion her Lord had made Adalrico brew in order to make a werewolf docile just from the smell, a variant of Wolfsbane that didn’t give them back human intelligence, worked after all.

“Come here, Hawthorn,” she said.

The werewolf gave a low snarl, but slunk forward until her head was right under Indigena’s fingers. Indigena slowly clenched her tendrils and her fingers in the pale ruff, thanking Merlin that Harry hadn’t made the cage he’d trapped Hawthorn in proof against Apparition. Of course, he knew werewolves couldn’t Apparate while transformed, and he probably thought most people would be
unwilling to venture into a cage with a wild werewolf at all.

Indigena closed her eyes and concentrated on the image of her Lord’s burrow. Pain shuddered through her body where a tough coating of both skin and leaves had barely kept her from dying on the jagged rocks where the Dark Lady’s winds had flung her. But she had to do this. It would not do to leave Hawthorn to be recaptured by Harry’s side—and once she became human again, Harry even stood a chance of talking her out of her hatred. The Dark Lord was not going to lose a pawn like that.

The darkness surrounded them, and for the barest moment Indigena was afraid it wouldn’t work. But then the world lightened and widened, and Indigena opened her eyes to find them crouched in the burrow in front of the throne room, with Hawthorn’s fur still tangled in her fingers. Already, though, the werewolf was whining and snapping as the effects of the potion wore off.

“‘I’ll take her from here, cousin.’

She looked up. Oaken Yaxley stood over her, distinguishable from his brother by his brown eyes and the fact that he almost never smiled. He nodded and hooked a silver chain smeared with the same potion around Hawthorn’s neck. The werewolf whimpered quietly as he led her away. Indigena simply knelt where she was, even though she knew she should rise and go to Voldemort—a fact only reinforced by Oaken turning around to add, “Our Lord wishes to see you right away, cousin.”

One more moment, Indigena promised herself, half-closing her eyes. Just one, to rest and recover my strength.

Pain struck through the Dark Mark on her arm, making her open her eyes and jerk to her feet almost before she realized what she was doing. She sucked in a breath, swayed, caught herself on the wall, stopped the thorny rose on her wrist from trying to squirm into the dirt, and then went to confront her Lord.

Voldemort hovered above the throne now; the presence of several new Death Eaters meant he could use their magic even when some of his older allies were out on missions. The flesh-snake was draped around his neck and his waist and his shoulders. Its eyes cut at Indigena like knives.

“Explain why you failed.” The voice was so deep, and so full of hissing, that Indigena had a hard time making out the words at first.

“I failed because the Dark Lady there was too strong for me, my Lord.” Indigena might have made cowing excuses if she was a different kind of witch. But she was not, and so she remained on her feet, meeting her Lord’s eyes, and did not flinch when the pain began to stab up her left arm as if she were having a heart attack. She could feel the leaves beneath her skin withering and dying.

“That is not an excuse.”

“It is the truth.”

Voldemort hissed again, and this time he sounded like a kettle boiling. “The truth and an excuse are not the same thing, Indigena.”

“I do not know if you wish me to beg for forgiveness, my Lord.” Keep your words simple. The truth, in this case, is. “I am not a Lady. I cannot face Stormgale and Jing-Xi on an equal level. I will do what I can to help you oppose Harry, but I nearly died tonight, and in such a situation, there is no excuse that would content you.”

She blinked when she was done; she thought she hadn’t meant to say all that. But instead of attacking her as she expected, or even calling someone else in to torture them in her place, as he had done with Adalrico, Voldemort continued to watch her.

A moment later, he said, as if out of the blue, “Who would you say the least valuable of my recalled Death Eaters is, Indigena?”

“Feldspar,” said Indigena, without even stopping to consider it.

Voldemort laughed, a rasping sound like a snake slithering in large circles. “Alas, I think I must retain him to make you happy, my dear,” he said, and Indigena couldn’t say if he was joking or not. “But, other than that? The one who has the fewest skills, who has done the least for us?”

Indigena shook her head. “I do not know, my Lord. Hawthorn did not accomplish all her missions, and has fought you, but you have said that she has the least chance of breaking free of her chains. Lucius Malfoy has done little specifically, but I know that you wish to retain him to hurt Draco Malfoy. Adalrico has made mistakes in potions, but you need his skills.”
Voldemort went still as if listening to something, and then said, “Yes, Indigena. You have helped me to make my decision. You are dismissed. Go into your chambers and remain there until I call for you.”

Indigena was more than happy to accept the dismissal. Her body still ached as if the winds were tossing her, and scrapes had opened in her skin which bled a mixture of blood and green sap. She wanted nothing more than to lie down, smear her wounds with earth, and begin the healing process.

And then think about the nightmare she was living in.

She had watched drops of purple, poisonous rain strike the grass she loved, and wither it out of recognition. She had watched the same thing happen to animals, to people, and even to stone, which she tended to think of as impervious to harm. But the grass hurt the most. It had done no hurt. There was no possible way that her Lord could think it opposed him, or even that it was a very valuable resource to his enemies, as Muggle machines could be.

She was tired, and heartsick.

But she knew there was no choice save to keep going. Flee, and her Lord could drag her back through the Dark Mark, and then she would not even have the dignity of chosen service. Or he would call a second honor debt upon the Yaxley family, and condemn another person to the same remorseless—and, Indigena feared, honorless—world that she was living in.

She had made a decision. She was the one who had laid the bed of thorns, and the one who must lie in it. She could ask for no help.

The only thing to do was keep going.

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Harry knew what would happen when he walked through the entrance hall doors and found Draco, Snape, Connor, Peter, Henrietta, McGonagall, and Narcissa waiting for him with various looks of fury.

The difference from many other situations like this he’d faced was that he didn’t really care what they would say. He intended to defend his actions and move past them as soon as possible so that he could secure their help in doing what was truly important—contacting the Muggle Minister, for example.

It could have had to do with the memories of carnage still present in his mind. It could have had to do with the fact that he’d just visited the cage in the Forest, and found Hawthorn gone, and suffered a surge of self-loathing at his own stupidity in not making the cage proof against Apparition.

Whatever it was, the sight of people with arms folded simply made his mind go flat and blank, and his own arms fold in return. He stood looking at them, and wondered vaguely if anyone else was watching from around the corner and what he or she would think if so.

Draco started, of course. Snape and McGonagall could sound sterner, but they didn’t have Draco’s passion for reprimanding Harry. “What was the meaning of that, Harry?” he demanded. “Running off into the Forest, and then Cornwall, which we only knew because Mrs. Gloryflower contacted us, was—”

“The right thing to do,” Harry said, and Draco actually shut up and paid attention to him. It was probably his tone of voice. Harry knew he sounded impatient, because he wanted to sound impatient. Coaxing wouldn’t work this time. “I couldn’t allow Hawthorn to be hurt, or hurt her, thanks to the family alliance oath. I was going to have the Gloryflower horses distract her, but that didn’t work. I chased her into the Forest and shut her in a cage beyond harm. As it turned out, though, since I didn’t secure the cage against Apparition, another Death Eater Apparated in and took her. That is what happened. What I did was what had to be done.”

While Draco was still blinking, Snape rallied. “It was dangerous,” he said, hissing like grass in a high wind. “When you promised to rely on us more, Harry, we did not mean only for potions and counsel. You are supposed to take us into battle with you, as well.”

“Even when there was absolutely nothing you could have done?” Harry inquired dryly. “When you would have wanted to kill Hawthorn, sir, because of your insane hatred for werewolves and because you do not have an oath holding you back? When you could have done nothing to fend off the storm Indigena Yaxley raised, and only Lady Stormgale’s control over the winds managed it? Oh, yes, of course. I should have come back for you at once, sir. That should have been my first priority, over lives.”
Snape’s eyes narrowed. “You could have contacted us from Cornwall, Harry,” he said, with too much calm. “Once you knew that Lady Stormgale was going to turn the rains.”

“I had other things to think about,” said Harry, and he could feel his anger unfolding slow coils in him, like the Squid shifting about under the lake. “In particular, viewing the devastation and deciding on how to inform the Muggle Prime Minister of it.”

“You cannot expose our world to the Muggles.” Henrietta took a step forward, as if she thought that would make Harry listen to her. “Not because of the International Statute of Secrecy—that is rubbish if you say it is, Harry.” Harry forced himself not to glance away from the mad devotion shining in her eyes. “But because of history, of what they did to us last time they knew of us, the persecution that caused us to retreat behind Disillusionment Charms and Muggle-repelling spells.”

Harry shook his head. “It’s no good. They have clues, anyway. The revelations the Opallines are making on the Isle of Man, for instance. The sight of the dragon and my image in the skies battling the sirens only a few months back. And now—there are too many Muggles dead. Hundreds or thousands, in a few minutes.”

“You should calm down, Harry.” Peter now, trying the patient saint route. “Think, talk with us, sleep on it—”

“No.”

Peter sighed. “Harry, at the moment you are distraught, and have reason to be distraught. But you cannot choose to throw over the principles of our world in a day. If you wait—”

“I will not.” Harry shook his head when he saw the looks they were giving him. “I know that none of you will agree with me, that you’ll try to talk me out of it, and that those arguments will take days, perhaps weeks. In the meantime, panic in the Muggle world will spread, and Voldemort may launch another attack that does even more damage. I know that not everyone cares about Muggles, or feels they should have as much knowledge as might guard them against this war. But do you know something? I do. I do care. And I will tell them.”

“Harry, if you are going blindly into danger, whether it is in Cornwall or London, it is up to us to tell you so,” said McGonagall. “For the first time in months, she sounded as if she were angry at him, rather than the officials from the Ministry who kept insisting that she shut the school.

“And I do not think I am going blindly,” Harry said. “I do think that I went alone tonight because I am the only one who had the capability and the power to respond—as so many of you have insisted so many times, by telling me that I am a Lord-level wizard and worth something—and I will go alone to London because I am the only one who will not try to undermine this meeting.”

“You can’t do that,” said Draco furiously. Connor nodded fiercely behind him, looking at Harry in a way that would have made him shrivel up a few years ago, though he said nothing.

Harry shook his head again. “I’m not doing it to score rhetorical points in a debate with you. I have larger things to think about now.”

“There is the matter of your safety tonight—” Snape started, and Harry’s gaze actually made him flinch.

“I returned safely,” Harry said. “I will be in danger in the future. That should be what concerns you, if you truly care about my life.”

He swung around and left them silent and staring behind him. He could particularly feel Narcissa’s stare. She had a habit of making her eyes cold and steady and sharp that reminded him of a Dementor’s voice: ice spikes being driven into one’s head.

He didn’t care, though—not truly. He could not care. He knew he might be acting alone in this case because no one shared his ideals, just as no one had shared his ideals when he first began the campaign to free the house elves.

But it did not matter. If he had to be a leader who stood alone for this task, he would be a leader who stood alone. What mattered was what he accomplished and how he accomplished it, not whether he’d received his punishment like a good little boy.

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Connor shook his head as he watched his brother leave. He’d never seen Harry so cold, nor so oblivious of the larger context.
Doesn’t he see? He’s a symbol, too, the way that Lily wanted me to be when she still thought I was the Boy-Who-Lived. What he does has more impact than just saving lives. It encourages people to trust him—or distrust him.

The noticing that refused to go away would not let Connor be blind anymore, no matter how tightly Harry might close his eyes. Connor saw the gazes that followed him in the hall, how people swayed towards him when he spoke, how they talked over his decisions and his actions among themselves. Just as people had once felt safe when Dumbledore was Headmaster, when they believed he would fight Dark Lords before surrendering his students, now people were learning to feel safe with Harry.

If he starts acting the way he used to—dashing into danger without accompaniment—they’ll think he’s reckless. And we don’t need that.

He glanced around. Draco was still staring after Harry, but the others had turned away, departing in pairs—Peter and Snape—or as individuals into privacy to think about what had happened. No one would notice him slip away, probably, or at least Draco wouldn’t know if Connor pretended to go to Gryffindor Tower and in reality tracked his brother down.

That was what he did, walking out of the entrance hall shaking his head and muttering as if, like the others, he had not the slightest idea of how to deal with Harry. Once he reached the staircases, however, he stopped, drew his wand, and whispered, “Point Me Harry.”

The length of holly and phoenix feather glittered as it turned, and finally pointed upwards, towards the Astronomy Tower. Connor snorted under his breath. Merlin knows why he likes going there so often, since it was the last place he fought Snape. But if he’s up there, up I go.

It took him longer than he wanted it to, given that the staircases seemed determined to play more than their usual share of tricks, and twice stranded him in midair as they swung between floors. Connor kept hoping that no one else would reach Harry before him; he didn’t think they would know the right things to say. But when he was on his way up the steps to the Astronomy Tower, listening intently, Connor couldn’t hear voices from above him.

He came out on the top, and Harry stood gazing moodily over the side. He turned when he heard his brother, but his eyes held only cold acknowledgment, not the recognition that Connor had been hoping for.

Well, when in doubt, begin bluntly.

“You understand why you pissed everyone off, don’t you?” he asked.

“Of course I understand.” Harry’s voice was bored, which Connor knew was a bad sign. “I simply don’t care.”

Connor snorted and folded his arms. “Don’t care about what we think, Harry? Don’t care about keeping yourself safe? And here I thought the promise you made to yourself at the beginning of the summer covered exactly that.”

“I had no choice in what I did,” said Harry, still with that level of careful, precise control Connor was unused to seeing from him. “I couldn’t allow Hawthorn to come to harm, and I couldn’t wait for assurances that whoever came with me wouldn’t harm her, and I couldn’t wait and race through the school instead of Apparating. And if I’d lingered to argue instead of going to Cornwall, how many people would have died?”

“I don’t actually dispute that,” said Connor, feeling his way carefully forward. “I know that you felt you had to react quickly.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “Then why are you here?”

And Connor did know the way to phrase it, then. The problem with what they’d done in the entrance hall had been the yelling and the implication that they cared more about punishing Harry, or the fact he hadn’t taken them along, than what he’d actually accomplished. And of course he wasn’t going to listen to concerns floated in that atmosphere. He would only see it as their valuing his life over the lives of others, and that was not something Harry had ever agreed with.

“Do you think it’s best to make a hasty decision about seeing the Prime Minister now, when you’re so tired and upset?” Connor asked. “I’d hate to see you make a mistake because of your emotions. If only because you wallow in guilt and self-loathing for so long after making a mistake.”

That won a reluctant smile from Harry, but he still shook his head. “It’s not a mistake, Connor,” he said. “He may know about magic—I know the Minister is supposed to keep in touch with the Muggle government—but I don’t think he does. Scrimgeour may have been in contact with him, but he never mentioned it. And Juniper won’t do it, Merlin knows.”
“And you think that knowing magic will make a difference?” Connor asked. “How can it enable them to protect themselves from something like this storm you described, Harry?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then why—“

“But I don’t know that much about the Muggle world,” Harry interrupted. “And neither do you, Connor. They may be able to do something. At the least, they may be able to prevent panic. The government can react more effectively if they know something about what’s going on than if they don’t.”

Connor tapped his foot on the flagstones beneath them. He certainly wasn’t as violently prejudiced against the Muggle world as someone like Lucius Malfoy—or Erasmus Juniper—was, but he couldn’t help a frisson of fear at the thought that Muggles might know about wizards soon.

“There are more of them than there are of us, Harry,” he said. “They could hurt us if they try.”

Harry cocked his head. “Did you really imagine I was going to tell him where to find the entrance to the Ministry, Connor, or Diagon Alley?” He gave a soft snort. “That’s assuming he’ll even listen to me, since I’m not the Minister of Magic.”

“What are you going to tell him, then?”

“That we’re fighting a war,” said Harry, “that this is not a natural disaster—though I wonder how even they would spin this to make it look like one—and that his people are at risk. That’s all. After convincing him that magic is real, of course.”

“It’s a risky decision,” said Connor doubtfully.

Harry snorted again. And wouldn’t you want to know about a war that might affect you, Connor, even if you weren’t fighting directly in it, even if there was little you could do to protect yourself against it? At least it will give the government a structure and a basis to work with. Whether they’ll tell ordinary people, I don’t know. I doubt it. But imagine blows coming from nowhere, blows that you can’t defend against and which have no explanation. Wouldn’t that terrify you more?”

“Yes, but—“

“But what?”

Connor shook his head. All the objections he could come up with sounded too much like the anti-Muggle slurs the Dark purebloods kept speaking—that the danger of Muggles was less than the danger of wizards, and why should people who couldn’t do anything to help know anything? Except that there were plenty of wizards who couldn’t do anything to help, either, and they knew. And if Connor didn’t believe that wizards and Muggles were really different kinds of people, then he couldn’t argue that there was a qualitative difference in what they should know.

And so many wizards have been sluggish and slow to help Harry with anything, or even join in the war at all. They’re still counting on Lord-level magic to save or damn them. They think they can do nothing, so they won’t struggle forward. Isn’t that pretty much the Muggle situation right now? Maybe the Muggle Minister can frame it so that his people won’t panic.

“You’ve thought about this, haven’t you,” he accused his brother.

Harry smiled a little. “Yes. I first made the decision when looking down on what the rain left.” Connor found it hard to be sure in the moonlight, but he thought Harry’s face went gray. “There is no end to the death Voldemort will cause if he begins another attack like that, Connor. And if he stirs up the Muggles enough, the chances of an exposure of the wizarding world that we don’t control and can’t predict just become greater.”

“You could have said this in the entrance hall,” Connor murmured.

Harry’s face hardened again, and he shook his head. “To a bunch of people whose major thought is punishing me? No. Approach me with rational arguments, the way that you did, and I’m willing to speak and listen. But they were speaking then as if I should feel guilty for protecting Hawthorn and going to Cornwall. I don’t.”

Connor shrugged and searched for words. “It wasn’t about punishment,” he said. “Not for me. It’s never been, Harry.”
Harry arched an eyebrow at him.

“It really isn’t,” Connor said earnestly. “I don’t want to keep you in line, like Snape does, or keep you in bed, the way Draco does.” He could feel his face flushing red, and he hurried quickly past that mental image. He still didn’t want to think about his brother having sex. He could think of many other things with aplomb, but not—that. “It just worries me when it seems that you don’t consider your life as important as the lives of others.”

“I’m trying,” said Harry, and his voice was hard. “But just because I’m trying doesn’t mean it will happen in every situation, Connor. I decide from moment to moment, circumstance to circumstance. If the danger in Cornwall had been less severe, or I had more time to respond, then perhaps I would have let someone else come with me. But, as it was, I had to make the decision on the fly. And I refuse to apologize for that.” He leaned forward, eyes fastened on Connor’s face. “There are many, many things that are more important than my life.”

Connor studied his brother. He half-wanted to claim that this was another sign of Harry’s training to value himself less than anyone else.

But—

He was afraid that it was just a sign of the man Harry had become after healing from his training, instead.

He’d chosen to pursue multiple causes where he did have to believe that his principles were worth more than his life in order to pursue them at all. And the idea that other people’s lives were more important than his could be backed up by all kinds of philosophical justifications that he’d mostly learned as he wove the supports for those principles in his mind, not from Lily.

Oh, Harry, Connor thought, understanding, as never before, what Draco and Snape must have been feeling when they knew his real brother, before he did. I know it’s important. I know that you wouldn’t be happy unless you were doing something like this. But I wish you could see how hard it is for people who just want you to be safe, instead of everyone innocent in the world.

He nodded. “I think I understand. I’m sorry.”

Harry nodded back, but didn’t apologize. Connor could understand that, too. It would have been a lie.

He left Harry there on the top of the Astronomy Tower, and went back to Gryffindor. Ron was waiting for him, propped up on one elbow in his bed. “Harry all right?” he asked quietly.

“Yeah.” Connor lay down in his own bed and closed his eyes. Respecting the signal that he didn’t want to talk, Ron turned away with a rustle of blankets.

Connor spent some time hoping that the meeting with the Prime Minister went well for both Harry and the Prime Minister, and then some time thinking about Parvati, whose parents still wouldn’t let her visit Hogwarts often, and then some more time slipping gently into sleep, that gray half-state where the worries of the day gradually grew more and more muffled.

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Harry slipped gently into the office and shut the door behind him. The man sitting on the other side of the room looked up, murmured a name Harry couldn’t make out, and then went back to the document he was reading, apparently dismissing it as the wind.

Getting past Muggle security had been easier than Harry expected. It had turned out that Extabesco plene worked just as well on Muggles as it did on wizards, and cameras and whatever other security devices they used couldn’t pick up on traces of someone who wasn’t technically in existence at the moment. The biggest challenge for Harry had been waiting for other people to pass through doors so that he could follow them. He didn’t want to start opening doors on their own and making someone so jumpy he would think he had to get the Prime Minister out of danger.

Now Harry cast a few silencing spells at the walls, since he fully expected the man to cry out when he revealed himself, and then another moment studying the Muggle. He was fairly ordinary as far as Muggles went, Harry supposed—young, probably not fifty yet. His face had a look of intent bustle that Harry thought might be innate, or perhaps related to the fact that he had just come into office recently and had a lot to deal with.

Including the carnage last night, Harry remembered with a wince, and the memory battered down his last objections to revealing
himself to the man. He took a deep breath and dropped the *Exabesco plene*.

The Muggle looked up at once, and then half-stood, his mouth open. In another moment, he caught himself and slowly sat down again, his eyes locked on Harry and a faint smile creeping up the side of his mouth.

“Hullo, sir,” Harry said quietly.

“You should know,” said the man conversationally, “that the British government does not negotiate with terrorists, young man.” He looked Harry up and down. “Even terrorists who appear to be sixteen,” he added, with more of a question in his voice.

*Terrorists? Oh, of course. That’s probably what they assume happened last night. And they’re not far wrong. Voldemort certainly works by terror.* Harry decided that he might as well cut straight to the chase.

“I’m not a terrorist,” he said. “My name is Harry.”

“If you’re not a terrorist,” said the Prime Minister in a very level voice, “would you mind, greatly, telling me what you’re doing in my office?”

“Have you ever heard of a man called Rufus Scrimgeour, sir?” Harry asked. He kept his hands down and away from his body, while he used his will to place a locking charm on the office door. There might be a silent way of calling for help from inside, and Harry wanted to make absolutely sure they weren’t interrupted.

“Can’t say I have,” said the Minister. ‘Odd name. Odd name. And I haven’t heard of a ‘Harry’ either. If this is about a pet cause of yours, you could have addressed it in a letter, you know, like any normal person.”

He had a half-smile on his face and was talking in a low voice, the way someone might soothe a frightened horse. Harry recognized it, and had to grin wryly. That was the same voice he’d used to speak to the refugees in Cobley-by-the-Sea last night.

The man—Harry remembered someone saying his name was Blair—seemed surprised by the smile. At least, he sat back a little and looked at Harry, and Harry took the chance.

“Then I suppose you haven’t seen magic,” he said.

Almost at once, Blair’s posture altered again, though Harry wondered if an ordinary terrorist come to lock himself in the office with the Prime Minister and demand attention would have noticed. The man was really very good at not giving his emotions away. He had decided that Harry was mad, of course.

“I’m generally more ready to see rabbits pulled out of hats when one makes an appointment,” he said.

Harry nodded. He had thought this would be the hardest part of it. He clasped his hands together and then drew them apart, letting strands of light shaped like a spiderweb splay between his palms.

Blair frowned, but said, “Mirrors. I fail to see what—“

Harry blew on the light, and it detached itself from his palms and drifted over to hover halfway between him and Blair. Blair’s hand twitched, as if he were ready to reach for a weapon.

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“I have told you—“ he began.

Harry concentrated, and the light grew solid and then settled into a heavy metal plate. Harry had deliberately not chosen a threatening shape, and he had already seen a scrap of paper on the floor he could Transfigure. While Blair was still staring at the plate, Harry picked up the scrap of paper with his magic, wafted it in front of the Prime Minister, and transformed it into a single vivid purple flower with green markings, like nothing native in either the mundane or magical worlds. He set it carefully on the plate.

The silence was eloquent.

Blair simply looked at the flower and the plate. Then he sat back and locked his eyes on Harry’s again.

“There must be mirrors involved somewhere,” he said, but his voice was slightly higher-pitched than it had been.
“No mirrors,” said Harry. He fought to keep his patience. He had known this part would be difficult; that was the whole point.
“What would convince you, sir? What would prove magic for you beyond a doubt, without the need to resort to explanations of mirrors and wires and tame animals up my sleeve?” Privately, he thought changing the man into an animal would do it, but he wasn’t practiced enough at human Transfiguration to attempt it. Becoming an Animagus was very different from forcibly changing someone else; even McGonagall did it with the greatest of care.

“Nothing would,” said Blair. He seemed to be getting steadier now. “Magic doesn’t exist.”

Harry frowned, but he had planned for this. He reached into his robe pocket, making sure that his hand motion was slow enough not to frighten the Minister, and drew out his shrunken Pensieve, which he enlarged with a quiet word and set on the desk.
Watching it grew bigger certainly made Blair’s eyes widen, but he shook his head and murmured, “An optical illusion.”

“The silver liquid inside is memories,” said Harry. “Specifically, my memories, of what happened last night. Will you visit them with me?”

“And how would I do that?” Blair now sounded as if he were humoring a child. Harry spent another moment studying his face, though, and could see the first flickers of doubt behind his eyes. Harry really had nearly broken through with the transformation of the paper, or perhaps the plate, or perhaps his entrance. Blair was trying to hold on to his reality, but it was being severely challenged at the moment.

“Place your head inside the Pensieve.”
Blair shook his head and smiled kindly at him. “Now why would I do that, Mr.—do you have a surname? You only ever introduced yourself as Harry.”

“I know,” said Harry. “And no, I gave up my surname when my parents were tried for child abuse.”

The Prime Minister’s eyes kindled. “And would there be a record of this trial?”

“Hardly,” said Harry. “None that you can access, at any rate.” He regretted not bringing a copy of the Daily Prophet with him, but Blair would likely have found some way to dismiss that, as well, even the moving photographs. “Please, sir, put your head into the Pensieve.”

“I will not—“ And then the man cut off, his eyes widening as he stared over Harry’s shoulder.

Not about to fall for one of the oldest tricks in the world, Harry sharpened his senses instead of turning around. He felt nothing, however, save a rush of magic. When he glanced back, cautiously, he understood what had happened. His frustration, the latest in a long series of emotions he’d been feeling almost without a break, had relaxed his control over his magic. The shadows of jungle trees glittered on the walls, and in every single one clung a black jaguar with green eyes, all of them splitting at Blair.

“You—know something about lights and shadows,” said Blair, but his voice was a bit more cracked and strained now.

“This is magic,” said Harry quietly. He knew why Blair was so affected. The visions, a Muggle might be able to fake with a clever light show, but it was much harder to create the sensation that swirled around them now, magic pressing against the skin like flesh and fur, fire and sunlight. “This is mine. I’m one of the most powerful wizards in our world, sir, and that’s part of the problem. Another powerful wizard is opposing me, and in his hatred for me, he’s striking out at Muggles—I’m sorry, ordinary British citizens—and wizards alike. The memories are in the Pensieve. Please, will you view them?”

Blair hesitated again. Harry let the sensation of magic in the room grow stronger, and waited.

The Prime Minister must have considered himself a good judge of character. He straightened, and nodded slightly, as if committing himself to the cause, consequences be damned. Then he edged forward and lowered his head cautiously into the silver liquid of the Pensieve. Harry followed.

In silence, he watched as the scene from last night played out, from the moment of his arrival at Cobley-by-the-Sea. Most of the time, he observed Blair, and watched the man devour it all with sharp ears and eyes, from the fact that other people spoke to Harry with urgent fear and using unfamiliar words, to the fact that Harry called out to Kanerva, to the fact that he got a response. Blair jumped when Kanerva appeared beside him in the memory. As he listened to her accented English, Harry saw one hand slowly close into a fist.

*He doesn’t like the idea that there are more of us, Harry thought. A whole world of wizards, living out beyond Britain.*
He closed his eyes briefly. He had known he was taking a risk, with this. And turning back now was simply not a choice, not when Voldemort’s attacks on the Muggles were likely to get larger and more destructive.

Harry thought he caught the moment when the man became a true believer—Harry’s memory of riding with Kanerva on the winds. Skipping from current to current, the muddled and dizzying flashes of the land they passed over, mingled with the sensations of heat and cold, were as they had passed into Harry’s head, touched, perhaps, with a bit of Kanerva’s own sensations to flesh it out and keep it from being overwhelming, since the Pensieve recorded what was truly there and not only what one person remembered.

Blair continued silent, of course, even as Kanerva disrupted Indigena’s potion and whistled the winds out over the sea, and as the flying horses descended. Harry looked over during his ride above the ruins of Muggle villages and cities and roads, and saw him standing with head bowed and eyes closed.

“I think I’ve seen enough,” he said abruptly.

Harry nodded, and tugged himself sharply backward, adding a bit of magic to pull Blair out when he seemed unsure how to remove himself from the Pensieve. Blair sat back in his chair behind the desk and closed his eyes, then opened them again.

“I want to know more,” he said. “How many of you are there? Where exactly do you live? Who is the wizard you’re fighting? Why have you come to me, and not some more proper representative of your government?”

Privately, Harry was impressed with the man’s ability to overcome a major shock like this and soldier on. “You’re dealing with me because our competent Minister was assassinated at the beginning of June, by the wizard I’m fighting, and his replacement is incompetent,” he said. “The man I’m fighting is called Voldemort. He uses magic like the rain last night because he wants to, to torture and kill, and because Muggles—ordinary humans—are nothing to him. I’m not going to give you complete answers to the rest. We live with and among you. We have pretty much since the beginning of time. I’m sure you understand why I’m unwilling to say more than that.” He locked eyes with Blair and waited.

Blair nodded tightly. “And you think that Voldemort will win this war? What was your purpose in coming here?”

“To warn you,” said Harry simply. “To make sure that one person, at least, had an explanation.”

Blair went on gazing at him for long moments, then shook his head. “And you actually expect me to explain magic?”

“It’s up to you what you choose to do with the information,” Harry said, while privately reflecting that many things about this war would be a good deal easier if he believed in the rightness of using compulsion. “I don’t know enough about the Muggle world to say what the best way of explaining it is. Hopefully you should know how to prevent panic.”

“And will another attack like the one last night happen again?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said, folding his arms and hoping he looked stern instead as if he were trying to hold himself up. The night without sleep and the constant roiling emotions were rather getting to him. “I’m trying to prevent it. Voldemort is trying a war of attrition, however, hoping to wear down both wizards and Muggles without losing himself. I do know the way to kill him, and I hope to do it soon.” He hesitated for a moment, then offered, “There’s a prophecy that claims he will die, though who will kill him is a bit unclear.”

“A prophecy.” Blair closed his eyes. “Yes, why not a prophecy? We have had nearly everything else.”

“Prime Minister? Are you all right, sir?”

“The disturbances on the Isle of Man,” said Blair abruptly, looking rather alarmed. “That isn’t your lot, is it?”

“Some of them,” said Harry, feeling a vague embarrassment, even though as far as he knew the Opallines had only invited a few Muggles to tour their home, Gollrish Y Thie, the immense house shaped from the bones of a British Red-Gold dragon. “Yes.”

Blair appeared to be thinking furiously for a moment. “Then they aren’t illusions or the brilliant prank the Manx are treating it as.”

“No, sir.”
“I’ll have to prevent writeups,” Blair muttered savagely. “In the meantime, I’d appreciate it if you could control them as much as possible. Managing this will be hard enough without more of you lot getting in the way and making us question everything we thought we knew.”

Harry sighed. “I’ll speak to them, but I can’t guarantee that it will do much good. They’re my allies, not my slaves.”

Blair opened his mouth as if to say something, then shut it. He studied Harry intently, but this time, Harry couldn’t tell what he was thinking. Then he nodded. “It’s been a pleasure speaking with you, Mr. Harry,” he said, voice almost succeeding in convincing Harry that he didn’t find the title ridiculous at all. “If another magical attack happens, I count on you to give us warning, or at least help in dealing with it.”

Harry nodded, and kept any of his feelings to himself. He had rather announced himself as the spokesman for the entire British magical world. Blair might not receive the help he was demanding, and he knew it, but he would treat Harry with all the responsibility he was claiming to have.

“Good day, sir,” he said, and removed the locking and silencing spells he’d used on the room, calling the Pensieve to him and shrinking it again as he did so. He had just vanished behind _Extabesco plene_ when the door burst open and several people swept into the office, all babbling at once.

“Sir, what happened? We—”

“Couldn’t hear you, sir! Were you—“

“There’s a group claiming responsibility for the attacks in Cornwall now, sir, say they’ll have control of Parliament by sunrise—“

Harry slipped out in the confusion, once they cleared the door, and took a deep breath as he hurried out of the Muggle building. At least he had a better idea where he was going, this time, since he’d found his way through.

He’d invited the British Prime Minister into the war zone, and he wasn’t entirely sure if he would be thankful for it later.

For now, he thought it necessary, and he would do what he could to defend the decision, and to insure it played out well, and to live with the consequences if it all fell down.

—*—*—*—*—*

Chapter Eighteen: I Will Take From You Everything That You Have Loved

“Good morning, Mother.”

Narcissa lifted her eyes from behind the _Daily Prophet_ long enough to nod to Draco. “Good morning, Draco.”

Draco took a seat at the kitchen table and stared blearily at nothing until Narcissa slid a cup of tea in front of him. Then he drained it, and sat there once again staring at nothing. His mind felt like a misty sea full of icebergs, grinding and drifting, and he didn’t know how to make them stop drifting or dissipate the mist. Things between himself and Harry had been in a state of low-level war for the past six days. He still thought that Harry should have used the communication spell from Cornwall to say that he was well, and had survived the rain, before he returned. He had to admit, grudgingly, that Harry was right about the wisdom of taking someone with him. No one else could have added much to Harry’s success with the rain, and they would have hindered him badly when it came to Hawthorn.

But he did worry about Harry still, and he did think that Harry was pulling away from relying on others again, convinced he had to do everything in the war himself, and he did think that the decision to show the wizarding world to Muggles was the wrong one. He had tried to explain as much to Harry last night. Harry had listened politely enough, but with the tightness around his nostrils that said he attributed most of what Draco said to love of himself and anti-Muggle prejudice. The one emotion he valued, the other he didn’t, and even the emotion he valued he seemed prone to treating as something of lesser importance.

Draco was in an agony of frustration, caught in a limbo between completely agreeing with Harry—which would be wrong, because he didn’t want to—and finding the words to persuade Harry to his side, which wouldn’t come either. Harry had been extraordinarily busy with meetings and research the last few days, and trying to figure out where Voldemort would attack next, and seemed to assign their bickering a low priority.

Well, Draco didn’t.
Especially with the sixth courting ritual coming up, he thought, and once again drained his cup of tea. Then he blinked, and realized he didn’t know how the tea had got there. He saw his mother putting down her wand, though, so he could guess.

“I wonder what, specifically,” Narcissa said, as if to the paper, “is making you so unhappy, Draco. You’ve had arguments with Harry before. What makes this one different?”

Draco didn’t answer. He was staying with his mother in Silver-Mirror for now, supposedly to comfort her about the devastating loss of Lucius and read about wards so that he could help prepare Malfoy Manor as a safehouse. In reality, she comforted him more than he did her, and simply ignored the idea of the safehouse as gracefully as she ignored most things having to do with the Muggle world. She didn’t even speak to him about Harry unless he began the conversation. Draco supposed she was letting him have the peace and space and time he needed to think about things himself, and sort them out.

But now she was speaking to him about Harry, beginning the conversation. Draco tried to pull himself out of his misery long enough to make a coherent reply.

“I feel as if Harry’s growing further and further away from me,” he said quietly, staring at the table, “like this is one argument that we won’t resolve. And I’ve told him about the courting ritual that will happen on his birthday, but he’s simply shrugged and said that he’ll be there when it happens, since he agreed to it. I don’t think that he cares about me next to the war, Mother.”

“He certainly does not express it in the best way,” Narcissa said calmly. “But I have been through similar situations with your father before, Draco.”

Draco checked the impulse to stare at her. This was the most neutral way he’d heard her mention Lucius since the Dark Lord recalled him. He forced himself to stand and examine the loaf of bread on the counter, so that he could select which pieces he wanted for toast. “Really?” he asked, when he thought he could sound interested but not desperate.

“Yes,” said Narcissa. “We are both very stubborn, much as you and Harry are, and neither of us want to admit that we are wrong in case it is a sign of weakness. And sometimes a duel is not appropriate.” Draco imagined she was smiling when she said those words, though he knew she wouldn’t be if he turned around and checked. “What I did in such cases was to take the moral high ground. It did not matter how eloquent my words were. I simply told him that I still loved him, that he made me unhappy, but that I did not wish to make him unhappy. I insisted on a conversation, and if the only impression we could make on one another was to agree never to have that subject at the dinner table again, that is what we did.”

Draco turned and frowned over his shoulder at her, even as he took two pieces of bread from the loaf. “That sounds like playing on his guilt. I’ve used the tactic enough with Harry that I don’t want to use it again.”

Narcissa gave a small laugh, or a sound that Draco supposed might have been called a laugh in another woman. Her eyes shone like icicles. “That is not what I did to Lucius,” she said. “He had no guilt to play on. I simply told him the truth. It is unlikely that Harry realizes how unhappy you are, Draco, or the source of your unhappiness, or he would not have let you suffer this long.”

“Sometimes I feel as if he doesn’t value me at all,” Draco muttered, scowling at the bread. “I know that’s not true, but—he makes promises and doesn’t keep them, like deciding to rely on us, or pay attention to our bond even in the midst of war. And he lets people like Kanerva Stormgale get away with threatening me.”

“Then tell him that,” said Narcissa.

“I have,” said Draco, casting a household charm he’d learned perforce to toast the bread, since living by the labor of house elves now felt odd. “He simply insists that he does care for me.”

“Oh,” said Narcissa. “Then you have not found the right tone. Do not say it as an accusation, my son. Say it as the truth, and force him to use Legilimency if necessary to examine your perspective. Or the spell you invented that puts him into a Pensieve and forces him into your mindset.”

“But then he’ll apologize, and make more promises, and promises are a temporary solution with him.” Draco jabbed his wand at the bread, and flame nearly broke out over one piece. Draco hastily stopped that, and retracted his wand to the proper distance to spread the same even warmth all over the toast. “I don’t know what to do to make it a permanent solution.”

“There is no permanent solution,” said Narcissa. “Any more than there was a way to stop Lucius and I from dueling for the rest of our lives, or make the rift that happened between us impossible.” Her voice had altered, and when Draco looked at her, she appeared more as the mother he remembered than she had for the past two months. “I thought your time with Harry had taught
you more of change than that, Draco.”

Draco resisted the urge to hiss or stamp his foot or do something childish and less than eloquent. His bread had finished toasting.

He went to the chilled cabinet which held the butter, glad that Harry hadn’t got around to forbidding him conveniences like that yet. “I know that what he does will change,” he said. “Freeing one magical species is never the same as freeing another. He’s convinced me of that. But—isn’t the whole point of the joining ceremony so that we have one thing in our lives that will never alter?”

“No,” said Narcissa, and Draco flinched a bit at how stern her voice had become. “Being married—or joined—is harder than being in love, and there are more ways of doing it, I think. You’ll be together, Draco, but that doesn’t mean endless sunshine and no arguments.”

“I didn’t think it meant no arguments,” said Draco weakly, aware that he wasn’t expressing himself well.

If I was just as good at making speeches as Harry is, this wouldn’t be a problem, he thought in frustration. “I just—I did think it meant no large rifts, I suppose. I can’t see myself ever separating from Harry the way you separated from Father.”

“And yet, things like this happen,” said Narcissa. “What you must do, Draco, is let go of your conviction that every change is a permanent one and that you will be in this argument, or this joining ritual, or this stage of your bond, forever. Harry has accepted that, I think, which is why he worries less over your arguments than you do. But this is something that you have to come to terms with on your own. The way I suggested approaching Harry requires that you truly believe the breach between you can be healed. Only then will you approach him with some other tone than accusation or resignation that you have to give in to him yet again to get what you want.”

Draco nibbled his lip. “And if I do think that he really is neglecting me, and that I shouldn’t have to spend so much time asking for what I want?” he asked at last.

“Then say it,” Narcissa said. “Without whinging.”

Draco sighed. He was having to grow up again, and this time, he didn’t have something like Calibrid Opalline’s threat to marry Harry which would propel the growth for him. It had to be his own decision, his own intent that drove him, and the goal was harder to meet.

Me alone.

He didn’t know if he could do it today, he admitted, as he buttered his toast and then sat down to eat. But he would think on it. There were still a few days between now and the joining ritual. He had time to come to terms with what his mother suggested, and think up ways to say what he really wanted and which would make Harry listen to him.

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“What do you think?” Thomas asked, holding the stone up.

Harry examined it, and smiled. “I think it’s perfect.”

Harry examined it, and smiled. “I think it’s perfect.”

That brought a shine to Thomas’s eyes that hadn’t often been there since his wife died. “Thank you, Harry,” he said, and turned the stone from hand to hand. “I didn’t mean to make it look like a shell,” he added thoughtfully. “Or so bright. But it makes a nice counter to the gray stone.”

Harry nodded, his eyes fastened to the tiny white scallop Thomas held, which glittered as if made of quartz. This was the counter to Voldemort’s ward-draining stones, which Thomas had finally devised after a month of intense work. And, small as it was, it shone with power, and it would now be easier to create others like them and embed them in the walls of the safehouses.

“I never tried to make something just like this before,” Thomas said softly, his eyes fastened on the shell. “I mostly used my knowledge to learn new spells, or to help me make decisions, like Declaring for the Dark. I’m not sure if it’s different, but it feels different to me.”

Harry understood. As long as putting his knowledge to practical use was a choice, Thomas was still free from at least some of the implications of the war. Now it appeared to have swallowed his life as it had swallowed Priscilla’s.

Harry resisted the urge to touch him on the shoulder and say everything would be all right. It never would be again, not the way it would have been had Priscilla lived. “How are your children?” he asked.
“Recovering,” said Thomas. “Melissa took it hardest, but she—well, she knows her mother is dead. Rose is helping with the others. She’s always been the most adult. And Robert is going to be a seventh-year here. In Ravenclaw, did you know? The Headmistress had the Hat Sort him yesterday. He’s studying. It’s a way of putting aside grief.”

“And you, Thomas?”

The man turned a gentle, melancholy smile on him. “I miss her,” he answered. “But I’ll live without her.”

Harry opened his mouth to say something, but Thomas had turned away, moving towards a table on the other side of the room. He’d chosen a chamber in the dungeons to make his area of study, and it was already scattered with old, heavy tables and sturdy bookshelves. Harry was sure at least one Head of Slytherin House had had offices here.

“I need to make sure that the scallops can hold up under pressure,” he said. “If you’d excuse me, Harry? So far, they always explode if someone else is in the room when I’m testing them.”

Harry nodded and shut the door behind him as gently as he could. He wasn’t sure if Thomas’s claim about the shells was true or not, but it was a harmless lie if it wasn’t, and if it would make the shells stronger, it would end in protecting the refugees in the safehouses more efficiently.

He took one step up the dungeon corridor, and a wash of intense tingling assaulted him, as if he’d been sitting with all his limbs curled beneath him and they’d all gone to sleep. Harry shivered and hugged himself tight, leaning against the wall as he closed his eyes. The tingles radiated down from his scalp, along the bridge of his nose, and centered somewhere around his mouth. Another line moved up to join them, beginning at his heart and using his sternum as their route. Harry stood with eyes shut until the mad tingling went away.

“Harry?”

Just whom I don’t want to speak with right now, Harry thought, and opened his eyes. He knew what the sensations were perfectly well—his magic stirring as he approached his seventeenth birthday—but they always made him feel nervous and tense after they occurred, and Merlin knew that speaking to Draco was difficult enough without that. “Draco,” he said. “I was just going to the Room of Requirement to supervise Ginny’s latest dueling session.”

“I want to talk to you,” said Draco quietly.

One look into his eyes, and Harry found himself swallowing his retort. Draco’s eyes were intense, and there was no hint of petulance in the way he held himself, leaning slightly forward so that he could look into Harry’s face. Talking with Ginny and watching the progress of the local witches and wizards as they learned—which he’d already done that morning, anyway—suddenly seemed much less interesting.

“All right,” he said. “Here?”

“No better place,” said Draco. “Given that several Slytherins returning for next year are crowded into the common room now, and someone would bring down any silencing spells we put on our room.” Harry nodded; the few fifth- and sixth-year Slytherins whose parents would let them attend this term had been cautious enough to send them a full month early, perhaps for shelter as much as study, and they currently milled through the common room in search of something to do. Draco leaned one shoulder against the wall and looked at Harry thoughtfully. “Do you know that it took me so long to settle this argument because I thought it would never end?”

“Yes,” Draco said, and scratched the back of his neck. “And only later did I realize how stupid that was. But I felt that way.” He leaned forward again. “And now I feel as if you’re neglecting me, making other things not simply equal in importance but more important than our joining.”

It would have been so easy to take offense—but not when Draco spoke frankly and in that tone, without either apologies to call on Harry’s guilt or self-defenses of himself to spark anger. Harry nodded slowly.

“I would like to know,” Draco said, his head lifting as if he were putting on a show before an audience, “what you see when you look into the future. Not the images the room in Hogwarts showed us before the first joining ritual. Not anything you think I want to hear. What you actually see. What does our future look like to you?”
“Difficult,” said Harry, giving Draco the same blameless honesty Draco had given him. “Filled with arguments, both between us and ones where we stand back-to-back against the world.” He hesitated, wondering if the next word he wanted to use was too soppy, but Draco’s gaze drew it out of him. “Unending.”

Draco gave a shallow nod. “That is what I wanted to hear, Harry,” he breathed. “And what do you need to make you remember it more often?”

“You mentioning it more often,” Harry admitted. “It is something that I could lose in the chaos of the war.”

“I’ve used the Dreamer’s Crown a few times now,” said Draco, stepping back enough that Harry didn’t feel crowded. “Each time, it shows my worst decision would be badgering you about losing our bond to the war. And yet I continue to do it. I did it that night you came back after Cornwall, and even if anger and worry made me do it, I should have been more considerate and waited. Forgive me?”

Harry blinked again. He’d never heard Draco ask for forgiveness in that tone of voice before. There was—not submission in it, not manipulation, but simple honesty.

And that might be the deepest manipulation of all.

But, even if it was, Harry couldn’t see himself caring. He felt far more interested in the resolution of this argument than he had been in the resolution of their last few. Then, part of the reason he had wanted to cover up the breach was so that he didn’t have yet another thing to worry about while he tried to lead this war. Now, he wanted to reconcile because he wanted more of Draco’s presence like this in his life: asking for what he wanted, offering what apologies were needed and no more than that, reaching out of his own free will.

“I do,” he said. “Thank you for coming to me and speaking like this, when you meant it.”

Draco’s eyes flashed as if in triumph, but he was certainly allowed to feel triumph when this had worked so well, Harry thought. He felt a delicate happiness as well, barely distinguishable from quiet satisfaction. If Draco had a relationship with him that was equal and based on free will, it meant something of his principles could survive the war. He hadn’t sacrificed them all with his actions so far, and Draco was learning to live by them because he wanted to.

“Good,” Draco said quietly. “These last few days have been difficult for me, Harry. I truly had to confront the fact that everything could change again in a week’s time, and I missed you.”

“I missed you, as well,” Harry said softly. He would give more than that if Draco wanted, dress it up in more elaborate words, but it was the truth. He wanted Draco at his side for more reasons than needing his emotional support in the war. He wanted Draco at his side because he wanted him there.

“And besides,” Draco added, with a small smile, “it would have been hard to perform this next joining ritual if we were angry with each other.”

“What a difference from February,” Harry muttered, and then shuddered all over again as the tingles started, this time around his wrists, as if he wore iron cuffs. Draco watched in curiosity. He might have guessed this was happening, Harry thought, as he fought off the irritating sensation, but he hadn’t been close enough to Harry all week to watch it happen.

“What’s that?” Draco asked, when it subsided.

“My magic,” said Harry, as casually as he could. “Getting ready for my birthday.”

Draco’s face altered, and suddenly he looked more like the gleeful boy Harry had known in second and third year, as he started discovering the full extent of Harry’s magic. “I knew that you wouldn’t feel a little twitch the way you thought you would,” he said. “If nothing else, the magic needs to expand into different areas of your body.” He wrapped an arm around Harry’s waist, propelling him further down the hallway. “We’ll have to have a festival, you realize.”

“Why?” Harry asked plaintively. He did hope that his birthday passed without fuss. Not only was it the time of his next joining ritual with Draco, it was Connor’s rise to his full power and adult status as well, and of course there was the research and the strategizing that had to be done every single day—if Voldemort didn’t choose that day for an all-out attack, which Harry had placed high odds on. “Draco, I don’t want one.”
Draco glanced at him intently, seeming to listen to his words instead of disregard them as usual. “Harry, have you noticed the way people are looking at you lately?”

“When I’m suffering from an attack of magic, or not?” Harry muttered, arching his shoulders as a ripple moved through them.

Draco rolled his eyes. “I didn’t mean your actions, prat. I meant that they’re looking to you as a leader. They’re willing to trust and follow you unless something spectacularly bad happens, but you can increase their trust with a festival like this. Give everyone something to cheer on, relax over, bond over. It’s certainly a worthy enough occasion. You aren’t just an ordinary seventeen-year-old wizard coming into his power, Harry, and in your best moments you know it. This symbolizes your having all the strength you can possibly command, the strength that you finally need to defeat Voldemort. I think people would be happy to celebrate that.”

“I still think my full magic has broken free from its bonds,” Harry argued feebly, and then bent nearly double when a pulse seemed to settle in his chest.

Draco gave him a patient look that was still there when he straightened. “Do you really?” he asked, but not as if he were interested in Harry’s opinion. “I promise, Harry, Connor can share this festival.”

“All right, all right,” Harry muttered. “But I want to register my displeasure at the idea.”

“My mother won’t care,” said Draco, his face bright. “She’s already been planning.”

Harry gave him a glare and some vituperative mutters, but now they were back in a place where those mutters could actually be taken as a teasing complaint, and Harry was more than grateful for it.

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Harry woke up the morning of July thirty-first, and blinked. From what Draco had told him about the sixth joining ritual, he was sure it would already have begun when he opened his eyes, but his sight still seemed to be normal. He sat up slowly, turning his head from side to side, and then bent over with a sharp gasp as pain and energy raked like claws down his shoulders, glittering as they seemed to open skin. He knew that his magic wasn’t really wounding him, which only made it harder to take.

Draco was awake in a few minutes, laying his hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Are you all right, Harry?”

“Just—fine,” Harry managed, around a gasp. Warmth curled around his neck and flowed like blood into the imaginary wounds. He had time for a breath of clear air, though, and a thought of worry. He really hadn’t expected his magic to react this strongly. Why was it doing it at all? Would he suffer some unexpected agony when his magic fully manifested at the exact minute of his birth, sometime around noon?

He had no idea. He knew Connor had been experiencing upsurges of his magic, too, in the past twenty-four hours, but nothing as acutely painful as this. He bowed his head, closed his eyes, and ducked beneath the waves of it, shoving it away and forcing himself to concentrate on something else, until it departed. When he opened his eyes, Draco was gently caressing his cheeks, staring hard at him.

“It’s just a sign that you’re going to be an exceptionally powerful wizard, Harry, that’s all,” he said comfortingly.

“I’m already an exceptionally powerful wizard,” Harry muttered, leaning into the caressing hands. “Besides, you said it yourself: this isn’t an increase of one’s magic. It’s more like—I don’t know, like the power finally settling into its proper place. Like a child growing into its limbs. And why hasn’t the ritual started yet?”

Draco chuckled. “Because it starts when we kiss for the first time on this day.” He leaned forward until his lips were an inch away from Harry’s. “Are you ready?”

Harry nodded, then closed his eyes as another wave of prickly pain assaulted him.

“You’re sure?” Draco sounded concerned. “We can wait until you’ve manifested, Harry, if you want.”

“I don’t want to let this stupid thing defeat me,” Harry said grimly. “Yes, Draco, come on.” When Draco hesitated further, he opened his eyes and leaned forward, deliberately taking control of the kiss as he didn’t do very often.

Light broke between their lips, across their eyes, across their faces. Harry gasped and tried to put an arm over his eyes, but the
kiss lingered, and he couldn’t move. He could see shades of the light, though: white as apple blossoms, the delicate red of blooming roses, green as summer leaves. All living colors, the way that Draco had warned him they would be.

When he pulled back at last, he could hardly look at Draco for a few moments, but he did study the colors blazing from him.

Draco’s skin seemed to have turned to crystal, and he shone with piled fires as if they reflected from jeweled facets in him, flashes of diamond and sapphire and topaz. Those were his good points, Harry knew; the diamond light meant, among other things, a tendency to love fiercely and not let go of what he felt that devotion for. The sapphire was a tendency to plan ahead and care about his future, and the topaz the ability to give up things he valued for the comfort of his loved one.

This was the Firing of the Virtues, which would make everyone they looked at today rather like a stained-glass window, setting all their virtues ablaze and open to sight while dimming their flaws into shadows. The effect would lessen after a few minutes of exposure. Draco had promised that he and Harry could watch the festival from a distance at first, so he would have a chance to get used to the colors the celebrants glowed before he ventured among them.

Now, he squinted and opened first one eye, then the other, until the intensity stopped. Then he smiled wryly at Draco. “I wish I could see yourself,” he said.

“The same,” Draco whispered, and slid a hand along Harry’s cheek, shuddering. “I’m afraid that we don’t have time for sex, though,” he went on in a mournful voice. “The festival starts in forty minutes.”

“Time for a shower, though?” Harry asked, and extended his hand, which to his vision was normal. One couldn’t see one’s own colors during the Firing of the Virtues.

Draco brightened, and followed him willingly into the loo.

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Unsurprisingly, when Draco and Narcissa had suggested the idea of a festival to the Headmistress—ostensibly for Harry’s birthday, of course, but really more as an excuse for everyone inside the castle to celebrate and remove their minds from what lurked outside—she had adopted the idea. Also unsurprisingly, Draco thought, holding Harry around the waist as they both squinted from just beyond the entrance to the Great Hall, she had decorated the Great Hall as if this were a high day of the Light.

The walls were hung with—triangles of glass, backed with other triangles of glass. That was the best description Draco could come up with for them, and he did not wish to know where McGonagall had got them. They each flickered with a leaping fire of some kind that sent out beams of honest sunlight, mingling with the sunlight that came through the windows.

Opposite the glass triangles, what looked like large mirrors in rainbow hues spun on strings and reflected their light. The effect was a shimmering haze in the hall, with hardly one shadow left. And, of course, because McGonagall was keen on House unity, there were six points at which the crossing beams were enchanted to reflect a pair of House symbols shining together: a golden lion with a silver snake around its neck, a bronze eagle perched on the back of a yellow badger, and so on. It was rather sickening, but at least the long tables filled with food helped make up for that, Draco thought, and so did the genuinely cheerful voices of the refugees thronging between them.

His eye fell on the one table that didn’t contain food and drink, and he smirked. He wondered what Harry would make of it, by the time he finally managed to see through the light and noticed it.

“Draco.” Harry’s voice, right on cue, was flat and displeased. “Did you do that?”

“I may have contributed,” said Draco loftily, curling the arm further around Harry’s waist and sweeping him into the room. “But I in no way arranged for this. I suppose there were many people who just wanted to wish you a happy birthday, Harry. Well, you and your brother,” he added fairly. One end of the large, gift-piled table held a string of presents for Connor.

“There are too many—“

“Happy birthday, Harry!” came the chorus from many throats, all of them people who shone in the Firing of the Virtues, overwhelming Harry’s objection. Harry shook his head, sighed, gave Draco a charged look, and moved to greet them. He looked awkward, but Draco found he didn’t particularly care. Harry would have looked awkward in a gathering of six people. This was a day when he shouldn’t mind being made a fuss of. He was finally of age, and some of the people who had looked down on him as a child in the past would listen to him now.
Besides, other people needed this.

Draco saw the way their eyes focused on Harry, and, even more interestingly, how their virtues flared wildly when they saw him. Harry might not actively encourage other people to demonstrate good behavior, but they did it anyway, looking up to him as a hero and an inspiration. What he meant to cause was perhaps ultimately less important than what he did cause.

Draco was smug that no one else got to see Harry shining as he did, though. Harry was a layered bank of candles to his sight, topaz and emerald—self-sacrifice and consideration, which Draco knew he didn’t have very much of himself, if any at all—and onyx, which stood for hard decisions made and passed. There were other colors under than those, but Draco had all day to gaze at them.

And other people, too, he admitted grumpily, looking sideways at his brother-in-law, who sat with his arm around his Gryffindor girlfriend. Topaz there, no surprise, and rubies for courage. One thing the Firing of Virtues was supposed to do was remind the joining pair of the larger world beyond their rituals, the world they would be a part of as adults by the time their dance was done.

It reminded Draco that other people existed and had their good points, yes. That didn’t mean he had to like it.

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By the time it was almost noon, Harry’s arm hurt from being shaken, and his mouth hurt from smiling—even laughing—and his hands hurt from opening gifts. He was starting to think his skin would hurt from blushing, too, any moment. So many of the gifts were helpful, such as books on rare potions and spells that the givers imagined might help him defeat Voldemort, or enchanted necklaces and blades and rings and other treasures that would help him move silently or see his enemy from a distance. Harry knew that he could at least afford to bring other people with him more easily now, even if his own magic would protect him more efficiently than the vast majority of the gifts.

A few of the younger children who had come to Hogwarts for safety had given him books stolen from the Hogwarts Library. Harry gravely thanked them and promised to use the library as a storage place for them, under the stern eye of Madam Pince. It was a harmless enough lie, and it made their faces light up.

Fire and light surrounded him, and he wanted badly to hide under a bed and never come up for air again. He was used to being in a room with at least one person who disliked him and thought he wasn’t fulfilling his duty. Having this many people all focused on him, thinking of him as the Boy-Who-Lived and their hope, was exhausting. Add to that the ritual that made them shine, and the amount of goodness and inspiration in this room alone was enough to make Harry feel humbled.

Connor had plenty of gifts to open as well, for which Harry was grateful. Parvati had got him something that made him flush dully and hide it again. Harry wasn’t about to ask what that was.

He knew when Connor opened Harry’s gift to him, though. He stared at it for a moment, then threw back his head and laughed loudly enough that the Hall rang with it and many people glanced curiously in his direction.

“What makes you think I need this, you prat?” he challenged, and held up the set of bristles that was inside the box. They were supposed to attach to a broom and make it go even faster. Of course, with the Firebolt he had, which Harry had got him for Christmas, Connor already flew faster than most people, and his skill on a broom had always been better than the vast majority’s. The gift was an insult, in a way. Harry had intended that.

Now, Harry half-shrugged, and made his voice as innocent as possible. “You won your match with Slytherin last year too easily. Don’t want you getting cocky and losing to Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw.”

Connor gravely separated a quarter of the bristles from the rest, and threw them at his head. Then he flicked his wand, and a gift rose from beside him and sailed over to Harry. “Here, then, you can open this next.”

Harry picked it up. It was his gift from Connor, a small but fairly heavy box. He heard a sleek clicking from inside it, like marbles. Curious, he undid the lid, and blinked when a cascade of round, colored objects flew into the air.

They were marbles, or at least they looked like them. They arranged themselves in front of him, and began to sing in a high-pitched chorus.

“When life brews you a lousy potion,
And trouble swamps you like an ocean,
Don’t you dare frown,
Or say that you’re down,
Because the Singing Cheerful Objects are in motion!”

Harry stared. Each marble had a smiling face painted on it, some wizards, some witches, and some fat figures in what were presumably meant to be Muggle clothes. They circled Harry’s head, then fell down with a pattering around him and stuck to his robes, radiating warmth. Then they started to purr like Kneazles.

“Connor, what on earth—“

“For when you’re not feeling that well.” Connor shrugged, but his eyes were full of mirth. “From Fred and George. Don’t you like them?”

The marbles purred and cuddled closer. Harry couldn’t stop his laughter, so he didn’t try.

His laughter turned midway through to a choked cry, though, when the minute he’d been born struck and his magic began to blaze through his body.

Harry quickly discovered he’d been wrong about this being a simple process. His magic headed through his body like a tide flowing up an estuary, rooting out small pockets of power all over and carrying them along in the general flood. Harry dropped his head into his arms and started to shake. He felt Draco’s hand start to touch his back, and then draw away; he probably remembered that Harry hadn’t been able to touch him when he was going through his own transition.

And a transition it was. Behind the feeling like flowing water came fire. Harry felt warmth rake him, tenderly, from the skin down to the vitals. He imagined he must be blazing hard enough to hurt Draco’s eyes by now. His power shifted around in him, and then came to rest like Fawkes on a perch, settling firmly into place amid the dreaming glow of the flames.

He felt more—aware of himself than he had before. It was as if the barriers that he usually kept his magic behind had been lowered, but only for him. Now, when he looked up and blinked, he knew what his magic could accomplish. He could see the trees and the deep, rich colors that his magic usually radiated when it was free at any time he wanted. He knew exactly what his power was, and what its limitations were.

Or he thought he did. He was stunned to find himself closer to the floor than before, and in an unfamiliar body. He took a step forward, and what made the motion wasn’t a hand or a foot, but a paw.

Draco laughed above him, and stooped over him. Harry looked up at him and hissed, which didn’t stop Draco from ruffling his ears. “Your magic had to go somewhere, it seems, Harry,” he said. “You’re in your Animagus form.”

Harry sneezed at him in disgust, then closed his eyes and concentrated hard, remembering his human body, and, above all, the new feeling of the magic slinking through it. In moments, his body flowed and reshaped itself and changed, and then he was crouching on the floor, luckily still wearing his clothes. He stood up and swatted at his robes, ignoring Draco’s attempt to pet him.

He sat down with great dignity, ignoring the laughter and the catcalls, and randomly opened the first gift in front of him.

It turned out to be Draco’s.

Harry stared at the document inside. Then he turned and stared at Draco in turn, who looked half-proud and half-smug, and a bit embarrassed.

“I thought you couldn’t access your vaults yet,” Harry whispered.

“I can’t,” said Draco cheerfully. “I haven’t bought it. I just contacted the owner, and he agreed to send a description. If we buy it
—well, correction, if I buy it for you, since it’s supposed to be a gift, after all—then I’ll ask the goblins to challenge the Ministry for control of my vault.”

Harry lifted the document out with hands that trembled. He couldn’t help it. Knowing that Draco didn’t see any problem with his fame, and in fact wanted him to take advantage of it more often than he did, just made the gift more special.

It was a wizarding photograph, and a description, as Draco had said, of a tiny cottage somewhere out in the wilds of Wales, or maybe Ireland—no, definitely Wales, Harry found as he read on. It was on an Unplottable piece of land, and the person who owned it controlled the wards absolutely. No one could visit there but someone to whom the owner had given both verbal and written permission. All cameras, including wizarding ones, spontaneously failed. There were special wards to discourage spying artificial animals and Animagi and other magic that people might use to get around the wards. If Harry chose to live there, he would have absolute privacy.

The cottage’s name was Aerie, from the description. Harry smiled and leaned over to kiss Draco.

His brother cried out then, though Harry finished the kiss before he turned around. He was half-eager to see if Connor would manage to assume his own Animagus form, a boar, but it seemed he wasn’t that lucky.

He did shake in Parvati’s arms, leaning back with his cheeks flushed and his eyes, when he opened them, shining. And Harry became aware of a new kind of power in the room: cheerful, brash, hearty, and very, very Gryffindor. The only time he had felt anything like it before was the night that Connor had saved him from going to Voldemort. Now Connor was come fully into that kind of determination, that magic that said, “Bugger this,” to obstacles and bulled straight through.

And, of course, he had come into it fifteen minutes after Harry did, being fifteen minutes younger.

“Welcome to adulthood, little brother,” Harry felt free to tease, when Connor opened his eyes.

“At least I didn’t turn into a kitten,” Connor retorted, which made those who could hear it laugh.

Harry started to respond, but the sound of owls’ wings startled him. He looked up, searching, and inwardly wishing that no correspondence would intrude on this celebration. Then he reminded himself how petulant that wish was. He’d had nearly two hours free of the pressure of the war. Surely that ought to be enough.

Two owls, both gray ones, soared through the windows of the Great Hall. One of them made for Harry, one for Connor. Harry felt a bit sick at the thought of gifts from Evan Rosier.

But he found, when the owl settled in front of him and held out its leg, that the letter bore an official Ministry seal.

And it was in a black envelope.

Like the letter that came for the Weasleys, about Percy, Harry thought, and again Voldemort’s words rang in his head.

I will take from you everything that you have loved.

With somewhat nerveless fingers, Harry reached out, grasped the envelope, and opened it.

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Intermission: An Old Debt Repaid

The new wards on Tullianum hadn’t really done much in the way of protecting the prison, Indigena thought.

The problem was that the people weaving the wards did not understand the earth their Ministry was built on. They conceived of it as emotionless, motionless rock and stone and soil, even after Indigena had burst in the first time by convincing her plants to grow up through it and the earth to bear the tendrils, vines, and flowers. They assumed stronger wards underground were enough.

But not when one can speak to the earth, Indigena thought. This time, it was even easier, as the last time she opened Tullianum she had still been mostly human. Now the soil felt her coming and began to reach out, currents of warmth traveling through the dirt, the stone rippling in tiny tremors that no other human would ever notice because they wouldn’t reach the surface. They did not pull back simply because she willed them to, but they were ready and willing to listen to her, because she treated them like equals.
When they learned what she wanted, they pulled back in a long, smooth split like a skirt tearing, and took the wards with them. The wards could not float in air as wards in buildings could. Here, they were anchored to stones and dirt, a solid medium, rather like wards underwater, and if their anchors parted, they perforzed parted.

Indigena turned and gestured down the tunnel her vines had opened behind her. The others followed her upwards, treating it like a mixture of corridor and ladder. Sylvan, Adalrico, and Hawthorn were a small force, but Voldemort hadn’t felt the need to send a larger one. Only those with some need should go to Tullianum—with the exception of Indigena, who was doing it partially to prove to her Lord that she could lead a successful mission.

This one was going to be successful, Indigena knew, as Hawthorn and Adalrico climbed out of the cracked stone floor into a silent prison. The wards weren’t sending out alarms, and Indigena’s plants, seeking people not inside the cells, had taken the Aurors standing guard. The whole of Tullianum’s central corridor was a mass of dancing green tendrils and disturbed dirt.

Indigena waited until both Hawthorn and Adalrico looked at her, and then nodded. “You know what to do,” she said. “You have come for your vengeance. Go and claim it.”

Adalrico closed his eyes and whispered a detection spell. A door a few paces away from him glowed, and Adalrico held out a ward-stone towards it. In moments, the protective wards were gone, and Adalrico had the door open with a simple Alohomora.

Inside, Pharos Starrise looked up, but only for a moment. Then his eyes shut, and his head tilted back so that the cords in his neck stood out, and his mouth opened in a silent scream as the magical weapon Adalrico carried exerted a punishing force that Indigena couldn’t feel.

Hawthorn, meanwhile, had turned towards the Aurors caught in the tendrils. She could not readily identify her attackers from that night when she’d been arrested for being a werewolf, Indigena knew, but that didn’t matter. She would slaughter Aurors, and that would hurt the Ministry, and give the woman a taste of vengeance satisfied.

That was the reason Voldemort had sent both of them on this mission, in fact: to strengthen the hold of their hatred over them by having them confront the objects of that hatred. By that alone, Indigena knew that Voldemort had decided to sacrifice Lucius Malfoy, though what he was going to do with him Indigena didn’t know as yet.

“What prisoners can we have, cousin?” Sylvan asked her.

Indigena whispered a quick detection spell of her own, and a slender vine, threaded through with red in all its leaves, arched itself like a cracking whip and struck two doors. “Anyone but the people in those cells,” she answered. “Those are mine.”

Sylvan gave her a curious glance. “I was unaware that you hated anyone.”

Indigena shook her head. “This is not for someone who wronged me. It is the only thing I can do to make up for a helplessness I once felt.”

Her cousin nodded, and then turned, eliminated the wards on another cell, and pulled out the woman inside. For a moment, he cupped her cheeks between his hands. Indigena was unsure the woman actually saw him. After a few years here, with nothing to do but stare at blank walls for a majority of the day, most prisoners went mad.

Sylvan must have found what he was looking for in her eyes, however, because he sighed and closed his own, half-relaxing. A series of small cuts opened in a circle around the sides of his face, and out of them came glittering spikes that shone like, and might actually be, diamond, for all that Indigena knew. The spikes came down and fastened in similar places on the woman’s face. Sylvan jerked his head back, eyes still closed, and tugged the woman’s face off like a mask.

When her lipless mouth began to scream, he laid her down on the floor and went to work, chanting the words of a long Latin spell as he wove the blood magic.

Indigena shook her head as she pursued her course to the first door that her detection spell had indicated. Sylvan and Oaken maintained their invulnerability through an ongoing series of unwilling sacrifices. That was the reason they had joined her Lord in the first place; they knew that, if Harry won, the world he created would not be hospitable to them, and he would certainly never welcome them to fight at his side.

She removed the first door by the simple expedient of asking a few of the green tendrils in the hall to wrench it off its hinges. They did so, and then began tossing the door from one thicket to another, playing tag. Indigena smiled. They were among the
most playful plants she had ever invented, a side effect of having the exuberance to break through solid stone.

Inside, Lily Potter started up from her bed and stared.

“Hello,” said Indigena cheerfully. “I suppose you know already that I’m a Death Eater. Indigena Yaxley. And I’ve come to punish you for what you did to Harry in the past.” She felt a slow green satisfaction uncurl in her. The reason her Lord had agreed to let her have James and Lily was so that their deaths would hurt Harry—he would kill everyone Harry had ever loved, excluding his brother—but Indigena doubted that would really be the case. Harry had loved his parents, but surely he did not now. And Indigena had wanted to do something like this ever since she saw Lily walk out of the courtroom with her life and illusions intact.

“You can’t,” said Lily, as if that would stop her somehow. She seemed to be watching around Indigena’s sides, preparing to make a run for it, but the playing vines filled the whole of the door. “I’ve already been punished.”

Indigena cocked her head. “That might be true, and if that’s the case, then you shall only have a painful death. Painful, but quick. I am not at home to drawn-out torture.” She looked over her shoulder and nodded, and a beautiful vine crept forward, bearing a red flower that still made Indigena’s heart swell when she looked at it. Her giant variation on the sundew was a shining thing.

“But first, I must see if you have been punished.”

The sundew lunged forward and wrapped its gently fringed tentacles around Lily before she could react, holding her motionless in a wet cocoon. Indigena nodded when she felt the flower’s attention shift to her. “Now, love.”

The ordinary sundew was a predatory plant whose juices dissolved the insects it captured. Indigena had adapted it so that the juices sought another prey than flesh. They trickled into Lily’s body now, climbing into her bloodstream and ascending swiftly to the brain.

There, they raced into her thoughts and mingled with her memories. Indigena waited, now and then touching the sundew’s stem when it wriggled at her for reassurance. Each sundew had to be made to respond to a limited range of memories, so far; it was her one regret that she hadn’t been able to breed them so that they would work for many types of prey.

But then, it was not as if she had cause to use them very often, either, since they were made to dispense justice and not vengeance.

The tendrils gave a sudden and violent flex. Indigena could feel a cold smile working its way onto her face.

“No, you have not been punished at all,” she said softly. “I was afraid not. Your death will be full of emotional pain, then. I am sorry,” she added, while letting her expression show that she wasn’t sorry at all.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Lily whispered, and tears were trickling down her face. “I’ve been punished. Let me go.”

“No,” said Indigena simply, and sent the second sundew in the hall to fetch James. While they waited for him, she smiled at Lily, and explained. “I was looking at your memories to see if you understood what you had done. And you did not. You’ve been stripped of your magic, left to rot here, denied contact with your children and your husband, and still it’s not enough. Still, you don’t understand that what you did was wrong. So.” She nodded at the sundew. “This flower shall make you understand, before you die.”

“You can’t do that,” Lily whispered. “You can’t.”

“My dear,” said Indigena gently, “many things about me are supposedly impossible. And yet I survived triple-linked blood curses, and I have come this far into a darkness that should have destroyed me. I trust that you will at least leave me this contact with the possible that I enjoy.”

She looked up as the second sundew dragged James in, flexing all over. Yes, he did not understand, either.

“Probo Memoriter,” she whispered, and flicked her wand.

Normally, the spell displayed a person’s memories about a specific subject to the caster. But Indigena had adapted the sundews carefully, and at the command, they released the prepared memories into Lily and James’s head. Her Lord had been more than glad to lend her memories of Harry in pain, including the graveyard and what he had seen in the boy’s head of his past while the scar connection between them was still open.

Indigena poured those images into them—and more than the images, the feelings behind them. She let them feel every single thing they had done to their son, and, through him, to their second son and to other people. Though this justice was mostly for
Harry, Indigena had some fondness for Connor as well. If they could understand how they had nearly made him useless by spoiling him so much, then she would be even more satisfied than she felt right now.

Of course, it would be hard to top the satisfaction she felt as she watched them writhe, their faces wrinkling, or as she touched the sundews and briefly caught a glimpse into the chaos of their minds. They were swirling amid black-red pain. They were face-to-face with the consequences of their actions, and the knowledge that those consequences had caused immense grief and suffering.

Indigena felt no need to let up on or modify the intensity of the memories, even when she heard Lily screaming again. Let the silly woman scream. Indigena could not change time and make her fall on her knees uttering the cries for pardon that she should be giving, but she could at least make her understand before she died. If Indigena had simply killed her, then it would have been a hollow victory. Lily would have died believing herself a martyr.

She was not. Nor was she an innocent victim. Indigena had felt the longing to make her understand that ever since she’d gone to the Potters’ trial in the guise of Iris Raymonds.

And now she had. The sundews had stopped pouring memories. James was staring at the far wall with eyes that looked as if he had seen the world shatter into black ash and poisonous rain. And Lily’s face looked as if she had seen the Dark Lord reign triumphant and rearisen, and the Dark Lord was herself.

“Now you are punished,” Indigena said softly.

James turned his head away. Lily uttered a sick sound of pain, as if she had blood stuck in her throat.

Indigena whistled.

The sundews clamped down harder, and their tendrils snaked around Lily and James, smearing their faces with sweetness, making them breathe in deliberately poisoned honey. The digestive juices in the flowers themselves simply sensed or gave memories. The tendrils acted like those of an ordinary flower, attracting and then trapping their prey.

Lily and James drowned behind a mask of honey, much as they had lived, but this time, they were aware of the rottenness that lay behind it. Indigena nodded as she let her sundews feast, and partially digest the bodies. She didn’t let them have the heads. The bodies needed to be left recognizable.

That done, the sundews slithered out after her. Indigena joined Hawthorn, who was covered with blood, in the hall, and Adalrico shortly after. He was clutching a set of fingerbones. Indigena didn’t ask. She knew Pharos wasn’t still alive, because their Lord had forbidden Adalrico to bring him back to the burrow as a hostage.

“Where is Sylvan?” she asked, glancing around.

“Here, cousin.”

Indigena turned, and saw him jogging up behind her, brushing aside ferns as he came. His face and hands dripped red-black gore thick as marmalade. His green eyes shone more brightly than they had in some time, and now and then he paused to chew something in his mouth. He nodded to her, graceful and composed even behind all the blood. “Shall we go?”

“We shall,” said Indigena, and led them down again, the sundews and the vines slinking gracefully around her. The tendrils brought Lily’s cell door along as a toy, partly in a reflection of Indigena’s mood.

She felt better than she had in some time, and convinced there could be justice even in darkness.

\[
\text{Even if the recipient does not know it.}
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**Chapter Nineteen: A Lock of Severed Hair**

Harry knew the letter by heart almost before he finished it, because the words seemed to find echoes in his head and rebound themselves back, as if his skull were made of stone.

*July 31st, 1997*
Dear Harry

This letter is to inform you of the deaths of your parents, Lily and James Potter, found in their cells at Tullianum this morning murdered by Death Eaters. They were identifiable by those parts of the bodies left intact, and as soon as they can be checked for traces of Dark magic by our Aurors, their bodies will be released to your custody. We here at the Ministry are sorry for your loss.

Connor made a strangled sound, and Harry looked up to see him staring at his own letter with a similarly strangled, twisted face. A moment later, he dropped his letter on the table as he tore himself free from Parvati’s arms and ran.

Harry stood, speaking as he moved, so that no one else would think he had to accompany them. “We’ve just received news that our parents were murdered,” he told the room at large. “Please excuse us.”

He went after Connor, navigating easily by the sound of his pounding footsteps, the only ones in the corridor; if someone who lived in Hogwarts hadn’t come to the festival, Harry didn’t know who they were. Connor was making for Gryffindor Tower, but he got delayed by a trick step he would ordinarily have jumped over. By the time he freed his foot, Harry had reached him.

“Harry,” Connor whispered, turning his head away. “Just. Leave me alone. I can’t talk to you right now.”

Harry ignored him, slipping his arms around Connor’s waist and bearing his brother backward until he had him cuddled against his chest. His ears picked up the sound of footsteps following them, and he wrapped the Extabesco plene around them both without a thought. He didn’t want to be found right now, even by Draco. No one else was likely to understand the depth of Connor’s grief.

“Yes, you can,” he said, running his fingers through his brother’s hair. “I know that you don’t think I’m sorry they died, but I am.”

“Why?” Connor whispered. “They did horrible things to you, Harry. I know that, but I—I still loved them, damn them, and I don’t expect you to feel the same way. Just—“ His arms had found their way around Harry’s shoulders by now, and seemed determined to clutch tight, despite his earlier words. “Just don’t say anything bad about them, all right? I couldn’t bear that right now.”

Harry nodded against Connor’s neck.

“I know that you’re sorry about them the way you’re sorry about anyone dying,” Connor whispered. “But don’t say that. Let me pretend that you’re sorry because of who they were.”

Harry tightened his clasp on his brother’s back and said nothing. The truth was that his sorrow had more of an edge to it than that. He remembered Voldemort’s words about taking everything he had loved from him too well.

The only reason Lily and James had died had been because Harry had loved them once, and Voldemort was determined to reap the world of everyone like that. They weren’t prime targets. They weren’t people he loved now. They weren’t as easy to reach as innocents wandering the countryside; it must have taken a bit of effort to prepare the Tullianum raid, as a matter of fact. But Voldemort had meant it when he said Harry’s love would doom someone else, and he was proving it.

The dissatisfaction that thought created was gnawing a hole in Harry’s heart, eating a small corner of it and rendering it scraps.

Who might live, if I hadn’t shown that I valued them?

For some people, of course, it was too late; Voldemort knew full well that Harry loved Connor and Draco and Snape and oh, so many more. But there might be others, further from him, whom Voldemort would consider targets and Harry wouldn’t even think to warn. They could have lived if his enemy’s hatred was not so cruel and so widespread, and if Harry had been a bit more cautious about his affection.

“I didn’t realize how much I hoped they would change,” Connor whispered then. “Well—James, at least. Not Lily. I’d given up hope of Lily. But as long as he lived, I thought there was the chance he might owl someday, asking to see me—us—and tell us he was sorry, though of course it would never have been enough.”

Harry nodded against his neck again, and wrapped his arms more tightly around Connor when he sagged. Then he made soft soothing, clucking, crooning noises, and Connor dissolved at last into helpless sobs.
Harry folded up the unfortunate thoughts and put them away. Even if they were true, and James and Lily would have lived if Harry hadn’t loved them, this was no time to voice it. He couldn’t do anything to convince most of the people around him not to love him, and Connor needed support far more than Harry needed to say stupid things. Harry would lend his support through the funeral, if Connor asked him to attend, and his strength. It was what he did.

The discontent had made a small place to lie down in his heart, but it could stay there. It wasn’t really a new thought, after all.

Harry had often wondered what his life would be like if things could only have changed, or, rather, remained the same—if no one had ever known what Lily had done to him, if he had stayed Connor’s guardian. This wasn’t even his first proof absolute that people dead now would have lived if he had stayed that way. It was only a newer and sharper version of it.

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Draco had crisscrossed the hallway for the third time when he heard soft voices, and rounded the corner to see Harry kneeling in front of his brother, talking. Connor’s face was a mass of tears, of course. Draco paused to push his worried expression into a stoic mask. He didn’t care about Lily and James, he cared about Harry, but if Connor was actually grieving, he wouldn’t want to see Draco’s indifference.

Connor’s virtues were blazing especially bright now, but they were occluded by the burst of Harry’s topaz. He said something that made Connor shake his head from side to side, but Draco could only make out the words when he got closer.

“—of course I want you there. Just because you renounced their name doesn’t mean that you renounced their blood.” Connor had the good grace to hesitate, at least, and add, “If you want to come, of course.”

“I want to be there,” Harry said, and his voice was full of such soothing comfort that Draco had no idea what he really felt.

“Thank you, Harry.” Connor squeezed his hand for one moment, and then leaned against him. Harry put his arms around him, and patted his shoulders twice. His eyes made Draco think about backing off. If anyone came looking to tease or bother Harry’s little brother in the next hour, Draco wouldn’t place a high priority on their lives.

He took a cautious step forward anyway, and Harry lifted his head and looked at him. Draco blinked. The gaze he was receiving now wasn’t one he’d been subjected to in a long time. Harry was evaluating him as a potential threat.

He nodded, though, and whispered so that Connor’s small gasping breaths almost covered his words, “What did you want, Draco?”

“Just to find you,” said Draco. “To make sure you were safe.”

“I’m fine.”

Fine, my arse, Draco thought, but Harry’s face was calm and closed. His eyes were the only things that challenged that impression, and they were full of burning wrath and fury for his brother’s sake. If Harry grieved for his parents, if he felt their loss as a blow, Draco had no idea.

“We’ll hold the funeral as soon as we receive the bodies,” Harry went on, his hand moving up and down Connor’s spine the way he would soothe a baby. “We’re unlikely to want to linger. The funeral will be near Lux Aeterna. Lily’s family would hardly want her body back, and James was a worthy heir of the Potter line at one point in his life. He should be laid to rest near his family.”

And he sounds like he’s planning a funeral for strangers, Draco thought. Which might actually be the healthier reaction. Damn it. There’s nothing I can do until I know if he needs comfort or not.

“Will I be welcome to attend?” he asked.

“That’s not my decision to make.” Harry looked down at Connor. “What do you say about that, brother?”

“He can come,” Connor’s voice welled out, muffled. “But not if he says anything bad about them. I just—I want this to be a day when they’re laid to rest. I don’t want them as specters in our lives, of either cruelty or gladness.”

Harry nodded. “And what about other people?”

“The same conditions apply to them.”
“Of course,” said Harry, and stood, easily carrying Connor with him because of his magic. “I’m going to get him to bed, Draco. You can tell the others that I’m fine. I’ll be staying in Gryffindor Tower tonight.”

“Tonight?” Draco couldn’t help asking. “It’s barely one in the afternoon, Harry.”

“I know that,” said Harry. “But Connor needs rest.” Draco realized only then that the sobs had become snores, and Connor appeared to have dropped straight into exhausted sleep, though he still clung desperately enough to Harry to defy that impression. “And removing myself from him now would probably wake him up.”

He turned and walked away. Draco licked his lips and couldn’t resist one more call. “Harry, are you all right?”

“Fine, of course,” Harry said. “Why wouldn’t I be, given what they did to me?” And he rounded the corner and was gone.

Draco shook his head slowly. That was actually the reaction he supposed Harry should have, if he’d given up on caring about his parents altogether. He would only attend the funeral and show sorrow for his brother’s sake. He wasn’t grieving, he was sorry for Connor’s grief.

Except that his acting is so convincing that I have no idea if that’s what he feels, or not.

He turned to find Snape, wondering all the while what to tell him. Should they be concerned about Harry, or not?

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As Harry had thought, Connor didn’t wake when Harry laid him down on his bed, but the moment Harry adjusted his position, he stirred and fretted, the way he had when they were still children sleeping in one cot and Harry would try to leave for a lesson. Lily had taken to telling him those early vows, while Harry was still too young to completely understand them, through the bars of the cot. Harry would lie still, arms around Connor, and listen.

He did that now, curling protectively around Connor and listening to the faint sounds that came through the Tower windows along with the sunlight. He lay there he didn’t know how long, watching as the shadows shifted and the sunlight withered and waxed with each passage of a cloud. It was a warm day, at least to lie fully clothed under blankets and next to someone else’s body heat. Harry didn’t let the sweat trick him into releasing Connor, though. He wouldn’t have let it happen if he were lying in the same position with Draco.

Or if Draco was comforting you—

Harry cut himself off with a small shrug. He didn’t think he needed the comfort. The major emotion he felt about the death of his parents was regret for the reason Voldemort had killed them. From the angle that Draco and Snape would see it, he certainly should feel relieved and proud that they were gone; they’d done so much to hurt him. Draco hadn’t grieved even over Lucius as much as Harry had expected him to, given what Lucius had done to hurt the Malfoy family name before he was called back to Voldemort. Snape despised James and hated Lily. And Connor didn’t expect grief of Harry, but he needed support.

So it was most comfortable for everyone if he just remained the way he was now.

Harry watched the changing sunlight, and waited for Connor to wake up. He expected more tears, a need for more soothing words, and some questions about the unfairness of life. Connor was an adult, almost, but he hadn’t lost someone so close to him since Sirius. He would need reassurance that the confusion he felt was all right, that a funeral near Lux Aeterna was all right, that even his tears could emerge because it wasn’t wrong to grieve for someone dead.

In the meantime, Harry watched the sunlight track across the walls.

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Snape turned Harry’s head slowly back and forth, peering intently into his eyes. Harry bore with it, his face absolutely expressionless, as it had been in the last few days since his parents’ deaths.

That wasn’t to say he was welcoming Snape’s Legilimency into his mind. Every time Snape tried, even to catch a glimpse of the emotions he was sure Harry must be feeling, he met a thick, choking kind of mist he hadn’t seen before. He was sure Harry wasn’t suppressing his emotions, because he had promised not to do it again, but he was defending his thoughts.
And for the last few days, he had helped his brother plan for the funeral, comforted Potter when he needed it, reassured those people frightened by the sudden appearance of such dark news in the middle of a festival, sent formal condolences to the Ministry on the loss of so many of its Aurors, commiserated with Tybalt Starrise about the death of his brother Pharos, and acted all the while as if this attack had only affected those he loved and not himself, or people he had once loved.

It was quite maddening for Snape. But Harry’s mask had not cracked once, nor shown any strain. Snape was close to having to accept that it was the truth, not a mask.

Well, there is one thing I have not tried. He had tried Legilimency on the sly, the offers of Calming Draughts and Dreamless Sleeping Potions, and surprising Harry when he was not with someone else and might let his guard down, but he had not tried simply asking him.

“How are you, Harry?” he asked, staring at him.

“Fine, sir.” Delivered with no hesitation, and no flinching. Harry stood, eyes locked on his, as if waiting for more questions.

“How are you feeling?” Snape pressed. He half-wanted to grimace at such words coming out of his own mouth, but this was how—normal—parents talked to their children, and all the other roads had dwindled into nothing.

“Strong,” Harry answered. “And calm.”

That got me exactly nowhere, Snape realized. But he'd held Harry long enough. Harry was already glancing politely at the door, as if to remind Snape that he had a meeting to attend with his brother and a curator of pureblood traditions from Diagon Alley, who knew the details of how to arrange a formal funeral when both parents in the Potter line had died at once.

“If you need help,” Snape said quietly, “you will come to me, won't you?”

“Of course,” said Harry, a trace of faint surprise coloring his voice, as if he were surprised that Snape even needed to ask such a thing. “You or Draco.”

And then Snape had to let him leave. He half-lidded his eyes, studying Harry’s posture and the way he walked, and could see no clues there, either. He hadn’t been skipping meals or sleep; that, Snape knew. He had simply picked up his role as tower of strength and guardian as though it were no strain on him at all, even though Snape knew it must be.

But with no evidence, all he could do was wait until—or in case—Harry asked him for help.

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Harry gave a little shake to settle the tension in his shoulders as he emerged from Snape’s office. The way that both his guardian and Draco had peered at him in the last few days was getting to him. They both wanted something from him that Harry didn’t know how to give.

They wouldn’t approve of his real emotions about his parents—not the regret, nor the dissatisfaction over the way things had fallen out and the yearning for them to be different. They would tell him sternly that his parents had been evil and deserved their deaths, or that of course Voldemort was only doing this to get at him and he mustn’t let that happen. They would pile more strain on Harry than he could handle right now. He was doing well as things were. He wouldn’t do as well if he had to defend and explain his emotions constantly along with everything else. The questions both Snape and Draco put him through were minor and tolerable, compared to that.

He hurried his steps. Connor was meeting with the curator in an abandoned classroom McGonagall had let them take over, near the dungeons. He didn’t have far to go, but he was already late.

The curator, who was already speaking with Connor when Harry arrived, was a short man with silver hair and a long beard that reminded Harry of Dumbledore’s. His robes were different, of course, covered with silver runes and symbols that proclaimed ancient heritage and his devotion to that ancient heritage instead of moons and stars. His name was Barnabas Followwell, apparently. Harry gave him a nod as he slid into the seat beside his brother.

Followwell studied him for a moment. “Your brother tells me that you have renounced your last name,” he said.

Harry, though a bit surprised the man hadn’t known that before he came, simply nodded again.
The curator sniffed. “Then you should know that there are certain duties you will not be able to perform during the funeral, because you are not considered to be true family of the deceased.”

If I’d known how much trouble renouncing my last name was going to cause, I would have done it in private, Harry thought in irritation. He opened his mouth to explain that he’d known that and didn’t mind refraining from those duties, but Connor actually snarled and broke in.

“They don’t want that kind of funeral. We’ll choose one that doesn’t have these—these idiotic tendencies saying that only certain people can pick up a gong or play a flute or swing a censer. You’ve already been condescending to me because my mother was Muggleborn. Don’t you dare start being condescending to my brother.”

Followwell blinked a bit, and pushed his small, square glasses up his nose. “Young man, there is no need to be rude—“

“He just lost his parents,” said Harry, leaning forward. “His parents whom he found out had abused him, and me, during the first eleven years of our lives. Tell me your feelings on the matter would be clear and uncomplicated. Sir.”

After a moment, the curator nodded stiffly, and then withdrew a pouch from a thick braided thread around his neck. He spilled a mass of documents onto the table, handling them as carefully and reverently as if they were ancient parchments, though from what Harry saw, they were much likelier to be modern copies of ancient parchments. “As your legacy is split between the two of you—your brother has told me about your being his heir, Mr. Harry—this funeral may do.” He separated one scroll from the rest and handed it over.

Harry picked it up and studied it. The list of customs at the top of the document was familiar to him, and while they were simple, they had a long history and were certainly profound and respectable enough. Best of all, this kind of funeral would allow for coffins that weren’t open at all, which would be to their advantage. The Ministry had delivered James and Lily’s bodies yesterday, and Harry had taken charge of them, so that Connor didn’t have to see them. What remained of them was the size of his lynx form.

“This will do,” he said. “What do you think, Connor?”

“Fine,” said Connor abruptly, without even glancing at the parchment. He rubbed his forehead.

Recognizing the signs, Harry stood quickly and nodded at Followwell. “We’ll ask that you deliver the instruments we need to us in three days’ time, sir. That’s when the funeral will happen.”

“Wonderful.” The man looked somewhere near happy. Harry wondered if he was grateful that this transaction was done, or if he simply liked using historical funeral customs, whether or not he liked the people involved. Harry suspected the latter, from the reverent way he took the parchment back. “I will send them to Hogwarts—or should I use the Lux Aeterna direction?”

“Here,” said Harry, knowing that the man’s owls wouldn’t be able to get through the wards around Lux Aeterna. He glanced quickly at his brother, who was sitting with his hands clasped tightly around his head and muttering under his breath. “It was a pleasure working with you, sir.”

“A pleasure.” Followwell nodded back, though Harry doubted he thought that way, and departed.

Harry turned to Connor and clasped his forearms, pulling his hands away from his face. “Tell me what’s wrong,” he said.

“I hate feeling this way,” Connor said, voice muffled. “Is this the way you felt before the trial, Harry? Thinking you should hate them more than you did! Unable to despise them as much as you wanted to, because you felt they were victims? I didn’t feel they were victims then. And now I do. They’re dead.” He took a deep breath. “But that doesn’t excuse what they did before death. But it shouldn’t have to, I should be able to feel regret for their deaths if I like. But I don’t know why it’s so strong.” He put his head back in his arms, yanking hard on Harry’s grip to break it. “I hate this.”

“They are dead,” Harry whispered, and embraced him this time. “There is no need to apologize, Connor. Yes, I went through that confusion, and I wish that I could have spared you that set of emotions forever. But the hatred and the pity and the regret and the grief and the guilt are all real. It’s better that you recognize them, rather than choosing one and castigating yourself for feeling the others.”

Connor pressed forward into the embrace and held him strongly back. “I’m glad that you’re here, Harry,” he whispered. “Since Parvati’s parents still won’t let her visit me for long periods.”
“I know,” said Harry, and began to rub circles on Connor’s back, which seemed to soothe him more than most other gestures. “And in a few days, Connor, this will be over. The loss will be there, but not as fresh.”

“I’d punch anyone else if they said that,” Connor muttered. “Especially Draco. But from you, it sounds all right.”

Harry closed his eyes and gathered Connor closer, feeling ready to kill anyone who might try to hurt his brother.

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The funeral began under a gray-washed morning sky, with clouds hanging above the sea and letting glimpses of gold peek through. Harry watched the clouds sway, and wondered if the weather could have chosen a more perfect reflection of Connor’s mood. It was better than burying their parents in either full rain or full sunlight.

The procession began at the beach where the Potters sailed their boats off into the east on Midsummer morning, near the waves. Connor took a step forward until he stood up to his ankles in the washing water. He held a boat like the parchment ones in his hands, but made of carved cypress wood, the symbol of death. Followwell had been able to produce one without much trouble; he kept such symbols for all the major pureblood families, he had assured Harry.

“The Potters came from the east on Midsummer,” said Connor. His voice was soft and didn’t carry far, but there wasn’t a large crowd there in any case. Just Harry, Draco, Snape, Peter, and, standing off to one side and speaking very carefully to the rest of them when he did speak, Remus. “I am sending this boat back into the east in memory of my father, and my mother, who became a Potter by her marriage. By the name of Helen Potter, who defeated the Firestar Lord who had loved her; by the name of Ebenezer Potter, who gave his life to shut the Shining Gate against the last of the sidhe; by the name of Mafalda Potter, who pursued her own life’s course and damned those who damned her; I give them back into the sea, and trust that they will welcome them.”

He breathed on the boat, then placed it in the water. For a moment, it bobbed, and Harry was sure that it would sink to the bottom, that it was too heavy with its thick wood sail. Then a breeze that hadn’t been blowing a moment before started to blow, and the wooden sail belled like real cloth. Connor stepped a bit away from it as it began to move, and then stood with head bowed until it vanished quietly into a wave that opened to receive it, like a mouth. Harry bowed his head with him.

Connor waded back to shore then, and flicked his wand to levitate the coffins. Both were for full-size bodies, though Lily and James made small and gore-soaked bundles in them. That didn’t matter, Followwell had said; the coffins should honor what they had been in life, not what they were at the moment of death. And Connor had agreed, though Harry thought that was partially because his brother wanted this over with so badly.

They made a small procession from the beach, over the hills behind it, across the grass to the Potter graveyard. Harry walked in silence, and so did the rest of them, to commemorate the silence that James and Lily were even now passing through. Harry did see a shadow on the grass, though, and when he glanced up, a large gull was keeping perfect pace with them, gliding like a hawk, now and then tilting its head down to watch them with one bright, beady eye. Harry kept expecting it to cry and break the solemn stillness, but it never did. He was almost sure he saw the hand of the northern goblins in that. They might not have cared greatly about the Potter line, which after all had owned one of the linchpins binding their web, but they could acknowledge the vates who had freed them and his brother.

They arrived at last at the graveyard. It didn’t look like a graveyard, and it had actually taken Connor and Harry most of a morning to find it. The ground was planted with a vaguely purplish grass that Harry knew was magical, though its magic seemed oriented to letting it survive the cold wind from the North Sea. Here and there, gentle curves, so soft they could almost be extensions of the hills, mounded the earth. Only when one drew close did one notice the tiny, ship-shaped stone in the center of each mound, containing a name and dates, and sometimes a longer inscription.

Followwell had prepared the stones for them, with Connor choosing the inscriptions. James’s gave his name and dates, and the single word Father, Lily’s her name and dates alone.

Harry came forward while Connor used his magic to open holes in the earth and then pile the disturbed soil off to the sides, ready to form the mounds when they were done here. The gull had alighted on James’s coffin and stood there with head cocked, as if wondering what he was doing.

Even bloodline heirs who had disowned themselves were allowed a final farewell. And that was what Harry intended to give. He put his hand on James’s coffin and bowed his head. Snape and Draco’s eyes burned on his back. Harry ignored them. What he felt about his parents’ death was his secret and going to stay that way, and it was not as though they could hear what he was going to say now. James had been living, and now he was dead. That was worthy of respect.
I wish you had been a better man, he thought. I wish you had had a better life. I wish I had known you better. I wish many things had been different.

He stepped away, and Connor came forward to speak his part. Harry kept one eye on him as he moved towards Lily’s coffin. Connor was composed, as the Potter heir had to be for this part of the ceremony, and his voice resembled the surface of the sea that morning: hard, but variegated with all sorts of contrary emotions.

“We are laying my parents to rest today. I cannot claim my relationship to them was uncomplicated. They abused my brother and I.” Followwell had said truth was best, and it seemed Connor would tell everything. Harry was impressed. He knew he could not have done it. “They were not the good people I thought they were for the first eleven years of my life. I will not say that does not matter.

“But they are dead now, and in a manner that no one deserves to perish.” Connor put his wand in his pocket and pulled out a silver knife, holding it to his scalp as he severed two locks of his hair. “I will mourn them for the rest of my life, even if what I am mourning is more shadow than it is reality.” He stepped forward, moving past Harry gently as he laid one lock of hair on James’s coffin and one on Lily’s. The gull watched him in interest, but didn’t try to peck at the hair. “I shall send part of myself with them, the one remaining son of both their body and their blood.”

He stepped back, and went to work widening the graves again. That left Harry to face Lily’s coffin.

Harry studied it in silence. The box was plain, dark wood with anti-rotting spells worked into the frame, and silver clasps. He knew what lay inside it. He had seen the shadow of the skull and the severed neck against the wrapping.

Part of my life lies there, too.

It did, Harry thought, and, for just this moment, he would face it and admit it, and ignore the thoughts of what Snape and Draco would say about it. Snape and Draco had no right to dictate his emotions, or his response to what had happened.

She understood me in a way that no one else ever has. She was the first to give me a vision of the future. She was the first to teach me about sacrifice, about compassion, about what the world meant and that there were more people in it than just me. And whether anyone wants to admit it or not, she’s part of the reason that I am who I am, and part of the reason that good as well as bad things happened—even if she never intended the good things. To deny that is tantamount to denying myself.

Goodbye—

And for a moment, the world seemed to turn bright and hard as diamond. The gull cocked its head to watch him in turn.

But Harry couldn’t do it, in the end. He could not give her back the name of “Mother” she had so efficiently stripped from herself.

Goodbye, Lily. Would that I could mourn you more.

“Diffindo,” he whispered, concentrating, and a lock of hair dropped from his head into his hand. He laid it on the coffin next to Connor’s. He refused to look and see if anyone was watching him and gaping. What he felt for his parents was his, to guard and lock away if he wished, and to refuse to explain.

He did not truly believe that his parents would have much existence beyond the grave, not if they did not become ghosts. The world of spirits was so bewildering that even what little necromantic magic he’d studied, to free thestrals, gave contradictory reports. He was sending the hair not to accompany Lily on any journey, but in token and sign of what would never come back.

Connor lifted the coffins carefully, James first, then Lily, and lowered them into their graves. The gull stayed until the last moment, then took flight, crying loudly, over their heads. Harry saw more than one person start at that, but he tilted his head back and watched it soar into the multi-colored sky, gaining height with each beat of its wings.

“James Potter is passed,” said Connor, and from the sound of it, he was fighting tears. “Lily Potter is passed. Ave morti.”

And then the coffins were down, and Harry heard the shuffling sound of earth heaping in above them.

He did not look. He kept watching the gull instead, until it was a circling, dancing speck flown so high that it was hard to distinguish from the leading edge of a cloud.
They might ask him questions. Harry would not answer. For today, his mind was as silent, and as difficult to interpret for any augurer, as that sky.

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**Chapter Twenty: And Sometimes There Is Light**

“And so the Pact won’t forbid you from doing this?” Harry had to admit, he was intrigued by Jing-Xi’s latest effort to help him, but not if it meant that she would be snatched out of the country by the other Lords and Ladies for breaking her word when she first came to Britain.

The Chinese Light Lady spent a moment looking over the list of Horcrux locations, then shook her head. “No. They were horrified by the idea that Voldemort has more than one Horcrux, even Alexandre, who surely has one himself. They will permit Kanerva and I to do whatever we can to destroy them.” She gave a small smile as she rolled the parchment up. “However, I would not suggest setting Kanerva to this sort of task. She can hardly control herself as it is.”

Harry nodded. Juniper had sent him a letter yesterday asking him to tell his Dark Lady friend to stop making winds blow at hurricane speeds all over the British Isles. The problem, of course, was that Harry couldn’t simply reach Kanerva like that; she was the one who decided to appear or not, and she hadn’t chosen to appear in bodily form since the night of the slaughter in Cornwall. She could be causing the winds, or she could be dancing and delighting in them, or those could simply be the places that she traveled through on her way to another part of the island.

“Harry?”

He looked up, wondering if there was anything else Jing-Xi needed. He had given her everything the bird and Regulus had told or shown him about Horcruxes, which wasn’t much. He would entrust her and Thomas the search because they were both research wizards; they would discover more if anyone could.

“Your magic is hovering in a halfway state,” said Jing-Xi softly. “You have accepted its full power, but not allowed it to settle. Why not?”

“There hasn’t been time,” said Harry, thinking of the mess his life had become since their parents’ deaths. Planning for the funeral and comforting Connor and everyone else who had lost someone in the Death Eater attack on Tullianum had taken most of his time, and then there had been some press conferences, because people were panicking under the idea that if the Ministry’s secure prison could be attacked, anywhere else could be and would be. And now he was determined to find and end the Horcruxes once and for all, but of course one could not simply do that. “I came into my full power on my birthday, and I haven’t used it greatly since then.”

Jing-Xi placed the parchment with the Horcrux locations in her pocket and stood. Her hair writhed around her like a nest of dancing snakes. “I would like you to go outside and use it now. Maintaining it in such a limbo state uses up extra energy of yours to keep it there. Allow it to settle fully into your body, and you will feel a little less tired. Even a bit of weariness can make the difference between life and death in a battle situation, as you well know.”

“Jing-Xi—”

“What?”

Harry tossed his head, wondering if part of the restlessness he felt at any mention of his magic, or indeed at any mention of what had happened on their birthday, came from that limbo state. “Can you suggest something useful for me to do with it? I can’t think of anything right now, but I don’t want to waste the magic.”

“It does not need to be something useful,” said Jing-Xi, and then she smiled at him. “In fact, it might be better if it was not. From what you have told me, on your birthday the magic was in a playful mood. Let it pass through that mood and come out the other side.”

“So no concentrating on the Horcruxes and hoping my magic points me towards them?” Harry asked, even as he stood up.

Jing-Xi shook her head. “You have not relaxed or played since your birthday,” she said. “I think it’s time, Harry.”

“I didn’t mean to—” Harry began.
Lightly, she reached over and clasped his wrist, and the sensation of her power eddying over his like sunlit water calmed him. “I am not blaming you,” she whispered. “Merely advising you. Go out and play until your magic finds its proper place, Harry. Then you will have more energy to meet the problems in front of you, and you will lighten your mind.”

Harry lowered his eyes and nodded. “Sorry,” he murmured. “I’ve been—on edge.” Snape and Draco kept trying to talk to him about the funeral. Harry kept telling them they weren’t talking about that. And the number of things that had gone wrong made him hypersensitive whenever someone started talking about another mistake.

“I know.” Jing-Xi squeezed his wrist one more time, and walked him towards the door. “Never fear. Thomas and I will turn up information on these Horcruxes. We turned up information on the laws underlying the Grand Unified Theory, didn’t we? Even though it took us years.”

“We don’t have years,” Harry murmured.

“Well I know it.” And then she hugged him, which so startled Harry that he didn’t return the embrace. She let him go, gently pushed him into the hallway, and shut the door behind him while he still blinked.

“There you are, Harry.”

Harry concealed a groan. Draco was leaning against the wall, waiting for him, and now he stood straight and nodded. Harry steeled himself for some new query about the funeral, or how he was feeling.

Draco only asked, “Where are you going? Do you want me along?”

That left Harry unsteady, waiting for the attack. But he mustered a smile and said, “Outside to play with my magic like a good little boy, the way that Jing-Xi told me to.”

“Too bad it isn’t to play with something else,” Draco murmured, and Harry choked. When he shot a glance at his partner, though, Draco’s eyes were very wide, and he looked the picture of innocence. “You didn’t say whether you wanted me along. Can I come?”

Harry hesitated, but at last said, “I don’t see why not.”

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They stepped out under such a beautiful sunset that Draco’s breath caught. For once, the clouds had drawn back enough to show the light without the rain, but hadn’t departed completely, so that the light had them to play with. The gray behemoths glinted with pink dripping down the underside, thick as paint. Above them arched lavender, and some nameless, wine-dark color that made Draco wish he could have sat under it and watched it develop, so that he would discover what it was made of. In the east, the blue-black darkness was already complete.

But the most beautiful thing was the dome of the sky itself, beaten and shining like hammered gold. Draco clenched his hands and lost himself in the sight for a moment, until Harry’s magic released him.

Draco would have known that feeling anywhere, the heady press of fire and fur along his skin. Turning, he saw Harry with his hands extended and his head bowed, the dark blue and purple light bursting around him, inchoate shapes of trees and jaguars and snakes whirling and blazing and fading. Then the magic settled itself and struck out at clouds, trees, grass, Draco himself.

He dropped to one knee as he felt the emotion the magic was giving him, wave after wave of solemn high happiness, of a peace stolen from the changing world and transplanted for this one moment. He closed his eyes, to conceal the tears this was bringing forth, and blindly put out a hand. Harry found and clasped it, pulling him close to stand with an arm around his shoulders, while he continued to send peace forth.

Draco forced his eyes open, because he wanted to watch. The lake, in front of them, rippled and began to dance under the pressure of a slight breeze. The light it reflected broke and scattered, but formed new patterns, triangles and circles, of radiance so extreme that Draco’s sight burned. The air warmed and brightened, and it became hard to tell what was Harry’s magic and what was retransfigured sunset. Light and power blended together, and Draco felt a distant, trembling premonition of what made people Declare for Light.

This was not the strongest magic he had ever felt, nor the most satisfying. It was the most beautiful. And beauty could seduce hearts.
I should know, Draco thought, as he tilted his head back and stared into Harry’s eyes. His hand came up and swiped softly at Harry’s cheeks, the tears leaking across them. Then he reached up, hooked his arms around Harry’s neck, and pulled him down into a firm kiss.

Harry made a startled little noise, but didn’t refuse, kissing back and collapsing so that they were chest-to-chest. Draco felt his magic lift and drape them both like a cloak, then extend in all directions as though the cloak were woven of a spider’s web. It caressed earth and air with stored heat. Draco arched his back, and he knew what he wanted, as suddenly and as completely as if it had been written in letters of fire on the back of his eyelids.

Accordingly, when Harry tried to roll them over so that Draco was on top, Draco gripped his shoulders and stopped him.

“No,” he said quietly. “Not this time.”

Harry froze in place, the way he tended to do when he assumed he’d made a mistake, his eyes wide and confused and searching Draco’s. He must have seen what Draco wanted there, because he gave a little shuddering buck, like a hooked fish.

“N—”

Before he could even get the refusal out, Draco cupped his face and brought it down again, kissing him breathless, trying to convey with that gesture how much he trusted Harry. He knew Harry was trying to refuse because he didn’t trust himself, didn’t trust his own capacity to control and dominate people.

How can I make him see that this isn’t about domination? I have perfect confidence in him.

Perhaps I should just say it.

“Harry, you aren’t going to hurt me,” said Draco. “I mean it,” he added, as Harry’s head started shaking. “I know that you’re not going to hurt me, because I trust you not to hurt me.” He nuzzled his head into the side of Harry’s neck, smugly congratulating himself on falling in love with him. Who else could he experience this level of trust with? “Come on. We both need this, and I know we both want this.” He rolled his hips against the hard warmth at Harry’s groin, and Harry caught his breath with a little gasp and a sob. “Please.”

Harry swallowed once, then nodded. Draco half-convulsed with the strength of the joy that ran through him.

“All right,” Harry whispered. “Here?”

Draco was impressed with himself for managing to arch an eyebrow. “Not unless you want to use a Disillusionment Charm, and not unless you Transfigure this grass into a cushion,” he said. “Too uncomfortable otherwise.”

Harry nodded, then stood and held out his hand. “Let’s go to bed, then,” he whispered.

As he took Harry’s hand, Draco realized there was something different about it. The sense of tension, of danger, he’d felt around Harry for the last few days had melted, or at least muted. He no longer seemed as if he would burst into flames if someone said the wrong thing. And his magic had filled the air with a deep purring that Draco had to concentrate to hear.

Doubtless, some of that was because Harry had just used his magic in rather a spectacular manner. But Draco knew part of it was also due to him.

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Harry hoped that Draco couldn’t see his nervousness as they returned to their bedroom, and he set up the strongest silencing and locking spells he knew. It wouldn’t do to be disturbed in the middle of this.

He should have known better.

He jumped a bit as Draco’s arms curled around his middle, and he murmured into Harry’s ear, “You’re not going to hurt me, Harry. Pain in sex can be unforgivable, but this isn’t about to be. And do you know why?”

“No not the slightest idea.” Harry could hear the panic building in his voice, and could do absolutely nothing to stop it. He knew things about himself that Draco didn’t. He had that darkness inside him, that darkness that liked the idea of hurting others, of
dominating them for his pleasure. So long as he put limits on himself—so long as Draco was the one inside him, and not the other way around—Harry knew things would work, because they had worked in the past. This, though—it reminded him of possession, of being controlled, of the phoenix web. He hated compulsion on himself, but he would kill himself before he would control someone else like that. He didn’t see why every relationship he had couldn’t just be equal.

“Because I know it will be slight, and I know I’ll forgive you for it if it happens.” Draco kissed the back of his neck, and then pulled away. Harry heard the sound of buttons sliding through cloth.

He turned around, wondering if Draco would give the notion up once he saw the fear in his eyes. But Draco’s face was utterly serene, though lit with a blaze, as if part of the sunset light had migrated under his skin. He gave Harry a look that was not a smile, and Harry knew that Draco understood the fear, and intended to lead him through it anyway.

And then Draco smiled.

Harry would have taken a step back if the door wasn’t behind him. He felt punched him in the gut. He had never seen such perfect trust in someone else’s eyes.

“I want this,” said Draco, and ran a hand through his hair in what looked like an accidental gesture, though that “accidental” gesture drew attention to the glints of light in his pale hair and the motion of his arms, so Harry had his doubts. “And you know what I’m like when I want something, Harry. Besides, I know that not all of you is so reluctant as you pretend.” He cocked his head. “Don’t tell me you’re not curious. Don’t tell me that you haven’t wondered what this would be like. Because of the pleasure I’m experiencing when I bed you, if nothing else.”

Harry flushed as he felt his cock give a twitch. “I’ve thought about it,” he said. “But I had ethical objections.”

Draco just gave a soft laugh, as if Harry’s ethical objections were an endearing trait of his, and nodded to Harry’s clothes. “Off with them, now,” he said. “And then I want you to kiss me.”

“We were kissing,” Harry felt compelled to say as he began to fumble at his clothes, his fingers feeling thick and clumsy. “On the grass.”

“Not like that,” Draco said, and sauntered to the bed, lying back on it, so that he could watch Harry undress. “The way I kiss you when I top. I want to be spoiled.”

Harry blinked, and paused in undoing his trousers, which made Draco hiss at him in impatience. “That’s spoiling?” He had never considered it so. To him, it had been more like a sign of a contract between him and Draco, that this was all right, that from moment to moment Draco was in charge and it was all right.

“The slowness I use, when I’m dying to go faster, is,” Draco, and leaned forward, taking a firm grip on Harry’s erection and pulling on it. Harry gave a strong gasp, swaying so hard he nearly fell over. Draco spent a moment more stroking him, then pulled away and raised one eyebrow. “Remember how good that feels? That’s pleasure, Harry, and nothing you need be cautious about. Now, come on.”

“I suppose I’m still worried about hurrying you,” Harry murmured, crawling onto the bed.
“Think about what you feel when you’re in my position,” Draco demanded, lying back and pulling Harry on top of him so that they lay chest-to-chest—and groin-to-groin, which made Harry nearly forget about listening for a moment. Luckily, Draco was there to lift his chin and remind him. “Don’t you want to make me feel like that?”

“Yes.” Harry wondered who had taken his voice out of his throat and put this gasping, husky, guttural thing in its place. He lowered his head and carefully licked at the side of Draco’s neck, and then blew on his ears. Draco sighed and let his head fall back against the pillow, running one hand down between their chests so that, apparently, he could stroke them both at once.

“Come on, Harry,” he whispered.

Harry grinned. He didn’t think he’d ever heard that exact tone in Draco’s voice before—begging without begging, pleading without pleading. He’d tried to make it sound demanding, and failed miserably.

Harry decided to see if he could get Draco to sound like that again. He moved down his chest, altering his position from moment to moment so that Draco couldn’t tell what would happen next. Now he blew across his nipples, now he simply ran his fingers lightly up and down the sensitive skin near Draco’s ribs, now he suddenly changed direction altogether and came near to sucking him. Draco muttered and thrashed and moaned, and sometimes, when Harry hit one of his extremely vulnerable spots—of which he had fewer than Harry, which wasn’t fair—he made a garbled sound that was rather like a version of a coo.

The first time he made it, he froze, and then stared at Harry. “Tell me that I did not sound like a dove just then,” he muttered. Or, at least, he tried to mutter it, Harry knew. His voice, broken with pants and half-moans and long pauses between individual words, made it sound rather more like a stutter.

“You didn’t sound like a dove just then,” Harry announced obediently, and pressed down on his own groin for a moment to relieve the need. Then he went back to work, flicking Draco’s nipple at the same moment as he blew on his ear. There came the coo again.

“That is not me,” Draco denied. “You’re casting some spell or something.”

“Am not,” said Harry, and repeated it, to get the sound a third time, though Draco tried his best to keep it in. “That’s all you.”

Draco half-opened an eye and glared at him. “If you weren’t making me feel so good, I’d—“

Harry cast a wandless lubrication spell then, deciding he’d rather do it while he was riding high on the confidence of making Draco feel this good, rather than fumble it later due to nervousness. Draco’s eyes widened, and this time he sounded like a dying mouse. Harry couldn’t hold back his laughter, which had a distinctly proud edge to it.

“You told me once that Malfoys don’t squeak,” he murmured, and worked his way down Draco’s body, deliberately moving so that he tortured every most sensitive spot at least once on the way. “And we established that Blacks don’t make embarrassing noises, either, because you said so. So perhaps it’s just Draco who makes noises like this because he’s so eager to have his boyfriend inside him that he just can’t hold back.”

“You—wanker,” Draco managed, in between gasps, as Harry gently ran a hand across his arse.

“Oh, well, if you wanted that, you could have asked,” said Harry, and closed his other hand around Draco’s cock.

It became a contest then, with Draco attempting to curse him, or perhaps even summon his wand and do it for real, while Harry wanked him slowly and taunted him with circling one finger very gently across his arse, never quite putting it where Draco wanted it. When he finally did put it where Draco wanted it, Draco arched his back and, Harry would swear later, half-barked.

“Ah,” said Harry, concentrating on coordinating the movements of his hands so that he didn’t think too much about either his own rising desire or his fear. “So that settles it. You aren’t a mouse or a dove after all. You’re a bloody seal.”

“Wanker,” Draco said weakly, his head rolling back and his eyelids fluttering. “How do you—ah—stand this?”

“Obviously, you aren’t quite as good as I am,” said Harry, and carefully added another finger, listening all the time for the slightest hitch in Draco’s breathing, the slightest gasp of pain. He knew he wouldn’t be able to resist his instincts if it happened; his hand would move away from Draco like it would from a fire.

Draco made an indignant noise, arching his neck into impossible shapes. “See—what happens—next time—Harry!”
Harry waited a moment, to be sure that that last cry was a sound of ecstasy and not of agony—

“Move!”

Definitely not agony, then. Harry resumed the motions of his hands, watching all the while as Draco’s face flushed and his skin bristled with sweat. He could almost lose himself in the watching, almost forget about the excitement that leaned heavily on the inside of his neck and throat and cock. Was this what Draco felt in his position? This intensity of pleasure knowing he was responsible for someone else’s pleasure?

And then he turned a corner in his own mind.

This wasn’t about power at all. At least, it didn’t have to be. No wonder Draco trusted him. He had already known it was about feeling good, and he’d wanted to share that, to see that Harry had pleasure he hadn’t known before.

And to feel it himself, of course, because Slytherins were nothing if not selfish.

Harry lowered his head and rubbed his cheek against Draco’s stomach, drying any tears that might have crept out—tears he certainly wouldn’t admit to—because Draco, damn it, was Draco.

“I think that’s enough, Harry,” Draco said abruptly, sounding far too composed, and lifted his legs high enough to drape them across Harry’s shoulders.

He’s coherent? I’ll just have to do something about that. Harry removed his fingers, slowly, and arranged himself so that his cock was where it needed to be, casting another lubrication spell on it. He looked down, and watched the shine of the wet skin, his and Draco’s, and the way his chest jumped and shuddered and shook, so intensely was his heart racing.

“Harry.” Draco’s voice was unexpectedly clear and clean and coherent, all of which Harry was grateful for right now. “I trust you.”

Harry nodded, closed his eyes, and then slid gently forward.

As it turned out, when Draco did make a noise of pain, Harry couldn’t pull away because he was entangled in Draco’s legs and Draco’s arse and Draco’s body generally. He bent forward, gasping, and summoned his magic to help him hold his body still and his voice steady as he asked quietly, “How much did I hurt you?”

“Not much,” said Draco, and he sounded both pained and composed. “Move.”

Harry didn’t think he was able to resist a command given in a voice like that, and slowly slid forward again, stopping every time Draco made a noise, until Draco’s voice repeated again, like a trumpet sounding a charge, “Move.”

At last, finally, he could move no more, and he sagged forward and let his forehead rest on Draco’s chest, panting. He knew he was bending Draco nearly in half, but Draco didn’t complain, and Harry couldn’t have held himself upright at that moment. His skin was one blaze of heat, his mind one blaze of various emotions—terror and excitement and remorse and lust—making the world surreal.

He found he didn’t need instructions for the moment when Draco was ready for him to move again. By that time, Harry would have been surprised if either of them could have spoken, anyway. He shifted his hips back and then forward, and cried out at the warmth while Draco cried out at the end of a pleasure that Harry knew well.

And he got to know this pleasure well, too, as he took it, motion after careful motion, seemingly impossible to halt once he started. He wasn’t rough—he made sure of that—but he was thorough, because it seemed impossible not to be. And when he found his pace speeding up, he thought about stopping it only for a moment.

Then he recalled Draco saying he trusted Harry, and decided that, in return, he’d have to trust Draco. Instead of assuming that he’d hurt Draco and Draco simply didn’t want to say so for fear of ending their bedding, he’d assume he hadn’t hurt Draco until he said so.

And, another corner turned, he began to move more smoothly and more confidently, and also to look beyond himself. His hand took up the motion on Draco’s cock again, and Draco gave a gasping little breath of surprise.

Then he began pushing back, as if hoping to regain some sort of control. Harry groaned, and caught a glimpse of Draco’s smirk.
He redoubled the force of his own hips, and Draco gave a deeper gasp than his and arched in a motion that once more reminded Harry of a seal as it moved through the water.

Merlin, it felt so good, made it so hard to think of the war and Voldemort and their parents’ deaths and all the other things that had so troubled Harry. It didn’t make them cease to exist, but it carved itself out a place in the midst of them, and Harry had a perfect moment before his eyes as an illustration of what it really meant to live simultaneously, to not let the good things stop existing because of the war. Draco was tight and hot around him, and tempting in other ways, groaning now steadily, as if he could hardly find the air for anything else, but more than anything, it was good.

Draco lost control first, which Harry felt smug about as he felt the wetness pour over his fist. And then he felt the moment trembling before him that he’d been most afraid of, when he thought for sure that refusing to hold himself back in sex would hurt Draco. He could resist it, if he liked, and dim its impact. His Occlumency would help him with that if nothing else did.

The haze cleared from his mind long enough to leave him that choice, untrammeled.

And Harry chose trust again, flung himself off the cliff and into mid-motion, trusting Draco to tell him if it hurt. He leaned forward and came hard enough that it should have hurt him, but it felt, instead, like pleasure equal to the pain would have been, and his whole body shook, and it did take magic to keep him from collapsing after that and crushing Draco’s face against his chest.

Carefully, or as carefully as he could with his hands shaking like an old man’s, he ran his fingers through Draco’s hair and tilted his head back. “Are you all right?” he whispered.

Draco blinked, then lunged up, despite the awkward angle and the bones Harry could hear creaking in his neck, and kissed him by way of answer. Harry felt the Yes in his mind more strongly than words could have conveyed, and relaxed.

Gently, he pulled out of Draco again and gathered him up in his arms, murmuring cleaning spells and spells to make them dry and warm. Draco yawned and cuddled close to him, but wasn’t asleep, as Harry knew from the fact that the soft, contented murmurs refused to turn into snores. He stroked Draco’s back and neck, and circled around and around the main thought in his head, a source of deep wonder.

He trusted me. And it was all right. And I didn’t hurt him. And I trusted him, and it was all right.

And if he’d trusted him with this, did that mean that Harry could trust him with other things? His feelings about his parents and the funeral, for example, and the darkness that lived inside him?

Maybe, Harry thought, pulling Draco closer and starting to kiss the back of his neck. Not right now, not while we’re so comfortable. But later. I’m going to.

Inevitability was as a road that led him towards that level of confidence.

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Thomas sat up.

It was the first time he’d felt something like this since Priscilla’s death, a bolt of lightning that struck from his eyes down to his chest and then bounced back up to his brain. He had buried his grief with his wife and set about comforting his children and making things for the war. It was what needed to be done, and, as Harry was forever reminding people—by actions instead of words; Thomas was sure that he would shut up in embarrassment if he talked about it as often as he acted it out—when there was something to be done, one did it. He had half-expected, without knowing why he was so sure of it, never to feel that excitement that accompanied a sudden discovery again.

And yet…

Here it was. Here it was.

Thomas bent close over the list of family names from Little Hangleton, his fingers writhing on the edge of the parchment. He felt Jing-Xi adopt a careful listening stance across from him. She knew something was traveling through his mind right now, and she would be ready to hear it, but she wouldn’t interrupt, in case that caused Thomas to lose the researcher’s trance.

And Thomas was grateful for the silence. He stared long and hard at the name in the middle of the list. Gaunt.
Then he closed his eyes and dived deep into his memory. He knew many things, but he could not keep them all in the forefront of his mind at all times. So they lay in deep waters, and reeling one specific piece of information back to the surface was sometimes like catching one specific fish or diving for one specific pearl.

In this case, he was remembering the book he’d read Gaunt in before. A wizarding genealogy, years ago, when he was trying to figure out what had happened to the famous “Lost Families” who’d supposedly started wizardry in Great Britain. Slytherin had descended from one of those families, and so his descendants had been of interest to Thomas, but he’d lost them in a thicket of intermarriages, criminal trials that had persuaded his descendants to vary their names, exiles to the Continent, and orphans of war who could remember only scraps and fragments of their parents’ pasts, or who were made the magical heirs of other families and given new names. That was where everyone lost them. In the end, Thomas had been forced to admit defeat, but he’d written down his best guesses for where the Slytherin line had gone to ground.

_Peverell_ had been one of those guesses, and that family had sprouted other families, who in turn were possibilities for candidates of Peverell descent.

And one of them had been Gaunt.

Thomas sat back with a triumphant laugh, and nodded to Jing-Xi when she leaned forward to share the moment.

“We’ll want to look at Gaunt properties near Little Hangleton,” he said, and turned to an ancient map that was divided by territory belonging to certain Muggle and wizarding families. “And for evidence of a Gaunt woman bearing a child away from her family’s native land. I would wager my skin that a Gaunt woman was Tom Riddle’s mother.”

“And if the Gaunt family possessed a powerful magical object—” Jing-Xi began.

“That’s our Horcrux,” said Thomas, and his excitement blazed brighter and brighter, summoning other memories. “Come to think of it, I believe I read once that the Peverell family used rings to mark their true heirs…”

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Chapter Twenty-One: The Dark Years

Harry finally put out a hand and splayed it palm-down on the parchment, preventing Thomas from moving it, so that he could actually _glimpse_ what was happening on it. Thomas, who had been about to substitute another family tree for that one, blinked and then gave him a sheepish look. “Was I talking too fast again?”

“Yes,” said Harry absently, and bent over the tree so that he could get a good look.

This one showed the descent of the Gaunt family from the Peverell family, at least as Thomas had reconstructed it; the higher branches were dotted with numerous question marks, to show that there were other families with claims just as strong to be true heirs of the Peverells. The branches steadied as they moved down the centuries, though, and closer to modern times.

They also contracted. It seemed that the House of Gaunt had been in the habit of marrying cousins, rather like the Black family. The last generation was a man named Marvolo—Harry half-bared his teeth, remembering what Tom Riddle’s full name was—and his two children, a son, Morfin, and a daughter, Merope. Both had been born near the turn of the century. If either of those children had ever had a child, the tree didn’t record it.

“And you think Merope was Tom Riddle’s mother?” he asked, tilting his head back to see Thomas. “Why?”

“Look.” Thomas whipped the Gaunt tree away and lowered another parchment in its place. Harry saw that it wasn’t another genealogy after all, the way he had suspected. It was a copy of a trial record from the Ministry. He leaned over it, and exclaimed so loudly that Madam Pince glared at them from her desk.

The trial record claimed that Morfin Gaunt, “the only member of the House of Gaunt then left alive,” had been arrested for the murder of three Muggles, by the last name of Riddle, in 1943. He had confessed to killing them, so the Ministry hadn’t seen any reason not to toss him into Azkaban. He had died there, apparently still believing that he had actually committed the crime.

“But it’s likely that Voldemort killed his father and his grandparents instead,” Harry said softly, his mind turning inward.

“Oh, yes, extremely likely,” said Thomas, shocking him out of his reverie. He took the trial record away and replaced it with what
seemed to be a map. Squinting, Harry couldn’t orient himself until he made out a line labeled “Thames” in the middle. Even then, though, he couldn’t make out what the map covered. Twining lines of many different colors, sometimes subtly different shades, ran in and out and around each other, and sometimes had the labels of years beside them. He looked up at Thomas and shook his head in confusion.

“Oh. Sorry.” A faint blush touched Thomas’s cheeks. “This is a spell that Jing-Xi invented, some years ago. It allows us to track people by magical signature, and that, combined with the magical gifts of certain families, means that we can know that Merope Gaunt was in London in December 1926.” He hesitated for just a moment, gratifying Harry, and then touched a dark green line with some confidence. “She was alone, and she died very shortly afterward. But the building near which she died—“ he rapped his finger hard against one small square “—was a Muggle orphanage. And we know that Tom Riddle was reared in a Muggle orphanage. That, along with a little information about him such as his real name, was known to a few members of the Order of the Phoenix, and Dumbledore passed it to your friend Peter.”

“What gift did you use to track her?” Harry asked.

Thomas stood straight and proudly cocked his head. “Who says that we used one?”

“You just admitted it,” Harry pointed out, a bit amused. “And it’s just wondrous that the spell could pick up a trail that old without one.”

Thomas flushed. “Yes. Well.” He cleared his throat. “We used Parseltongue. We don’t know for certain if Merope was a Parselmouth herself, of course—we could hardly ask her—but she carried the magical signature for it. She certainly passed it on to her son. And of course it’s not surprising that descendants of Slytherin would have that gift. For me, that’s just proof positive that the Gaunts really are the last of that line, not the Thickbrackets or the Hornflowers or all the other descendants of Peverell with a claim to the title.” He gave a sharp nod. “And I’m reckoning that we’ll find that a Peverell ring is one of the Horcruxes.”

Harry half-closed his eyes. He felt he was on the verge of an important discovery, but it hung in front of him, just out of reach, and he couldn’t yet grasp it. “So Parseltongue was a blood gift in Slytherin’s line,” he murmured. “There’s no sign that Merope was the magical heir of her father.”

“No,” said Thomas firmly. “We tried to track her using the *absorbere* gift at first, actually, since we thought part of the reason Tom Riddle might have developed his powers so absurdly young was that she might be an *absorbere* and have died right near him, thus allowing him to absorb that gift within a few hours after his birth. But no such luck. That truly is a power original to him alone in his line, it seems. Parseltongue worked. Whether or not Tom Riddle was his mother’s magical heir, he was her blood heir, and that is a blood-passed gift.”

And the notion that had been taunting Harry burst full on him like a sunrise.

“Thomas,” he said, “I’m also a Parselmouth, and yet I’m certainly not connected to Tom Riddle by blood.”

“I know,” said Thomas, his face taking on a certain shine that Harry had only ever seen in his eyes when he discussed the Grand Unified Theory. “And that would have been impossible to explain, except that I studied the tunnel between you and Voldemort, and I came up with a theory.”

Harry blinked, and it was a struggle not to lose his idea in his startlement. “When did you do that?”

“In Woodhouse, before your father told me to stop, and that I was not to make you the subject of an experiment,” said Thomas, without a trace of embarrassment. “What I found there was that *all* magic passes freely back and forth between you two, including the Parselmouth gift that would ordinarily be passed only to a Riddle—or Gaunt, rather—blood heir. I have told you that magic has free will.” He waited for Harry to nod. “And by then, the Parseltongue magic knew that its host would have no heir of his body. So it changed and adapted itself when the moment came for the *absorbere* gift to flow into you. It made it possible for you to be a Parselmouth and therefore a blood heir, because it wished to survive when Tom Riddle died. It was determined that he not be the last Parselmouth in Britain, and perhaps one of the last Parselmouths in the world.” Thomas shook his head, eyes shining. “Magic is a wonderful thing, Harry, truly, and we are only on the brink of understanding it, not fully there. We will not be fully there in my lifetime, nor for a hundred lifetimes thereafter.”

Harry clenched his hands slowly, feeling the fingers of his left hand chill as they slid across the silver emblem in the center of his palm. “Do you think it’s possible, then, that from a certain angle, I could be considered the blood heir of Slytherin’s line?” he asked.

Thomas stepped abruptly back from the table, and whispered, “That is a brilliant idea, Harry, *brilliant*. Part of what made the
Gaunts whom they were was the inheritance of that magic. That was the truest sign of their descent from Slytherin, not any rings they might have managed to lose, or perhaps sell for food. And by passing to you, in a way, it makes you a Gaunt. I must research this.”

He looked as if he were about to dash off to do it right then, but Harry managed to press the documents he’d given him back into his hands. “You’ll want this,” he said. “I just need one thing from you: directions to that orphanage in London. I’ll be going there to learn what I can about Tom Riddle’s childhood.”

Thomas cocked his head and blinked rapidly. “Well, you know, Harry, that tracking spell really only reveals where someone went, and sometimes how they died. It doesn’t tell you anything about their character.”

Harry smiled. “I won’t need that tracking spell. I’ll have someone with me who can learn things from objects.”

“Oh, good,” said Thomas vaguely, his eyes blazing and elsewhere. “Well, here then, Harry.” He copied a street name rapidly onto a scrap of parchment, then tossed it to Harry and hurried out of the library. Madam Pince cleared her throat significantly and looked at Harry, as if to say that that would be a good act to imitate.

Harry pocketed the parchment, returned a few of the books he’d been using before Thomas interrupted him like a small excited whirlwind to their usual places, and then departed the library. His mind was elsewhere, on the implications of his being the actual blood heir of Slytherin—if it were true.

There was an Unassailable Curse on that small shack on the hill above Little Hangleton, which Harry now imagined was probably the one-time home of the Gaunt family, and the hiding place of the Peverell ring, assuming that Voldemort had made it into a Horcrux. The Unassailable Curse said that only someone with the blood of Slytherin—if it were true.

If Harry could be considered, in a technical sense, the blood heir of the Gaunts, since Parseltongue along with everything else had come down to him through Tom Riddle, then his blood might be enough to unravel that curse.

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Luna nodded solemnly to Harry. “If no one else has ever come asking the orphanage the story of Tom Riddle, then the doors must be eager to tell it,” she said, and carefully put her wand back into her pocket. She’d been casting spells on the warped wood of a classroom door when Harry found her. He hadn’t quite dared to ask her what that was about, though perhaps she was easing its pain. “I will go with you. But, for now, there is another question to ask. You must come with me.” She clamped her hand on his arm and started tugging him in the direction of the stairs.

Harry allowed her to tug him, knowing from the shadows of his movement that seemed to shift just off to the side that Owen and Charlie were following. “What is it, Luna?”

“The object that hates the whole world,” Luna answered him, giving him a bright glance. “The one I felt in the Headmistress’s office. The stones have watched for it, for it moving, and they have told me nothing. I think the truth is otherwise, but I need you with me to divine it.”

Harry nodded, and obediently followed until they stood outside the gargoyle, which jumped aside in a moment when it saw Luna. Luna gave it an absent-minded little pat and continued pulling Harry up the moving staircase by main strength. Harry could hear shuffling above them, and guessed that McGonagall had heard or seen them coming, via the wards, and was waiting to meet them.

Sure enough, she nodded when the door into her office opened, and not at all as if she were surprised. “Harry. Miss Lovegood.” She lifted her eyes just beyond Harry, and smiled a little. “You might as well come in, Mr. Rosier-Henlin, Mr. Weasley. What can I do for you?”

“I have to test something, Headmistress,” said Luna, and then hauled Harry front and center, just before the Headmistress’s desk. She was quite strong when she wanted to be, Harry reflected. “I don’t think it was moving around after all. I think it was waking up, and that was the source of all the trouble. It—and” Abruptly, she went still, and snapped her head up and to the side, holding out a hand. All of them were silent, but though Harry listened, he couldn’t hear anything.

“There,” Luna breathed. “Did you feel that?”

Harry shook his head. “No. Sorry.”

“I was wrong, the first time,” said Luna triumphantly. “I thought it was an object that could scurry around in the school, and that I
felt it at some times and not at others because it was in the office at some times and not at others. Then I thought it must be something Professor Snape carried with him, because he was always nearby when it got angry. But it’s getting angry at you, too, Harry. So it’s always here, but it only wakes up when someone it hates is in the office.”

“Where is it?” Harry felt compelled to whisper.

Luna lifted one hand, and unerringly pointed at the wall beyond the Headmistress. “There,” she said.

Harry squinted as McGonagall moved out of the way. Secure in its glass case, the Sword of Gryffindor glinted at them.


“The sword is a Horcrux,” Harry corrected grimly, pieces falling into place in his mind with a series of clicks so strong they almost hurt. He had always known that one of the Horcruxes was hidden at Hogwarts, and the Sword hadn’t been moved out of the building in the last few decades. Voldemort had a penchant for favoring artifacts of the Founders, at least if Slytherin’s locket and a ring said to come from a family descended from Slytherin proved anything, and the Sword certainly counted. And during his second year, the Sword had burned him when he tried to touch it. It had done the same thing to Professor Snape; he had confessed that in one of the letters he sent to Harry over the summer while he was at the Malfoys’, as if hoping to make Harry feel that he was not alone in being rejected by an artifact supposedly of “good.”

“Why would it burn you, though?” Owen asked from behind him. Harry turned to look at him, and saw that he appeared just as confused as McGonagall. “Shouldn’t it like you, since the Dark Lord marked you?”

Harry shook his head. “We betrayed him—Professor Snape and I both. We’re not good, obedient little servants.” He faced the sword, feeling much worse about turning his back on it now, though it hadn’t outwardly changed from the blade he remembered. “Do you think that’s right, Luna?”

“That’s right,” said Luna, her face radiating not just serenity but confidence. “You’ve figured it out, Harry. And now it really hates you.” She cocked her head to the side, listening for a moment, and then added, “But it’s smug, too. It has something even worse than the usual Unassailable Curse on it. It’s sure that you won’t manage to destroy it.”

“We’ll see about that,” Harry muttered, then promptly felt silly talking to a sword.

A moment later, though, a curl of darkness unfolded and drifted along the blade, and Harry saw a pair of dark eyes watching him, similar to a pair he’d seen only once before: in Sirius’s face, when Voldemort had come close to possessing him completely during third year. The sword hissed, a noise that was a cross between a serpent’s hiss and the crackling noise of a fire, and then fell silent.

“What shall we do with it?” McGonagall asked. Harry glanced at her, and saw that, if she had any qualms against believing that an artifact of Gryffindor was a repository of a shard of Voldemort’s soul, it was gone now. “It cannot stay here.”

“Oh, but it should,” said Luna, sounding surprised. “If it’s moved, it might find a way to send a message to Voldemort. And it can’t actually hurt you, Headmistress. It doesn’t even hate you, just those whom Voldemort marked and who betrayed him. It wouldn’t even have a problem with Harry if he were just a good little heir or with Professor Snape if he were just a good little Death Eater. We should leave it here until I have a chance to talk to it more and see what the curse on it is.” Then she abruptly slipped her hand away from Harry’s arm and walked around the desk towards the sword. “Unless I can make it tell me that now.”

“Be careful, Luna,” Harry said. His heart had jumped into his throat. When each Horcrux was destroyed, he would have to face the shade of Tom Riddle implanted in it, and he had no idea if he was ready to do that, should it come forth now and attack her.

“I told you, it doesn’t hate me,” said Luna, giving him a patient look, and then leaned forward and hissed softly at the blade. Her eyes closed, and she adopted a listening posture that reminded Harry disturbingly of Professor Trelawney, on the night that she had recited the fourth prophecy to him.

Harry didn’t think he’d been in a room that was this silent in a long time. When he glanced back, Owen’s face was tight, and Charlie’s ashen, as if they were trying to figure out what other objects might be Horcruxes, and the best way to protect Harry from them. McGonagall had already recovered from her fear, of course, by the time Harry looked at her, and was studying the Sword as if contemplating the best way to take it, snap it, and cast the halves into a bonfire.

At last, Luna stepped away from the Sword and gave it a stern look. Harry wondered if she were silently communing with it. Then she turned around and said, “The Unassailable Curse says that someone can’t just kill herself in front of the Sword and want
to die to destroy the Horcrux. She has to kill herself by stabbing herself through the heart with the Sword.”


“That’s impossible,” said Owen, disbelief in his voice. “How in the world could anyone do that?”

“That would be, probably, why Voldemort chose that particular curse,” Charlie pointed out in a dry tone.

Harry closed his eyes, and the third stanza of the fourth prophecy came back to him.

“The second, no one can afford
To ignore the curse that seems a wall.
But that curse is true, and from the Lord,
And its only destruction is a fall.”

He could feel everyone turning to him as he recited that, but he didn’t open his eyes until he’d finished. Then he nodded bleakly to Luna. His throat felt too dry, and his heart too fast. “I think you’re right,” he said. “I think that is the only way this particular Horcrux can be destroyed. The curse is real, and ignoring it and disdaining it won’t get us around it.”

“But what does that last line mean, then?” Charlie demanded. “Its only destruction is a fall?”

“Mr. Weasley, I’m surprised at you,” said McGonagall, in a voice that proved she’d fully recovered herself. “Don’t tell me that you’ve never heard of the honorable tradition of falling on one’s sword?”

Harry nodded. “To commit suicide by stabbing oneself with one’s sword. That is the only way we’re going to kill this Horcrux.”

“But no one would—” Charlie stopped, then said, “Can you envision anyone with the courage or the desperation to do that?”

“Not right now, no,” said Harry, his eyes lingering on the Sword of Gryffindor. “But we should keep it in mind. I think what the prophecy is warning us against is trying to find some other way around this, or doubting that the curse is real and was placed by Voldemort. We won’t find any way around it. We have to do it this way.”

He looked at the Headmistress. “I do think it best if the Horcrux remain here for now. It’s fairly well-known that you have the Sword of Gryffindor in your office. If it’s taken out, then someone might wonder why, and word might reach Voldemort. Do you agree with this?”

“As Miss Lovegood has said, the Sword does not hate me.” McGonagall looked self-possessed again. “Yes, I will leave it here.”

“Good,” said Harry. He gave one last glance at the Sword, and shook his head. To think that Dumbledore tried to use it as a test of my goodness during second year, and was sure that I wasn’t good when the thing ended up burning me.

Well, one of us was evil, but it wasn’t me.

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It was fairly easy to find the Muggle orphanage, even in the crowded streets of London and in a part of the city where Harry hadn’t been before. Thomas could give very precise directions when he wanted to. And they could easily cast a Disillusionment Charm over him, Luna, Charlie, and Owen.

No, the difficult thing was hurrying Luna along when she wanted to stay and talk to the streets.

“But some of these are cobbles laid centuries ago,” she complained, when Harry coaxed her away from yet another conversation. “They’ve never had a chance to talk about all the murders they’ve witnessed, and they wanted to know if the drunks who lay on them got home safe to their families.”

“You can talk to them later,” Harry promised, tugging gently on her hand. “But, in the meantime, we might find another Horcrux in the orphanage.” Harry thought it at least a likely place, since he knew that one of the Horcrux hiding places was in an unremarkable desk in a narrow room. And Tom Riddle would take advantage of the fact that hardly anyone knew anything about his past, including his mother’s name and that he’d been reared among Muggles.

“Oh, that’s right, we might,” said Luna, and she walked along beside Harry without any more prompting.
They reached the door of the orphanage and slipped through it. The building was so quiet that Harry might have thought it was deserted but for the sounds of children shouting somewhere near the back. It certainly seemed dusty, and Harry guessed that it didn’t make very much money.

A heavyset man with a shock of shaggy black hair came into the front room when he heard the door open, but after several glimpses around, he shrugged, scratched the back of his neck, and ambled out again. Harry suspected he was just glad that the prank, which he probably put down to passing adolescents, hadn’t been worse.

Luna reached out and ran her hand down a wall that framed a narrow staircase. “They remember him,” she breathed. “They’ve had a few other magical children here, too, but never one like him. He was the strongest. And he did worse things than anyone else, too.”

Harry nodded. He wouldn’t be surprised if the inbreeding in the Gaunt family had forced evil traits to the surface that otherwise never would have appeared. Voldemort might have been somewhat twisted by his raising among the Muggles, far from the wizarding world, and by the fact that he was an orphan without parents, but that wasn’t enough to make someone open the Chamber of Secrets when he was sixteen and decide that he wanted immortality around the same time.

Unless he was abused.

The thought made Harry squirm a bit, as he thought about the possible similarity between himself and Voldemort. Their souls certainly vibrated in sympathy, enough to allow him to become Voldemort’s magical heir. And Lily and Dumbledore had been convinced they had a potential Dark Lord on their hands the night after his attack on Godric’s Hollow—

Stop thinking like that, he told himself. Unless you uncover actual evidence of that, you don’t know that it happened, and it probably wasn’t abuse like you received, anyway. Otherwise, Voldemort would understand more about love and compassion.

“He came up and down these stairs many times,” Luna went on in a dreamy voice. Harry heard footsteps coming close to the room again, and hastily raised a silencing spell. The Muggle peered directly at them, shook his head, and left. Luna, locked deep in her trance, her fingers brushing back and forth across the wood like waving tendrils of seaweed or Jing-Xi’s hair, didn’t notice. “The bottom stair tread didn’t like him. He always paused there and leaned around the corner to listen to secrets. Or he took scraps of breakfast from the hungriest children and taunted them with them, and stood here to do it. The other children learned early not to bother him.” Luna frowned then, and a note of censure intruded itself into her voice. “He used his magic to punish them if they did anything he didn’t like, and they didn’t know what it was, but they knew better than to go against him.”

Harry understood. Luna was the daughter of a Light pureblood family, reared on the ethic that, even if Muggles weren’t equal to wizards, it was wrong to remind them how unequal they really were. The rules against showing off magic in front of Muggles weren’t just to protect the wizarding world; they were also to prevent unnecessary outbursts of jealousy and hatred, fear and distress.

“He dragged a girl by her hair across the steps once,” Luna whispered. “She was bleeding from a cut on her shoulder. He knelt down in front of her and laughed and whispered to her. The stairs couldn’t hear what he said, but it made her faint. He laughed, and cut a lock of her hair.” Luna paused again, then said, “And that’s what he did with everyone. He took something from them. A lock of hair, a scrap of skin, a fingernail or a toenail. Or, sometimes if they had something that reminded them of their parents, he took that instead. He killed their pets. He set things on fire from a distance, with the power of his mind, and they didn’t know how he did it. He made boys bigger than he was back away with a glance. Those were dark years, while he was here.”

Harry shivered convulsively. Listening to Luna’s soft voice recite things that no one alive, except Voldemort himself, probably knew now made him glance over his shoulder, half-expecting the shade of the handsome, uncaring boy he’d met in the Chamber of Secrets to stride past him.

“And that’s all they know,” said Luna abruptly, stepping back from the staircase. “They think that the walls in the room where he stayed might know more.” She gave a fluttering pat to the wall, as though reassuring it that she would come back and talk more to it later, and then went upstairs. Harry and his guards followed close behind. Harry felt half-useless, but compelled to follow. At least it was much easier to discover the truth this way than it would have been researching on his own.

By the time they caught up with Luna, she was in the middle of an old room that had been converted to a storage closet, from the look of it, though when she knelt down and pushed aside some rubbish that had accumulated on the floor, Harry could see marks that might represent the legs of a bedstead.

“He lived here,” Luna said, eyes still closed. “The floor didn’t mind him, because he never really did anything but walk across it,
but the walls hated him, and the ceiling. They had to watch while he played with his magic and the trophies he took, or,
sometimes, burned them, and then the people he took them from would get sick.” Luna fell silent again, then said, so softly Harry
could hardly hear her, “Once, he burned three trophies, all from the same girl. She died. The Muggles said it was disease—
tuberculosis. The walls and the ceiling tried to tell them the truth, because they knew, but the Muggles couldn’t hear them.”

Harry couldn’t help the question. “How old was he then?”

“She’d been in this room for ten years,” Luna answered.

She sat in silence for a moment more, then added, “He didn’t do that again. The sight of her death was too much for him. He
started fearing death, hating it. He stopped caring about hurting other people, unless they’d hurt him, or they could hurt him. He
was much more interested in ways to avoid death. The walls say that he read all sorts of books about old magic, alchemy, and
sometimes religious books, too, but he wasn’t interested in those. He wanted to find some way to survive death inside his body.”

And he found it, too, Harry thought, sickened and fascinated.

“The floor remembers seeing an old wizard come to fetch him when he’d been here eleven years,” said Luna abruptly. “He had a
russet beard, and he walked in soft shoes, so the floor liked him. He delivered a letter to the boy. The walls say that he talked
about Hogwarts.”

Dumbledore. And, of course, though Dumbledore had known under which conditions Tom Riddle had grown up, he hadn’t tried
to interfere. He had thought it best to let the boy have free reign, and free will, and develop into whom he wanted to develop into.

And then, regretting that fiercely by the time Voldemort fell, he’d tried to control Harry strictly, so that there was no chance of his
power ever getting out of hand and turning him into a second Tom Riddle.

He wasn’t so much like me after all, Harry thought, and shook his head to free himself from that chain of associations.

“And then he left,” Luna went on, straightening up. “He came back sometimes, for holidays, but never for long, and then he
didn’t spend as much time in this room. If he did something else nasty, another murder, it was far from the walls. He never had
any blood on him when he came back. The floor remembers the taste of blood, since it didn’t taste it often.”

Harry waited, but Luna had opened her eyes and was standing in the middle of the room, looking sadly at an old, broken bed piled
in the corner. It seemed that the room had nothing more to tell her.

“Luna,” Harry said quietly. She looked at him. “Do you think there’s a Horcrux here?”

Luna shook her head.

Damn.

“But there used to be,” Luna added.

Harry stood straight. “What makes you think so?”

Luna nodded to a desk in the corner of the room. Looking at it, Harry uttered a low curse as he recognized the desk from the
image that the bird had shown him, when trying to share the locations of the Horcrux. “The desk remembers an object that hated
the whole world,” said Luna. “It was long and slim, and made of wood, like itself, but sometimes it hissed to itself and talked. It
was very old.”

“A wand?”

Luna drew out her own wand and held it solemnly towards the desk. A moment later, she nodded.

“And someone took it?” Harry asked.

“Someone who walked softly, and contained the living,” said Luna, squinting slightly, as if she were reading a page with blurred
words. Then her face cleared. “Living wood, that’s what they mean. Not dead wood like them, already made into objects. A
woman made of plants.”

Harry groaned. “And she took the Horcrux,” he muttered. “I would bet that it’s probably hidden in one of her gardens.”
And that would fit the prophecy, too. Isn’t there a verse about night’s poisoned garden? And this is the third Horcrux we’ve discovered clues to, too.

“Probably,” said Luna, not sounding concerned. “Now, can I go back outside and talk to the cobbles? I’ve made the room sad. It didn’t want to remember the magical boy who lived in it. I want to leave.”

“We can,” said Harry, since it didn’t seem likely they would learn anything more here. He nodded to Owen and Charlie, and they followed him and Luna down the stairs, still heavily under cover of the Disillusionment Charm.

As they went, Harry looked around at the blank wooden walls, and the unwelcoming staircase, and wondered if it had looked any different when Tom Riddle lived here. Had he ever known what happiness was? Had he ever been abused? Had he always thought of his magic as a tool of domination that made him special, better than the people around him, or had there been a point in his life when he innocently tried to share it?

Then Harry shook his head.

This is really only useful as far as it lets me understand him. The boy who lived like that is long dead, and I have to deal with what he is in the present.

Like me or not, my magical father in a sense or not, he has to die.

 Chapter Twenty-Two: Face The Boy Across A Battlefield

“Come here, Indigena.”

Indigena went there, her eyes now and then darting from her Lord to the man who crouched at his feet. As she had suspected, it was Lucius Malfoy. But he didn’t seem to be bleeding yet, and Indigena had never known her Lord to be gentle about a sacrifice. She didn’t know what was going to happen.

But she suspected it, and it was confirmed in the moment that the flesh-snake turned its red eyes to her, and her Lord’s voice said, “Hurt him, Indigena.”

She bowed, keeping her face still and perfect. That was easier than it might have been for anyone else, thanks to the contours of leaves beneath her face that would hold her muscles in any position she wanted them to—or change her face altogether, to that of Iris Raymonds. “Yes, my Lord. Shall I put him on my thorns?”

“That death takes too long, Indigena,” said Voldemort. “I wish you to torture him here, in front of me.”

Indigena took a deep breath, and then risked the one thing she could, chose the one path out of confinement. “No, my Lord.”

And then the silence was as still and perfect as her face had been. Indigena locked her eyes on the far wall of the burrow and awaited her Lord’s explosion. In the meantime, she studied the richness of the soil. Deep and dark, and it stayed where it was put. She regretted that she could not have planted a garden here. She could have reared flowers matched in fineness only by the ones in Thornhall itself.

“What did you say to me?”

What made it worse was the softness. If Indigena hadn’t been listening for the tone of intense rage—and hadn’t known it would be there anyway, whether or not she listened for it—she might have thought that Voldemort was asking her tenderly, gently, why she had failed to take up this task.

She glanced back at him, looking at his empty eye sockets, eaten by the poison of the Many cobras, and repeated, “No, my Lord.”

Another pause of silence, and then Voldemort said, “You must explain this to me, Indigena. You know what will happen if you refuse me for too long.” He nodded at Lucius, who remained motionless, though crouched in a position that must have been uncomfortable. “Your body will become mine, and your mind, to do with as I will. You bear the Dark Mark, and I can control you through that, should I choose.”

“Yes, my Lord,” Indigena acknowledged. She could not deny that. Her hatred of Feldspar would make a fine chain, should her Lord choose to employ it.
“Then explain why you are defying me.”

And that was easy, though Indigena doubted Voldemort had meant to make it so. As she recovered from her failure on the Cornwall mission, and heard more and more about what had happened in the wake of the raid on Tullianum, her heart had firmed. She knew death waited at the end of this road, but she had accepted that she would die, in one way or another, ever since she took the Mark. At least she would die on her own two feet. And if her body continued to exist after that, she would still account it dead, because her free will would have perished.

“I am not one for torture alone,” she said simply, eyes locked on Voldemort’s. “I have not ever been. I did not mind torturing Evan Rosier, my Lord, because I could feed my thorns with his blood and flesh. And I have stood by while you tortured others, and never said a word. And I fed the truth to the Potters because it was the only way they might know justice before their deaths. But lingering pain without a second purpose has never been my choice.”

“That does not matter, Indigena,” Voldemort said, his voice dangerously flat. “I am asking you to make this choice.”

“And it is one that I cannot make,” said Indigena, even as she tried to fill her memory with the sound of shifting dirt and the crackling and creaking of a tendril as her rose unfolded around her wrist. “There are some things in me that clash too strongly with my definition of honor. I know that you can control me and make me do them, but in that case, I will not be the one doing them.”

Voldemort was silent for a long moment. Then he said, “You came to my side because of honor, Indigena.”

She nodded, and sniffed the scents of the soft perfumes drifting around her body, so that she would have their company in the darkness of her enslaved mind.

“I must hold you with honor.” Voldemort’s voice was softer than she had ever heard it. “You came to me when I was wounded, and aided me without compulsion from the Dark Mark. You have never considered going to Harry and betraying me. I know that. I know the furthest reaches of your mind, and I know that you do not fear my wrath now, because you have refined the fear from your soul.” He was silent for long moments more, while Indigena blinked in astonishment. That almost sounded like compassion, and she knew her Lord did not feel compassion.

He does not, she thought, as she studied him and the slow way his hand caressed the flesh-snake. But he knows loyalty. He felt for Nagini, the snake that stayed with him for so many years prior to her death. If I had ever shown doubt in my allegiance to him, some temptation to run, then he would not recognize mine. But I never wavered, and so he recognizes that steadfastness.

“I will not force that sacrifice from you,” Voldemort went on.

Indigena bowed, and breathed a bit more easily. It seemed that she would keep a scrap of her honor after all, even as she continued to run down into the darkness.

Voldemort looked down on the kneeling Lucius. “Of course, this does mean that we must find some other use for you,” he said, and idly kicked out. Lucius fell over, unable to move, and lay there, his nose to the dirt, while Voldemort contemplated. Indigena thought the position amusing, and fitting for what he had become.

“Oh, yes, I know,” said the Dark Lord suddenly, and his voice was a purr as he glanced at Lucius again. “Lucius.”

“My Lord?” His words were partially muffled by the floor.

“You will go to Malfoy Manor, and stay there until you see signs of activity.” The snake swayed and danced around Voldemort’s waist. “I do believe that Harry will be using it as a safe house soon.”

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Draco closed his eyes and bowed his head.

He’d studied wards for the past several days to get to this point, so intently that he hadn’t wanted to interrupt his study to go to the orphanage with Harry. He wished Harry well, of course, and he would want to be by his side in battle, but if he was ever to make a contribution to the war effort that didn’t lie in Harry’s shadow, he would have to do this, which only he could perform.

He could feel the wards around Malfoy Manor throbbing beneath his skin like a heartbeat, or a tumor, when he touched them. The
chains tightened and grew thicker when pulled. Draco wasn’t going to simply tug on them, though, as he would when raising the Manor’s defenses against intruders. He was going to change their very nature, so that only certain people would be able to enter the Manor.

After much discussion with Thomas Rhangnara, Draco had finally chosen wards based on the intentions of the people entering the house. They had to either be completely neutral in the conflict against Voldemort or actively opposed to him. Compliance with either Voldemort or the Ministry would mean being bounced from the wards and unable to enter.

Harry might have been a bit unhappy about that, if he’d known all the details. Draco wasn’t. There should be no one innocent caught up in the web. Children who were too young to understand the conflict would be accounted neutral. Members of families who preferred the Ministry to Harry might seek to undermine his war effort so that Juniper could succeed, and though they might deserve shelter, they would have to find it at some other place than Malfoy Manor.

Narcissa had expressed her disapproval in cool tones. Draco had listened to her as politely, and discounted the objections—politely, he hoped. It wasn’t as though he would often be visiting the Manor, unless Harry moved there. He didn’t have to live in the same house with Mudbloods and Muggles.

But now he had to change the wards.

He sank into deep silence; he sat in his and Harry’s bedroom, and right now Harry was rather busy collecting those refugees from Hogwarts who would be going to safety in the Manor. The rest of the Slytherin House knew better than to come near their door, after a short but powerful talk that Draco had had with them the other day. The wards became the only thing that was real, twanging, glinting golden chains that stretched from his body into the distance.

Draco began to change them.

As Rhangnara had told him, he visualized each link changing, the gold that made them up right now bleeding away and being replaced with pewter, the color that Draco had chosen to represent wards based on the guests’ intentions. It was hard, of course. The old wards were ancient and thick, and had hosted generations of Malfoys and those rare people they trusted. Most of all, Draco himself had been reared to think it was only right that his family have a place they could retreat from the world, and that the wards provided that place. Changing them involved going against his own convictions as well as the magic.

But along with the visualization and the spells Draco had cast before he began—spells to strengthen his concentration and his will—he had his own beliefs on the matter. He wanted to contribute to the war effort, in a way that only he could. He wanted to be able to make some use of the Manor, which otherwise would sit empty, since his mother had no intention of entering it until she reconciled with Lucius and Draco had no intention of leaving Harry’s side. He knew the intense need that Harry’s side had for secure, warded properties. He wanted to do something to make Harry proud of him, to show that he was moving on and leaving at least a few of his prejudices behind. Therefore, he would do this.

His new beliefs pushed at the old ones, and Draco felt the chains lessening bit by bit. It helped that he could think of gold as soft and malleable, likely to melt in the fires of his convictions. He knew each link, too, thanks to his status as heir of the Malfoy properties. Each one he saw as dimming in color and shifting in properties, and, little by little, reluctantly, they changed.

Then a flash of golden light enveloped him, and he felt another will shoving back against himself, as if a second Malfoy opposed his intent to change the wards.

Draco kept calm. Rhangnara had told him this might happen. Old houses quite often had some protection built into their wards, so that a rebellious child, a blood traitor, or someone who had managed to fool the wards into thinking he was of the family could not change or drop the defenses on a whim. This was a fragment of the spirit of an ancestor, come to test Draco’s courage.

Draco answered with a flash of pewter light, and all the arrogance he could muster. I am Draco Malfoy, son of Lucius Malfoy and Narcissa Black, only heir of the line, accepted joining partner of the most powerful undeclared wizard in the British Isles and the only vates in the world. Who are you?

The voice hesitated, and Draco gained some ground, changing five golden links to gray before it could respond. Then it answered, It does not matter who I am. What matters is that you are degrading the wealth and pride of our heritage!

Draco laughed. You can’t even remember, can you? Again the hesitation, and Draco pushed against the center of that strength, which seemed to hover in the air somewhere between the chains. You might not even be a Malfoy, but a wandering ghost caught and held by the wards, or some bastard child condemned here because you were no use to the family otherwise. At the least, you have no proud name to match mine.
Do you know what you are doing to this proud name? The voice was screeching now, and Draco imagined a tiny stamping figure like a house elf, because it amused him.

Of course I know, he said, and I know that as true Malfoy heir, the wards and the Manor are mine to do with as I like.

The voice snarled back at him, and then seemed to decide to use all its strength in shoving against him. But Draco was past the midpoint now, with the chains all around him changed to pewter and the colors rippling away from him, flowing down the wards to the horizon, melting the gold. He knew he was going to succeed.

Flash, and change, and spurt like a starburst, and then the voice wailed in indignity and went back to its place as a guardian. Draco blinked, and opened his eyes to what felt like a changed world—shards of glass grinding under his skin. He had been told to expect that, too, until the wards had time to get used to their new nature and the Manor to its changed status.

He didn’t care. He had done it, and Harry would find out and look at him with love and pride, and Draco had enough love and pride in himself for any ten wizards even if Harry didn’t.

He flopped back on their bed then, a small smile on his face, and slept for two hours.

Harry sighed. He had argued with Michael Rosier-Henlin for an hour, and if the boy didn’t want to go with his mother and little sister to Malfoy Manor for safety, then he didn’t have to go. Harry wished that someone would have, however, since none of his sworn companions had been enthusiastic about the idea of Michael staying with Harry and swearing another oath.

Instead of thinking about Michael, who currently stood behind him in Medusa’s room with arms folded and looked ready for another fight, Harry turned to Medusa. “You have everything you need, Madam?” he asked gently.

Medusa nodded wanly. She had Eos wrapped close in her arms, and a small trunk floating behind her that contained the objects she’d managed to create or been given in Hogwarts. Though several people had tried to help her, Harry suspected she hadn’t taken anything but those items she truly needed for her baby daughter. Medusa obviously didn’t like charity.

“They may leave,” said Harry, and escorted her down to the entrance hall, where the other refugees who would go to Malfoy Manor were waiting. Medusa buried her head in Eos’s baby blanket and refused to look up. Eos was awake, Harry saw, but watching everything with large solemn eyes, absurdly quiet for a baby of five months old. Harry thought about making absurd faces to see if she would laugh—she was supposed to be his goddaughter, after all—but refrained, in the end. He didn’t think Medusa would appreciate it.

Most of the other refugees straightened up the moment they saw him, and Harry nodded carefully to them. Thirty-five people, most of whom had fled to Hogwarts for safety immediately after the first vampire attack, or in the wake of the first attacks on Harry’s allies. Ignifer and Honoria were among them, though Ignifer was going mostly as a bodyguard for the others, Harry thought, and Honoria because she would not be parted from Ignifer. She currently stood upright with the aid of a wooden leg, cheerfully refusing any more help, and making jokes about losing limbs that didn’t seem to reassure the anxiously hovering Ignifer at all.

“We’ll go out beyond the wards around Hogwarts to the edge of the Hogsmeade road, and Apparate,” said Harry quietly, drawing their attention. “I know that I’ve shown Malfoy Manor to most of the adults, but does anyone else require a glimpse of it?”

Heads shook. Most of the party was tense and unsmiling, Harry saw—probably intimidated at the thought of venturing out beyond Hogwarts for the first time in a few months, even though they’d agreed to leave the school so as to be farther away from Harry in the case of a direct attack by Voldemort, and even though the transfer to the safehouse at Silver-Mirror had gone perfectly. Well, perhaps they did have something to worry about.

Harry stayed closed to Medusa and Eos as they left, but it wasn’t long before Ignifer came up to him, bouncing her wand across her palm.

“Why isn’t Malfoy accompanying us?” she asked.

It took Harry a moment to realize she was talking about Draco, and he smiled a little ruefully. “He still has his share of pride,” he answered. “He has agreed to let strangers live in his home, but he would prefer not to watch as they possess it.”
Ignifer grunted. Harry wondered if she was saying she could understand that. They walked a few feet further in silence, and then Ignifer said. “Do you think he will mind if I kill his father?”

Harry blinked twice, then glanced at her. “You know that Lucius is a slave to Voldemort, and did not—“

“He cut off Honoria’s leg.” Ignifer’s voice was soft, and Harry might not have thought she was furious except for the curl of flame bubbling over the edge of her hair. “I want him dead.”

“I can’t let you kill him,” said Harry.

“Even in the heat of battle?”

Harry was forced, sharply, to remember that Ignifer had, after all, Declared for Dark, and could presumably use subtlety and cunning when she wanted to. She acted enough like a Light witch most of the time that he could forget.

Instead of replying with the sharp tirade she probably expected, therefore, he said mildly, “Do you know, each time I think the lesson of misplaced vengeance is going to strike my allies, and yet it never seems to work? Bulstrode, Parkinson, Starrise, Snape—the list of those who have fallen victim to it is abnormally long. I suppose that I shouldn’t be surprised to see another case beginning.”

Ignifer’s spine stiffened, and then she glanced away from him. “You have made your point,” she murmured, so gently that Harry could hardly hear her. “But I still want Malfoy dead.”

“I can understand that,” said Harry, his heart beating harder with relief. “What I can’t understand is giving up your duty to guard others—your duty to guard your partner, in fact—to chase misplaced vengeance.”

Ignifer gave a curt nod. “You need not worry about that.”

“Good.” Harry squeezed her arm briefly, then lifted his head. They had passed the edge of Hogwarts’s anti-Apparition wards. He raised his voice. “Now, concentrate on the image of Malfoy Manor, and Apparate.”

He gently took Medusa’s arm, although he knew she probably didn’t need the help, and closed his eyes. The image of the blue-gray house he’d seen so many times showed clearly on the back of his eyelids, and he jumped.

There was a bright twitch of the world around him, several sharp cracks as people came into being, and then screams. Harry’s eyes flew open, and he moved to put himself between Medusa and Eos and danger.

Lucius Malfoy was attacking from the left.

He didn’t look at all like either the Lucius Harry had known or the Death Eater Harry had heard mentioned during the First War—thought that latter might have something to do with his lack of a cloak and a mask, Harry thought, finding humor, somehow, in the haze of his anger and shock. His hair flew around him, and his face was covered with dirt as if he had spent days lying in it. His wand shot spells without pause, so he must be doing them nonverbally. And almost all of them were pain curses. He hadn’t raised a shield that Harry could see.

Almost certainly, Voldemort intended Lucius to die fighting Harry.

Harry heard Ignifer give a snarl, and snapped at her without turning around, even as he raised a *Protego* around the target of Lucius’s first pain curses, a woman with three small children. “Get them into the Manor and stay with them, Ignifer!”

There came a moment shared between Lucius’s deflected curses and Ignifer’s silent struggle to obey. Harry knew he’d won both when Lucius had to duck and Ignifer spoke from behind him in a loud, deliberately calm voice, chivvying people towards the Manor’s front door.

Lucius’s eyes locked on Harry. Harry felt his heart ache with pity. They only held insanity on the surface. Someone else looked out of the bottom of them, and that person was begging for help.

“Fight me, Potter,” Lucius whispered, and his wand struck out, with a curse Harry knew well—the Blood Whip.

Harry dropped the shield, which would explode in the face of that curse, and rolled smoothly on the ground. The curse shot over his head, and from the scream that followed, Harry knew it hadn’t struck someone, that that was just a cry of fear; he knew the
sounds of pain too well. He stood and concentrated on the image of Lucius standing motionless, while relaxing the barriers on his magic the way that Jing-Xi had taught him.

The air flooded with images of shadowy cats and snakes, and Lucius slowed down, his movements heavily weighted. Harry began to breathe a bit more easily. If he could hold Lucius still, it was possible he could recapture him, and hold him in one place until he managed to talk him out of the hatred Voldemort was still using to cage him. On no account would Harry kill him, not if he still had a choice.

“Do you remember me, Lucius?” he asked softly. “The man who made a truce-dance with you? The man who gave you the gift of Parseltongue, and received a link to the wards of Malfoy Manor in return? Your son’s lover?” He took several steps forward, never removing his eyes from Lucius’s. “You left behind a son and a wife who love you, who are willing to share their lives with you if you return. Isn’t that better than what you have now, Lucius?”

Lucius squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head, though, given the weight of Harry’s magic on him, it moved as slowly as though he were underwater. Harry could feel the strands of compulsion winding around him, originating from the Dark Mark on his left arm. If Voldemort possessed the ability to make Lucius go against him, Harry thought, it would come from that.

“You can do this,” Harry whispered. “You can struggle. I know you can. I’ve fought enough times with you, you stubborn bastard.” He made sure to lace his voice with affection. True insults might drive Lucius back into the arms of the Dark Lord. “I refuse to believe that you would give up simply because you’re fighting Voldemort.”

Slowly, Lucius’s eyes opened. Harry looked into them, quietly, confidently. The insanity had dimmed. Something like sense was rising to the surface again.

“You can do this,” Harry coaxed. “Narcissa misses you. Draco misses you. Isn’t that worth more than all the hatreds you’ve held on to, the clever plans you wove that couldn’t save you, the—”

Lucius’s eyes moved past him, and shook his head, though, given the weight of Harry’s magic on him, it moved as slowly as though he were underwater. Harry could feel the strands of compulsion winding around him, originating from the Dark Mark on his left arm. If Voldemort possessed the ability to make Lucius go against him, Harry thought, it would come from that.

It didn’t seem so, though, perhaps because Voldemort could also command Lucius to use his own magic. Lucius used a sharp green lightning bolt, which resembled some curses Harry had seen before but which he didn’t actually know, and which turned out to explode shields. Harry found himself flat on his back, gasping, his control over his magic shattered and his cheek flayed open almost to the bone.

He lunged upright, reaching again for Lucius, this time envisioning the cloud cage that had contained Hawthorn, and which he would make proof against Apparition.

But Voldemort had learned his lesson about sacrificing pawns. Lucius Apparated out moments before the air around him turned thick and golden.

Harry cursed, slamming a fist against the ground to relieve the feeling. His magic turned the grass to molten glass. Harry blinked, shivered, and stood, cradling his hand against his side. He heard pounding footsteps behind him and turned, eyes scanning the ground for casualties. There was no one dead, but a blood trail led towards the door of the Manor.

Ignifer was running towards him, wand held high. She skidded to a stop at the sight of his bleeding cheek, her flames leaping around her like a wall. “He hurt you,” she said. Her narrowed eyes traveled past him to lock on the place where Lucius had stood. “And escaped.”

“What part of ‘stay with them’ did you not understand?” Harry asked. His chest was heaving, but his mind was perfectly clear. He had lost hold of Lucius, but he would most likely have other chances. His wound was minor, the least of his worries; it could have been so much worse. He frowned at Ignifer, who looked taken aback. “I told you to remain with the refugees in the Manor. You’re the strongest witch among them. They need your protection.”

“I…” Abashed, Ignifer looked away from him.
Satisfied that she had the point, Harry softened his voice. “I know. You saw me hurt. But sometimes that doesn’t matter, Ignifer. Sometimes you need to make the hard choices, and my life is worth less than the lives of thirty-six people—thirty-seven, counting yourself. Do you understand?”

Ignifer nodded, though she didn’t look happy about it. “Why do you think Malfoy was here?” she asked, changing the subject.

“Voldemort probably sent him for his knowledge of the territory, and to punish both me and him by making me face him in battle,” said Harry, pushing aside the thought of what he would say to Narcissa and Draco when next he saw them. It hadn’t been his fault that he lost Lucius; he had not known that Voldemort could force his captured Death Eaters to go against Harry’s magic. In the future, he would know that. “I imagine that we’ll see him again.”

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Adalrico had been waiting.

He had felt something more than despair ever since Pharos Starrise had died whimpering over the sound of his own bones. The hatred that had condemned him to serve under the Dark Lord was ended. He could not look at the fingerbones hanging in the corner of the burrow room where he brewed his potions and feel his loathing towards the Starrise family with the same intensity as before.

Pharos has a brother...

But Tybalt Starrise had done nothing to him, and Adalrico most often ignored the voice in his head in favor of staring at the fingerbones again, and daydreaming about the day of the Tullianum raid.

Sometimes, now, in a corner of his mind so deep that he barely allowed himself to realize it existed, he dreamed of Millicent, and Marian, and Elfrieda. He dreamed of them, and he dreamed, too, that he had been allowed to go back to them, somehow rescued and redeemed from his chains in the blackness.

But he had never thought seriously that he might have a chance like that—at least until Lucius Malfoy Apparated back from Malfoy Manor, and the full might of Voldemort’s anger descended on him. As Adalrico knelt, eyes on the floor, in a corner of the throne room, he felt the chains on his own mind slip a little. Voldemort was intent on making Lucius pay, so intent that he wasn’t keeping as tight a leash on his other recalled servants as he should.

Adalrico let his eyes track, inch by inch, over to Hawthorn Parkinson, but saw no twitch of movement from her. Then he remembered that she had other hatreds to chain her here. One of them, Indigena Yaxley, stood a few feet from her, arms folded as she watched the interplay between Lucius and Voldemort with a resigned expression. And Hawthorn was probably dreaming of killing Lucius herself.

Feldspar Yaxley was absent, but he would probably have been too cowardly to move even if he was here, Adalrico knew.

So this was his chance alone, should he choose to take it.

The screaming from Voldemort about Lucius’s failure, mingled with the hissing of his snake, went on and on, and even a few of the other Death Eaters—minus Sylvan Yaxley, who was cycling into Oaken Yaxley just at that moment—began to shift uneasily. Adalrico knew they were thinking about the rage and hatred behind that screaming, and what might happen should Voldemort decide that Lucius was not enough of a target for him.

Adalrico knew that his own disappearance would increase those emotions in the Dark Lord, but he did not care. He couldn’t do anything to save either Lucius or Hawthorn. He felt something like himself for the first time in months. He wanted to go back to his wife and daughters, and if Voldemort’s hold on him lessened any more, then he was going to take the chance.

Voldemort leaned forward in his throne, the snake actually slithering off his lap to confront Lucius, and his hold lessened.

Adalrico took the chance.

He focused all his thoughts on the house at Blackstone, since it was the place he knew best, and certainly better than trying to Apparate to Hogwarts and being bounced from the wards. Once he was back in his house, he could raise the wards. He had designed the ward-destroying stones. He knew their weaknesses, and he could resist anyone trying to reach him. The hardest part would be fighting the call of the Dark Mark, but with his hatred held back, he could do even that.
Just one moment more, to let the library of Blackstone coalesce in his mind’s eye.

And then Voldemort noticed him.

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Indigena lifted her head. Before, she had not felt that the atmosphere around her was truly dangerous. Her Lord would scream, and he would torture Lucius to death, but she had already expected that.

Now, though, silence filled the air like smoke from a fire, and Adalrico Bulstrode was making little, choked, helpless sounds, holding his head in his hands as Voldemort and his snake stared at him.

*He tried to escape,* Indigena realized, as she watched the others straighten. *And our Lord sensed him.*

She could almost feel the vast weight of Voldemort’s anger swinging, centering now not on Lucius, who had only failed him, but on the man stupid enough to oppose him. Indigena took a moment to fortify herself, raising the same shields against compassion that she had during Severus Snape’s torture in the Chamber of Secrets. She did not care for the torture, but she would not interfere. It was not her place.

“Indigena.”

She clenched her fists, causing the thorny rose to try and worm its way into her hand so that it could spread the fingers, and looked up at her Lord. “Yes, my Lord?”

“I assume that your prohibition against torture extends to torturing Adalrico, as well?” The calm in Voldemort’s voice made the statement worse.

Indigena nodded in silence. She was not sure that her Lord would actually give her a choice when he was this enraged, but she had to refuse the opportunity to torture no matter what.

“That does not matter,” Voldemort whispered. “That does not matter. I am minded to try something that requires the sacrifice of a Death Eater—one who took the Mark willingly, one whose Mark my magic may circle through. Only the rarity of my servants until now kept me from trying it. And now that I have a servant I may sacrifice, and one versed in the necessary torture, there is no need to hold back any longer.” His voice changed, to a whipcrack. “Oaken!”

“My Lord.” Indigena’s cousin rose to his feet, showing off the brown-bronze eyes and stern face of the quieter Yaxley twin.

“You have tortured people, I know,” said Voldemort.

“One every month for the last ten years, yes, my Lord,” said Oaken, without flinching or changing his expression. “Unwilling sacrifices are necessary to maintain our invulnerability.”

“Then you will have no objection to taking this man and doing what I tell you to do with him.” Voldemort pointed his finger, and the snake jerked its head, at Adalrico.

Oaken did not blink. “No, my Lord.”

“Excellent.” Voldemort stood from his throne and walked steadily forward, the snake gliding next to his heels to insure that he did not do so blindly. “Stretch him spread-eagle, then. Indigena, your vines are required to bind.”

Adalrico made small, futile motions as if he wanted to struggle, but their Lord’s control over him was too complete to let him do so. As she made vines sprout from the earth to tie him, Indigena felt a moment’s stab of pity for him. And then it was gone back into the washing tide of horror, as she watched Oaken stride forward and crouch down over Adalrico, insuring that his limbs went where they needed to go.

When that was done, Oaken glanced up at Voldemort, who stood looking down at Adalrico as if he still had eyes.

“The Death Eaters swear an oath to me,” Voldemort whispered. “That is the true secret of service, that oath. *Do you consent to serve me all the days of your life?* That created a bond that cannot be broken, and the Mark is the visible sign of it.” He outlined the Dark Mark in the air above Adalrico’s left arm, though he did not touch it. It was so quiet, save for his words, that Indigena could hear as well as feel her heartbeat. She felt the other Death Eaters leaning forward all along the wall, trying to guess what
would happen next and how to avoid it themselves.

“Adalrico’s time to serve me, alive, is done,” said Voldemort, and then sank to the floor. “Oaken Yaxley, I desire you to make a Dark Mark of Adalrico Bulstrode, to see that his body imitates in shape what his arm bears. Do not touch his left arm, but warp every other part of him as you see fit. And make sure he stays alive and conscious.”

“My Lord,” said Oaken, and bowed, and began.

Indigena watched, both because she felt Adalrico was owed a witness to his demise and because she thought she knew what her Lord would do to her if she were to look away.

She saw Adalrico’s belly opened, the intestines drawn out like braided ropes, twined around his body in the shape of the snake, running from shoulder to shoulder and arm to arm to form the sinuous curves. She saw his legs broken and reformed, the bones in them used to suggest the pattern of scales; Oaken spent a long time on that, as if the detail were important. She saw his head twisted to the side and then bent inwards to his chest. His torso would become the center of the skull, Indigena saw. His ribs were broken and extended through the skin to form the teeth of the skull. Large, bloody patches of overturned flesh made the eyes. Adalrico’s right arm was obliterated, pieces of it used to carefully layer the dome of the skull.

And all the while, Adalrico screamed, until he could scream no more. What stopped him was not the exhaustion of his voice, but the placement of his mouth. Indigena saw a pair of lips opening and shutting somewhere in the center of the skull design, but Oaken—well, it was Sylvan by then—smoothed a hand over them, and they shut forever, so as not to disrupt the harmony of the design.

Soon it became impossible to think of what lay before them as Adalrico Bulstrode, or as human at all. It was a Dark Mark sculpted in skin, in bone, in flesh and organs and quivering meat.

And through it all, the left arm remained untouched, the Dark Mark uncovered, black and gleaming in the dim light of the burrow.

When it was done, Sylvan stood back and looked at the Dark Lord for further instructions. Indigena, breathing heavily against her own nausea, looked, too. Her Lord’s eyes were not open, of course, but his snake-like, bone-white face conveyed his deep bliss in the twins’ work.

“Now,” said Voldemort, his voice barely above a whisper, “make a cut in my left side. Use your magic. It must go to my magical core.”

Indigena had a faint inkling, then, of what her Lord intended to do. He could use the magic of his Death Eaters because of the Dark Marks. His power could run through the Marks in a vast circle instead of draining.

But she did not know, yet, whether she was right. So she was forced to watch as Sylvan cut a hole in her lord’s left side, and dug deep, using magic to keep him alive all the while, aiming straight for the magical core. Indigena listened to the intently muttered spells with detached admiration. At some point, Sylvan—Oaken now—would need to cross the divide that separated the world of soul and spirit from the world of flesh and blood, and they were doing so even as they kept up the work of cutting. In their own way, they were true artists.

She thought that a moment before she vomited.

Her Lord did not seem to notice. Of course, he had not wavered since the cutting began, instead staring at the Dark Mark made of Adalrico, his face unchanging. And then he started, and Indigena knew that Oaken must have reached the magical core.

“Bring up his left arm,” he whispered. “Press the Dark Mark to the hole in my core.”

Oaken didn’t hesitate, separating the left arm from the rest of Adalrico’s body by a simple Cutting Charm, and then feeding it through the hole in Voldemort’s left side, murmuring another spell that would let the limb cross that same divide between the world of spirit and flesh.

The world shook and quivered. Voldemort placed his right hand on the Mark made of flesh, and Indigena felt the moment—as a crawling in her left arm—when he began to draw up his magic.

The magic tried to drain out the hole in her Lord’s magical core that Harry had cut with his variant of the Fisher King Curse—

And was stopped. The Dark Mark contained a piece of Voldemort, and the magic drained into Adalrico’s Dark Mark, circled
through it, and then circled back into the magical core itself.

At the same moment, Voldemort intoned, “*Ebibo minutalem!*”

The Dark Mark under Voldemort’s hand, all that was left of Adalrico, softened and shook, and then withered up and plastered itself around Voldemort like one of the fake masks Indigena had seen Muggles wearing for Halloween. It clung there for long moments until it abruptly all softened further and streamed into the cut in his left side. Sealed twice, Indigena thought, dazed, with the Dark Mark providing the immediate plug to the hole and the flesh shaped into a Dark Mark providing a second, symbolic plug on top of that.

And, since Adalrico had taken the Dark Mark of his own free will—as had every Death Eater, or Voldemort would not have accepted them—there was a good chance that this counted as a willing sacrifice.

The burrow flooded with magic. Indigena could not see. She could hear her Lord laughing, and smell her own vomit, and taste the heavy tang of blood, and feel soft musky fur pressing against her skin, but she could not see. The Dark Lord had arisen again, and he was cloaked in Darkness.

She did know that the magic raised in this burrow was beyond anything she had ever felt before, that Voldemort was the most powerful wizard she had ever encountered, and her knees bent without conscious volition, casting her down with humbled mind and bowed head.

Voldemort laughed, and laughed and laughed, and the Darkness went up like an unfolding flag to challenge the dominion of the Light, promising terror and torture and magic resurrected—the life of despair, the death of hope.

~*~*~*~*~

Intermission: In Transition

A tunnel opened between Millicent and the distance, in what she later understood as the moment her father died.

She choked and fell to one knee, hearing her mother’s soft, anxious voice asking her what was wrong. Millicent put up a hand, but was unable to speak as her vision flooded with darkness and light, alternating pulses of it that at last settled into a single image: a clenched, black stone fist on a white background, with *Duramus* written beneath it in dark letters.

By that, the symbol of Bulstrode, she knew that her father was dead, and from this moment on she must be the head of the Bulstrode family in truth as well as in name.

The fist spun away in the next moment, and Millicent saw a storm of dark snowflakes flying towards her. She spread her arms to embrace them, though the power of the transition still would not let her rise from her knees.

The magic hit her as the transfer of gifts began between her and her father. She had been his magical heir, and so his power did not flee at his death, to become one of the many wandering shades summoned on Walpurgis Night, but gave itself to her. Millicent felt the capacity for blackfire grow strong in her stomach. The secrets of Blackstone unfolded themselves in her head like songs she had always known but temporarily forgotten. The last and most terrible defense of the Bulstrodes—the Medusa gaze, never to be used on anyone who would escape alive to tell of it—flared behind her eyes.

And then it was done.

Millicent knelt where she was for long moments, eyes still shut. She had fallen one person, and she would rise another. From this moment, the future and the fortunes of her family depended on her.

When she stood, her eyes were empty of tears, her face calm, but that fact alone made her mother burst into tears and cling to her. Millicent smoothed her hair, one part of her mind on the mourning that would need to be done, one part of her mind on Marian—her heir, now, in truth as well as name—and one part thinking of the message she would need to send to France.

It was a time of war, but that only meant that the future of Bulstrode was less secure than ever. It did not bring an end to obligations, or to the life that would need to continue when the war was done. Millicent intended to summon Pierre Delacour, marry him as their families had already agreed, and do what she could to conceive an heir. She would not ordinarily have rushed to have children, but she might not be alive a year from now, and Marian was a slender thread to hang everything on. She must do what she could.
More than just my blood flows in me.

“Was it swift?”

Millicent blinked and looked down at Elfrida’s face. She was about to say that she did not know the answer to that question, but when she opened her mouth, she found she did. Echoes of agony rolled through her muscles.

“No,” she said. “It was slow, and there was much pain.”

Her mother shut her washed-out, pale blue eyes, and slowly nodded. Then she seemed to gather strength to herself. Millicent knew that, in important ways, that was a lie. That strength was always there, but for the most part Elfrida leaned on her husband in public and summoned it only to defend her children.

Now the task of defending at least one of her children would always be hers. So when her face bristled with an edge of gold, and her body filled with the lioness strength of the *puellaris* witch, Millicent was not surprised.

“That is as it must be,” she murmured. “Will you be using the Stone Chamber?”

Millicent considered that for a moment. The Stone Chamber was the last refuge of the Bulstrodes, never revealed to anyone outside the family; not even all those who married among them had known of it, unless they had revealed themselves to be as loyal and trustworthy as Elfrida had been to Adalric. In that chamber, members of the family could be transformed to statues and endure a war or a persecution that way, behind an Unassailable Curse that only the willingly spilled blood of Bulstrode could negate.

There was a chance, of course, that they might be left that way forever if no free member of the family survived the war or persecution. But Millicent would leave a vial of blood just in case, and if worst came to worst, there was Edith Bulstrode, her third cousin, Henrietta’s daughter, studying in France.

*They will come out of this alive.*

“I think we must,” she said, opening her eyes and staring into her mother’s. “I do not know what Father died to bring about, but I know that the Dark Lord was happy. Things are about to get worse. Much worse.” She added the notion of warning Harry to her list of what she had to do.

Elfrida nodded shallowly. “Then I would prefer to become a statue with Marian, and stay there, knowing no one can harm us.”

Millicent kissed her mother on the brow. “It shall be done.” She turned to face the Hogwarts Owlerly. She would send the message to Pierre first, and then find Harry.

Her father would have no funeral. Millicent knew, as surely as she knew anything, that there was no body left.

But she did fill one fist with crystalline light as she went to the Owlerly, turning it the color of quartz, and directed one glinting beam through a window into the sky, where it might shine.

*Farewell, Father. Even in death, there is life, and there is life beyond it, in the form of the blood that must continue.*

*Duramus.*

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**Chapter Twenty-Three: It Gets Uglier**

Harry nodded. “I understand, Millicent. Thank you for the warning.” He stroked the scar on his left arm, the only remnant of his bond with Adalrico, before he could help himself.

Millicent followed his gesture with her eyes, and then shook her head. “Just because my father is dead does not mean the alliance is broken,” she said. “I fully intend to fight at your side, Harry. The only time I should be absent from the battle is for my wedding, and for the birth itself, assuming that we’re unlucky enough to have the war continue throughout my pregnancy.”

Harry frowned. “Most pureblood witches don’t fight when they’re pregnant. Dark ones, at least.” He’d read enough history as a child to know that. So important were those pureblood children that pregnant witches sometimes vanished from society for a year
altogether, partly to protect the child and partly to give birth in absolute safety and avoid attempts by enemies to destroy the newborn infants.

A faint curve of her lips was the only response from Millicent, who cocked her head to the side. “I am not most witches, Harry. And I do have an heir, unlike many of them—just not a child of my own blood. Not yet. I accepted the formal family oath knowing what it could mean. There are spells that conceal the magical signature of a baby.” She gave a brief flex of her arm. “And there’s one advantage to being a tall, hefty Bulstrode woman, you know. It’s much harder for people to tell you’re pregnant than it would be with one of those delicate little witches.”

Harry nodded. “If you’re sure.”

“I am.” Millicent caught his eye. “And I don’t want you to blame yourself for my father’s death, either. He was already dead, unless he managed to escape. I would have had to kill him the next time I saw him.”

Harry gave a convulsive shudder. He couldn’t imagine giving up on someone like that. There were times he was glad that his morals were closer to the Light’s than the Dark’s, whatever education he might have received in Dark pureblood history or rituals.

Millicent turned and left their bedroom. Harry glanced across at Draco, who sat on the edge of their bed and had his head buried in his arms, muttering. Millicent had interrupted their conversation about Lucius. Harry had let her in seeing her face, since he knew it was an important message she carried, but in some ways he thought he should have shut her out. Now Draco had retreated into himself.

“Draco?” he asked gently.

“If I’d gone!” Draco exclaimed, tossing his head upright. “If I had gone, then he might have seen me, and his love for me might have let him overcome that damn hatred. From what you said, you were close. Voldemort’s hold on him must have been weaker than we thought. If I were there, he could have broken free.”

“You can’t blame yourself for that.” Harry wrapped his arms around Draco and drew him back so that he lay against his chest. “No one knew Lucius was going to attack. I thought there might be an attack. Voldemort knows the kind of house I’ll look for to be a refuge, and Malfoy Manor is a natural choice, assuming the wards changed. But we couldn’t have known it would be him.”

Draco turned and pressed his face into Harry’s shoulder, keeping it there. “I just don’t like it,” he muttered. “I hate regret, but this time I can’t help feeling it.”

Harry stroked his hair and bent his head so that his face nuzzled into his partner’s neck. “I know.”

Draco’s hold on him gradually eased, and then he sat back, shaking his head. “Will there be some of those foreign Aurors around Malfoy Manor?” he asked. Harry thought he saw a shine of tears in the corners of Draco’s eyes. Wisely, he did nothing to draw attention to it.

“Yes. Esperanza’s people. I’m dividing them between all the safehouses.” Harry clasped Draco’s hand, ignoring the half-hearted gesture he made to move it aside. “And they’re doing some good, Draco. There was a skirmish near Cobley-by-the-Sea the other day that was probably a result of Death Eater recruiters visiting Dark families in the area. The Aurors didn’t manage to capture any, but none of them escaped. Voldemort won’t receive any information about safehouses in the area.”

Draco cocked his head curiously. “It doesn’t bother you that your allies are so much more willing to kill than you are?”

Harry shook his head. “No. I know it has to happen. I know it’s war. I’m trying to get more used to doing it myself.” One of the first things Narcissa had said when she heard about Lucius’s failed attack, her head held high and her lips tightly shut, was that Harry should have killed Lucius if he could not hold him. That way, Lucius would not be alive to kill someone else in the future. “But a swift death is better than many people will be able to hope for in this war, and better than what Voldemort will offer. I won’t be against those who can offer it, and who are willing to offer it. I will be against torture, and unwilling sacrifice, and the murder of innocents.”

“Sometimes,” Draco breathed, “I wonder if you should not be. You wouldn’t have a semi-war with the Ministry if you were more committed to demonstrating your power, Harry, or looking away from exceptions to your rules.”

“Yes, but that would mean compromising myself irrevocably.” Harry rolled onto his back, still holding Draco in his arms. He intended to visit Narcissa again soon—his first attempt at comforting her about Lucius had been anything but good—but there was no reason he had to hurry. And it was pleasant to lie here, cradling Draco. It would give him strength to continue during
many hours when he didn’t have it. “And I fear that more, the loss of my principles.”

Draco laughed softly and nestled more fully against him. “I don’t think you could do that, Harry. There’s no true darkness inside you.”

Harry stared up at the canopy of the four-poster bed, and stroked Draco’s hair, and didn’t answer. He did think about telling Draco his secrets, sometimes, but then Draco came out with something like this, and Harry wished for nothing but to preserve that innocence untainted.

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It was manifestly obvious to Narcissa that Harry did not understand why his attempts at comforting her had failed.

He assumed it was partially his fault that Lucius was in Voldemort’s service, and that she needed apologies from him, and reassurances that they would win him back. But it was not his fault. It was Lucius’s, for succumbing to the spell of hatred in the first place, and perhaps making it imperative for Draco to kill him, should they meet in battle. Harry had made a mistake by not killing or capturing Lucius during his raid on Malfoy Manor, but that had nothing to do with why Lucius had gone back to the Dark Lord.

Narcissa would welcome the chance at reconciliation with her husband if it could happen. But she would not, could not, live in a dream world where that hope ruled her. She would, and had to, exist in the hard, real world where he was the servant of an enemy.

So, when Harry slipped back into her room after an hour when he’d spent time with Draco—she could tell that at a glance—Narcissa told him the truth. “It was not because of you that Lucius went to the Dark Lord,” she told Harry.

He gave her a confused glance. “I know that,” he said. “Even if he hates me, I’m only one among many people he hates.”

Narcissa shook her head. “You are not responsible for casting him there,” she repeated, “and therefore, you are not responsible for winning him back. The next time, if he endangers our allies or a safehouse, strike hard, Harry. Kill him. It would be better than leaving him alive to serve as a slave and to point up a vulnerability in our side. He would thank you if he could.”

Harry narrowed his eyes and studied her as if she were speaking in a language he had never heard before. “Why, Mrs. Malfoy?” he asked at last. “Don’t you want your husband back?”

“Narcissa,” she corrected him, for at least the hundredth time since they’d met. “And of course I do. But I would rather not see your attention divided and distracted with getting him back. Surely you can understand that much, Harry.”

“He didn’t manage to do more than wound me and one other person at the safehouse today—“

“That does not matter,” Narcissa cut him off. “And the next time, it will be worse. I have put him aside from my heart, Harry, and if you are holding back in anticipation of inflicting some fatal blow on me, you need not worry about it.”

“And Draco?”

Narcissa closed her eyes. She could not say that her son was as fully mature as she was, as able to put his father aside from his heart and embrace what must be done. That didn’t mean that he would object, though, or ever show his grief to Harry. What he wanted more than anything was his own adult life, and that had to have Harry in it. It did not have to have Lucius. Lucius’s own actions over the past year and a half had made sure of that, lessening Draco’s dependence on him in a way that he had never expected or desired.

“He will not be as sanguine as I am, but he will survive,” she told him. “I know that half the reason you held back was because of us, Harry.”

“Half the reason,” said Harry, and his voice had grown cooler than Narcissa expected. “But that leaves half the reason still unexplored, doesn’t it?”

Narcissa opened her eyes and frowned at him. “I do not understand you, Harry.”

“I also did it because I value Lucius as a person,” said Harry. “And I want to set him free of slavery as I would want to set a magical creature Voldemort had enslaved free. And I never wish my heart to become hardened to sacrifices, resigned to necessity
as the best course of judging a war. Sometimes, yes, I have absolutely no choice, as happened the night that I went to Cornwall. But even there, I acted as necessary to save lives, not to kill those who opposed me. I will take other chances for as long as I can, Narcissa. When I think I have no choices left, then I will strike quickly and hard, yes.”

“You cannot live like that,” said Narcissa, frowning more deeply. She was sure that Harry understood this already. He had had numerous examples proving the truth, in any case. “You will have to destroy those who face you. Voldemort will have an intolerable advantage against you otherwise.”

“And if I do that all the time, then Voldemort will have won,” Harry countered calmly. “I should simply kill myself when the war is won, because I will have nothing left to live for. The part of me that values freedom and not mechanical duty is the part that loves Draco, the part that chose the vates path. I will not endanger that part of me—”

“Though the struggle to keep it safe will endanger others?” Narcissa challenged. She could not believe what she was hearing. Harry was often careless with his own safety, rarely with others’.

Harry shook his head. “I do not think it will, Narcissa. Where it might, then yes, I will kill first and ask questions later. But most of the time, it won’t. And I will not kill simply as a precaution, for fear of what might happen. That way lies the Ministry’s slippery slope, Juniper’s paranoia.”

Narcissa wondered if the difference between Harry and other war leaders she had heard of came down to something as simple as age, or Declared allegiance, or the fact that Harry was a vates. Regardless of any of that, she had never heard of a path similar to the one he now proposed. One grew hardened by war and did what had to be done. She was not sure that Harry’s way, remaining open to the world and refusing to grow jaded, would work.

But then, Harry did do what had to be done, she thought. It was simply that those duties encompassed more than the traditional hard duties of a war leader. How difficult was it really, after all, to make a decision on the battlefield for which your people would applaud you later? Not as difficult as witnessing pain, or killing people on your own side swiftly to prevent their torture, or burying the dead.

She inclined her head, slowly, still unsure, but feeling more confident than she had been in some time about the way Harry was managing this war, and particularly that aspect of it that concerned her husband. “Thank you for explaining to me, Harry.”

Harry caught her hand, kissed the back of it, and then turned and strode from the room, leaving Narcissa alone. She walked thoughtfully to the window and stared out of it. A few people were coming up the Hogsmeade road, surrounded by an escort of foreign Aurors, probably to seek refuge in Hogwarts.

And that would be impossible, too, if we really were living in some stories out of the history-tales. Most leaders would turn away people who can’t contribute to the defense of the strongholds. Harry does not.

Narcissa clenched her hands on the windowsill and gave a firm nod. She knew that Harry had stern, clear-eyed people at his back—herself among them—who would protect him if it turned out that his decisions left something to be desired. In the meantime, they might as well follow his path and see if it worked.

We can turn him back if it does not. Most of the time, Harry listens to other people.

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“Sir?” Xavier’s voice came out of the phoenix song spell on Harry’s left wrist, distracting him from a daily tour of the wards. He halted and cocked his head, wondering if something had gone wrong near the safehouses that the Cercle Familial had been split to guard. Xavier had been a target once before, the night that Voldemort arranged the trap with Hawthorn in her wolf shape, so it was only natural the Death Eaters might seek him out again.

“Yes?” he asked.

“We have a family recently arrived in Britain from Ireland, who wish to seek shelter in Hogwarts,” Xavier said. “I have escorted them to Hogwarts with help from a few of my siblings. May we approach?”

“Oh course. Only give me time to inform the Headmistress, and I’ll come out and meet them myself.” Harry had heard little from Ireland, where things were, as far as he knew, tense and quiet, most of the wizarding families looking to Cupressus Apollonis and his Ministry allegiance. These refugees might have valuable information.
He told McGonagall new refugees were approaching and to drop the wards, and then hurried to the entrance hall doors. Halfway there, he found himself shadowed, and checked a sigh when he realized his shadows were Owen and Bill. Well, they could come if they must. Harry thought the protection less important on Hogwarts’s grounds than it was when there was a known enemy outside.

He stepped onto the road, and found Xavier and his companions already close. Both the women following him looked more Veela than he did, with long silver hair and a graceful, swinging stride that made it seem as if they would break into a dance at any moment. Harry might have been puzzled by Xavier calling them his “siblings,” but Xavier had explained that it was one way the wizards and witches in Cercle Familial traditionally referred to each other, as most Veela could make a claim to be related to each other in a way that most humans could not.

The family they escorted was small, a dark-haired woman with a pinched and silent face, a man who walked in her shadow, and three children, all of whom looked to be between the ages of five and eight. Harry wondered what their story was. The look on the woman’s face said it was nothing good, and the way that the man shivered and ducked behind his wife promised nothing better.

It was the children who concerned him most, though. Two of them were frightened, but otherwise normal. The one who walked in front, bent as if against a strong wind, was a boy, and Harry saw that he had probably misjudged his age; he was nearly old enough to start at Hogwarts, it seemed. He kept shivering, and Harry wondered if they had encountered the new magic Voldemort had been so excited about when he killed Adalrico.

A stab of grief tried to overcome him. Harry reminded himself that the problems of the dead came secondary to the problems of the living, and stepped forward, spreading his hands in as non-threatening a manner as possible.

The woman saw him and halted, which forced the halt of the man and the two younger children. The boy in front kept walking, as though he noticed nothing but the path his eyes were focused on. Harry winced. "Yes, something traumatic happened to him, and not long ago."

"Harry," said Owen sharply. "They’ve been through Dark magic."

"That’s obvious. Hush," Harry said. He didn’t want the boy’s first impression of Hogwarts to be as threatening as whatever his family had fled from. He took a step forward and half-crouched, so that he was at the walking boy’s eye-level. "Hello. What’s your name?"

The boy glanced up at him, but didn’t stop walking, his legs rising and falling like an automaton’s. His face was set in a picture of absolute misery, and it looked as though he would crash right into Harry rather than stop.

"You’ll be safe in a few moments," Harry murmured. "First, though, can you tell me your name?" The boy was a few feet from him now, and hadn’t paused.

The boy opened his mouth, and stopped, struggling to speak. Harry moved a step nearer, not wanting to miss whatever whisper might emerge.

He heard a wordless roar behind him, and then a body crashed into his, bearing him out of the way just as the boy exploded.

Harry heard the sound of flesh falling and pattering around him, the thicker sound of blood, the screams of shock and panic and rage. He rolled, caught, breathless, beneath Owen, and not able to see what had happened.

"Is Bill all right?" he asked, when he could muster the breath to talk. He tried to sit up, only to have Owen push him flat again and keep him there. Owen was a year older than he was, and far stronger. Harry frowned up at him, and received a scowl so dark back that he looked away.

"It was a trap," Owen whispered. "He was full of Incrementum spores, but more virulent than any I’ve ever seen before."

"What happened to Bill?" Harry reiterated.

"He’s fine," said Owen, and glanced over his shoulder, then nodded once. "Yes. The spores were likely meant for you, and if they don’t attach to the living flesh they’re attuned to in the first few seconds, they die. But they would have attached to you, with you standing that close." Finally, he sat up and let Harry roll over and look at what had happened, though he kept one arm in front of Harry’s chest.

The ground was red and black with gore. Harry swallowed the temptation to be sick, since, after all, the boy was dead, and he had
to worry about the living, Bill and the boy’s family. Bill stood just beyond the gore, his wand leveled at something on the ground next to his feet and his eyes blazing. A diamond glow surrounded the fang earring in his right ear.

Harry gazed at the spores in front of Bill, eyes narrowed. They were larger than the Black Plague spores Adalrico had created, and looked more dangerous. They were enormous puffballs, red as if flushed with blood.

“What do they do?” he asked Owen.

“\textit{Incrementum}?“ Owen shifted to stay in front of Harry when he tried to move. “Stay here for now, my \textit{L—vates}. They’re Dark magic. We learned about them in Durmstrang. They’re meant to multiply fast, so fast that they infest a body and take control of it away from the wizard. A modified version of possession; after they take over, the body belongs to the wizard or witch who sent the spores. Usually, they’ll use the victim until he’s full to bursting with the next generation of spores, then tune them and send him after someone else.” Owen shook his head. “Those spores were tuned to you. Before that, they must have been tuned to the boy.”

“So this is Voldemort’s work?” Harry supposed he might have turned to that tactic—he did want Harry on his side if he could get him, after all—but it seemed strange that he’d risk the destruction of Harry’s body at a further point in time.

“I doubt he would have the knowledge to make them work to their full potential,” said Owen darkly, scowling at the puffballs, and blocking another attempt Harry made to move forward. “They require both powerful magic \textit{and} specialized knowledge, which is one reason they aren’t used often. They’re part of the branch of magic associated with reproduction, and fertility.”

And, like that, Harry knew who must have sent the boy.

“Monika,” he breathed.

Owen gave him a confused look. Harry shook his head, and stood. “The Dark Lady of Austria,” he explained shortly. “She breeds magical creatures. Something like the \textit{Incrementum} spores would be easy for her.” Shaking his head again, he turned to the family who huddled between the three French wizards, who had all taken out their wands. “And she would be cruel enough to stuff a child with them and send him to explode on me if she could. She wouldn’t care.”


Owen nodded slightly, and Harry stepped forward to face the boy’s family. The man had backed away, his mouth working wordlessly—at least, he’d backed away as far as he could with Xavier’s wand pressed between his shoulder blades. The woman had enfolded her two younger children in her robes, but the thin line her mouth was pressed into told Harry that, at least, she had known about this.

Harry focused on her. “Why?” he asked quietly.

The woman shook her head. Harry cast a translation spell. He now thought it extremely unlikely that the family had come from Ireland. More likely, Monika had filled the boy with \textit{Incrementum} spores in Austria, then sent the family to Britain through Ireland so they would attract less attention.

As he thought more about it, Harry decided to change his first question. There was something he wanted to know more.

“I want to know his name,” he told the woman.

She couldn’t pretend not to understand him now, but she could still refuse to answer, and it seemed that was what she wanted to do. Harry went on staring at her, and let some of his magic rise, until she flinched. Then she answered, reluctantly, “Aaron.”

Harry slowly nodded. “And why did you let the Dark Lady fill him with spores?”

As he had hoped, the realization that he already knew they came from Monika was enough to break the woman’s courage. She slumped, her body folding inward as if to protect the two children left to her. “We’re hers,” she whispered. “We owe allegiance to her. We live on land that belongs to her. She was the one who kept us safe from Muggles for years.” She lifted her head, as if hoping to find understanding in Harry’s eyes. “When she asked us for a favor, such a small favor, in return, how were we supposed to refuse her? She is a Lady.”

Harry fought to keep from curling his lip. He didn’t expect Aaron’s mother to understand his disgust. It was less a disgust at her,
anyway, and more at the entire system of Lords and Ladies and Declarations. That it could command mindless obedience, sacrifices, like this, was disgusting. A Light Lord like Dumbledore, a Dark Lady like Monika—what was the difference between them? And ordinary wizards and witches were so ready to roll over and give in because of fear or awe about stronger magic.

*Stronger magic doesn’t make someone good,* Harry thought savagely. *It doesn’t make someone right. It doesn’t make us entitled to anything that anyone else has—including the lives of their children. Lily knew no better than this woman, and Aaron became a victim just like I did.*

*I wish that Scrimgeour was still alive, or at least that the Ministry was under the influence of someone more competent. Ordinary wizards and witches do deserve that middle ground that Scrimgeour dreamed of where they can settle their own affairs without influence from posturing people who insist on calling themselves Lords and Ladies. If Juniper would accept help from me, and would actually implement it, I would work to insure that the Ministry was free of both Voldemort and me.*

“What did she want?” he asked.

The woman shook her head. “I don’t know. To control you, I would assume, my Lord, but I know nothing more. I only know that she put us on a boat for Ireland, and we were to pretend that we had always been there, with the aid of Memory Charms.”

Harry nodded shortly. “And what will she do to you, when she finds out that this trap failed?”

The woman’s wide eyes were answer enough.

“If you will give me your oath that you intend to harm neither me nor anyone else here,” Harry said, “I will give you shelter in Hogwarts. I cannot guarantee that you will be safe from Monika forever; this attack proves that her arm is long. But you can have a place here.”

Tears filled the woman’s eyes, and Owen gripped Harry’s shoulder and shook it lightly. “Are you mad?”

“No,” Harry said, turning to face him. “What else would you suggest I do, Owen? Cast them out? They have no relatives here, no friends. And I hardly expect Monika to be friendly to them when she realizes what happened.”

“They would not be safe inside the castle,” Owen said. “You have no idea who will wish to harm them when word gets out, Harry.”

“Then I will send them to a safehouse,” Harry said stubbornly. “They should not suffer for Monika’s paranoia.”

“If you must.” But Owen looked deeply unhappy about it.

Harry turned to make the arrangements, anger boiling in him all the while. That this could have happened—that Monika could get around the Pact by sending servants into Britain, while staying physically out of the country herself—infuriated him. And so he had another message to send when this was done.

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He had no winds, as Kanerva did, to summon the Lords and Ladies of the Pact. He was not sure they would come even if called, should their youngest member be the one doing the shouting. Besides, he didn’t know if he needed or wanted an audience.

In the end, therefore, he sat before the fire of the Slytherin common room, and called on Monika alone.

He made himself remember every detail of the clearing where he had seen her when Kanerva’s call went out, the strange creatures grazing, the heavily warded cottage, the dip and rise of the land. He envisioned it in his mind, until the image wavered between him and the rest of the room. He had no fear of being disturbed when he opened his eyes and found himself gazing at it. The rest of the Slytherins were staying away from him for right now, since they’d felt the intense shimmer and waver of magic around him. And Owen, Bill, and Xavier and his sisters had kept silent for the moment about what had happened on the path, since Harry had enjoined them to.

He had not done this before. That should not, theoretically, matter. Once his magic knew what he wanted, Harry trusted it to establish the connection. He would not have if he had not seen Monika and her home before, or if his rage were not so deep, a clear sea studded with dark green flowers, but both were true.
“Monika.”

He felt his voice shudder out of him and into the image, which rippled in response, and then became like one of Kanerva’s wind-windows, picturing what was really there. Monika stood near one of the grazing creatures, caressing the one curled around her wrist, which looked to be a cross between bird and snake. She looked up with faintly narrowed eyes, and locked her gaze on Harry.

“I see Aaron failed,” she murmured. Since Harry still had the translation charm in effect, he could understand.

“He did,” said Harry. His voice deepened and cooled even further. At least she had not made a joke of it. He might have attacked if she had. “Might I inquire why you sent him and his family after me?”

Monika whispered to the creature around her wrist, and then tossed it up. Green-golden wings flared around a frilled face filled with jagged teeth, a creature out of nightmare. Harry watched it soar up and disappear.

“Part of it is the fact that you might free my children when you are done with your vates work in Britain,” said Monika. “I have already had to tighten my webs. But not all of it. Have you yet realized that Lord Riddle has come back to full power?” Her eyes narrowed again, locked on him.

“He cannot have,” said Harry. “I cut a hole in his magical core with the Fisher King Curse. I am the only one who can heal it.”

“Do not ask me of the method.” Monika folded her arms. “But the truth is that he has returned. We felt the flag of his power unfolding over Britain this morning.” She cocked her head. “Such power is more than attractive, and if the prophecy can be believed, unclear thing though it is, you will be the one to win against him, even as strong as he is. You are his magical heir. His power will pass to you on the moment of his death.”

“How did you know the prophecy?” Harry demanded.

Monika’s smile deepened, but she didn’t reply.

“And so you sought to control me and the magic that I will inherit,” Harry finished flatly.

“Yes.” Monika did not sound at all sorry for it. Harry told himself that he had known she wouldn’t be. It didn’t stop his impulse to strike her dead where she stood. “I would be more than safe from your webs. I would be the most powerful witch in the world with even a third of that power, which is probably all that the spores could manage to transfer to me. Lord Riddle is the strongest Lord in the world.”

Harry had not known that, but it made sense. If nothing else, Voldemort’s absorbere ability, and his reckless use of it, would guarantee that.

“I want your word you will not interfere in Britain again,” he said.

Monika laughed softly. “Why in the world would I give you that? And how can you trust me if I do? You know that the Pact will not consider this to be a violation of my word to stay out of your country, but if you come to Austria, I will be justified in defending my home ground.”

Harry stood. “I do not have to physically come to Austria.”

He drew on his magic, the deep rage he had felt when his parents were arrested, and some—a tiny bit—of the darkness that lay pooled in him, whining anxiously for an outlet. The air in front of him chilled, and came together in the shape of a serpent. Harry caressed its white scales, outlined with gold, and saw the unwillingly fascinated expression on Monika’s face.

“This creature shall not be subject to your magic,” Harry told her, “since it did not come from sexual reproduction. And I will direct it to travel to Austria. Sooner or later, it will find you, and if you have interfered in Britain again, it will kill you. Slowly.” He would fill its fangs before it left. Many poison would do, he thought. He wondered if Monika would enjoy being blind as Voldemort was. “You cannot affect it, slow it down, or stop it, and its vengeance will endure even if I have died or fallen under your control in the meantime. I will give it instructions in Parseltongue not to obey me after my initial commands.” He bent his head close to the snake and did just that. The serpent blinked gold-fringed eyes, then curled around his wrist and extended its tongue, tasting the source of Monika’s magic so that it would know where to go when it began its journey.

“No one would let a creature so wonderful go,” Monika said softly.
“I just did,” Harry assured her.

Monika studied him a moment longer, then bowed. “Perhaps I shall not find some way out of it,” she said. “Until then, you have my word that I will not interfere in your country. Vates.” She paused. “But even if I do not, others will come for your magic, standing ready to reap it when Lord Riddle falls. It is too tempting, and the idea that an undeclared adolescent should control it is not to be borne.”

She clapped her hands, and Harry’s window darkened and drifted apart. Harry sat back for a moment and closed his eyes. Both the contact and creating the serpent had taken a toll on his magic.

“Harry?”

Harry stirred himself reluctantly and sat up. Draco was coming down the stairs, and unlike his emotions over the death of his parents or the darkness inside himself, Harry knew this was not a secret that could be hidden.

“I have something to tell you, Draco.”

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Twenty-Four: Nor Iron Bars a Cage

Harry swallowed, and slowly inclined his head. “I understand,” he said, not looking at Jing-Xi. What else could he say? This was not her fault. She was obeying laws set up long before she was born.

“I am sorry, Harry,” Jing-Xi said quietly. “And I agree that it is an incidence of hypocrisy. But the Lords and Ladies are wary of what could happen if they did grant permission for others of the Pact to send small creatures—spies, and servants such as Monika has—into the country to help you. Some of them would help you. Some of them would try to help you only to gain the power you stand to inherit when Tom falls. And some of them would help Voldemort, because they would rather deal with a Dark Lord, even the most powerful Dark Lord in history, than an undeclared vates whose actions they still cannot determine.” She shook her head, looking weary. “The noninterference rule of the Pact states that they will not allow something to occur merely because it did once already. Thus they will shun Monika, but she will not be punished. They almost expected this of her.”

Harry sighed. He had hoped for more help once the Lords and Ladies heard Voldemort was returned to full power, but it seemed that was not to be. “I understand,” he repeated. What else can I say?

Jing-Xi reached out and cupped her hand beneath his chin, lifting his face, smiling warmly. Harry felt her magic slide over his like the flood of sunlit water it often resembled. “I am here, Harry,” she said. “And I can help defend your allies, even if I cannot carry my strength into offensive battle. Kanerva can do the same. Depend on us. Thomas and I think we may yet find a way around the Unassailable Curse on the Sword of Gryffindor.”

Harry’s tongue burned with the longing to say that they wouldn’t, because the prophecy claimed they could not, but then he realized whom he sounded like. Dumbledore and Lily relied on prophecies to the exclusion of all else, including human kindness and compassion. I will not do that, not let my own stubbornness shut off avenues of hope.

“Thank you, my Lady,” he said instead, and kissed the back of her hand, and retreated from the room.

Owen met him there, face grim and tired. Harry braced himself for news of an attack on a safehouse, but what Owen had to say was different in degree, if not in kind.

“Someone tried to attack Aaron’s family,” he said bluntly.

“Are they hurt?” Harry demanded at once, turning towards the hospital wing. It was where he had sheltered Aaron’s parents and siblings, behind strong but subtle wards that would only flare if someone carried actual physical violence to them.

Owen shook his head and sped up so that he matched Harry stride for stride. Harry was aware of another sworn companion appearing close to his shoulder. Bill, from the sound of the footsteps—longer legs, since he was taller than Charlie. “Those wards made sure of that. But it’s as I suspected, Harry. Other people don’t want them here, not after hearing what they did to you.”

“That wasn’t them,” Harry muttered in disgust. “That was Monika. And what do others think they would have done, put in Aaron’s mother’s place?”
“Resisted,” said Owen. “Besides, Harry, most people are not as rational as you are. They know that you were attacked. And the attackers are sheltering in Hogwarts. Some people think you are blind to the danger, others that you are fanatically compassionate even if that compassion could doom you.”

“And either is a weakness,” Harry finished, his voice clipped.

Owen paused, then nodded reluctantly.

“Compassion is much more rarely a weakness than they think it is,” Harry muttered. “But, well. Thomas has finished fortifying a safehouse in London. I’ll move them there tonight.” He looked at Owen out of the corner of his eye. “Can I trust you to escort them the distance?”

Owen shook his head. “I do not want to be away from you for that length of time,” he said calmly. “I would not hurt them, because you asked me not to, but neither will I leave your side. The first responsibility of a sworn companion is to his Lord or Lady, above family, above victims, above pride.”

I suppose if he wouldn’t abandon me for Medusa and Eos, or his brother, I can hardly ask him to do that for strangers, Harry decided. “Very well. I’ll send Tonks.” The former Auror had taken over dueling classes, but there were other teachers—Moody and Peter among them—and missing one night, or being reassigned to a different teacher, would not hurt her students.

They had reached the doors of the hospital wing by then, and Harry cautiously pushed them open. He found Madam Pomfrey standing next to the bed that cradled Aaron’s mother—and, currently, her two younger children, who had their faces buried in her robe—trying to reason with her through both her sobbing and the translation charm. The matron glanced up, and Harry didn’t miss the flash of relief on her face when she saw him, even though she tried to temper it.

“Harry,” she murmured. “There was an attack, but it didn’t even scorch the wards. I’m trying to make sure it didn’t touch her children, who were nearer the edge of the wards than she was, but I can’t get through to her.”

Harry nodded, and Madam Pomfrey moved aside. Harry crouched down in front of Aaron’s mother and half-closed his eyes. He had learned her name, though so quickly it took him a moment to remember it—

“Liane,” he said quietly.

She looked up at him slowly, eyes still overflowing with tears of exhaustion and fear. Harry squeezed her wrist gently, and she shuddered, her mind returning from wherever she’d cast it.

“I am sorry,” she said. “But I woke, and there was a dark figure, much like the servant of the Lady that fetched me, and—” She shut her eyes and her lips, seeming to resist saying anything further. Harry wondered if it was pride that kept her silent, or unwillingness to reveal too much about the circumstances surrounding Aaron’s death.

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” he said. He could have blamed her, but what would words of blame do? Voldemort was back in the world. Harry had no wish to make the lots of other people, or his own, harder. “It’s all right, Liane. I promise. It will be all right. We’ll move you to a safehouse where other people don’t know who you are or what happened.”

“So no one will hate us?” Liane whispered.

Harry shook his head. “Not unless you do something to make them hate you.”

A faint half-smile, the first he’d won out of her, was his answer for that. “Thank you,” she said. “I think I would like to sleep now.” She gathered one child, the younger one, closer to her, and handed the other over to her husband, who retreated into the next bed with dark, watchful eyes fastened on Harry’s face. A moment later, if they weren’t asleep, they were at least still.

Harry sighed, and then turned and carefully studied the air in front of the wards. He hoped that he’d be able to find who had done this, at least if their magic was familiar to him. There were so many people in Hogwarts now, and coming in and out through the wards as they arrived for dueling training or refuge, that the chances of it being someone he knew were much smaller than before.

As it turned out, he did know the signature, and he stiffened in shock.

“Harry?” Owen hovered in front of him. “What is it?”
“Nothing,” Harry muttered. “Not right now, anyway. I’ll go find Tonks, and talk to her about escorting Liane and her family to the safehouse in London.”

He carefully avoided Owen’s eyes as he went down the hall. Why in the world did Michael attack them?

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Draco had become very practiced at telling when Harry was awake and only pretending to be asleep. Of necessity, Harry had in turn become even better at feigning slumber. He lay with his head pillowed on Draco’s shoulder and his breathing even and completely relaxed until he knew from the soft snores next to him that Draco was deeply asleep. Then he opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling of the four-poster.

He’d found Tonks and given her instructions about Liane’s family; she’d been glad to accept the assignment. But he hadn’t been able to shake Owen off so that he could find Michael and talk to him alone. He had no idea what the boy thought he was doing. Some warped demonstration of loyalty? Choosing random targets for his anger? Something even stranger than that?

I will have to talk to him. Just another problem in a slew of them, a sea of them.

The image of the sea called to mind the shifting, variegated light and darkness of the North Sea on the day he and Connor had buried their parents. Harry decided to use the image to lull himself to sleep if he could. He imagined the rising and falling waves, the quietude behind them, the movement that was a lot like the movement of Draco’s chest beneath his ear.

And then the darkness parted.

Harry found himself gazing at an image of Malfoy Manor, which made him frown and cock his head. Why am I seeing this? It’s certainly not something that I normally picture when I close my eyes, or that I would expect to see on the verge of falling asleep. Spillover from Draco’s dreams, perhaps?

He was trying to figure out if he was in the right frame of mind to share Draco’s dreams—it didn’t seem likely, but stranger things had happened to him in his life, Merlin knew—when pain took him by the throat.

He recognized the sensation almost at once. Voldemort had broken through the Occlumency and the defensive Legilimency Harry had put up around the scar connection. He paralyzed Harry’s body in the midst of agony so complete that Harry almost forgot he had limbs.

Darkness curled and lapped around Harry like the shifting coils of some great serpent, and then surged forward around him to fall on the still vision of Malfoy Manor. By the nearly full moon in the sky overhead, Harry had no doubt that he was seeing it as it was this night.

If I’m seeing it as it is at all, he tried to remind himself. This could be a trick, a false vision, a deception—

Hush, my heir, Voldemort’s voice said, full of laughter and hatred. I am showing you the truth, because I wish you to watch them die.

And then Voldemort was there, walking towards the Manor under the moonlight, and Harry was voiceless and could not scream. Voldemort lifted one pale, gleaming hand. The snake wound around his waist saw for him, and in any case, he could feel the glinting pewter edge of the Manor’s changed wards.

He opened up the gullet of his absorbere gift.

Harry felt him drink the Manor’s wards, absorbing the magic of the shell planted in the walls as easily as if it were a Muggleborn child’s. Alarms tried to cry, but they fell silent too quickly. Voldemort turned and looked over his shoulder and nodded, and three people came forth from behind him. One was Lucius, one was Hawthorn, and one was the shifting shape of Sylvan and Oaken Yaxley.

“I have told you what to do,” he said. “Do it.”

The three Death Eaters bowed, only one of them smoothly, and then strode past him and towards the house.

Harry was fighting furiously to wake up, and every time he lashed up he was drowned by the sheer strength of Voldemort’s will, soothing him the way that someone might soothe a cantankerous pet. You cannot wake up, Voldemort told him. You cannot stop
this. You can only watch. I shall take from you everything you have loved, I told you that, and I meant it. Rejoice, for some of your loved ones shall escape me this night. I shall take only two.

Harry imagined Ignifer and Honoria dying under Lucius’s and Hawthorn’s wands, and struggled harder.

_Hush, Harry. If you burst your heart, then what shall the war effort and the prophecy do? What shall I do, without my beloved son?

_The vision moved, and Harry accompanied Lucius and Hawthorn into the hallways, saw them meet the first resistance, and watched them lift their wands.

And he understood, then. Voldemort had sent them to maim, not to kill. Again and again Lucius intoned curses that removed limbs, and Hawthorn chanted blood spells that would turn the most basic of bodily functions on her victims, but leave them alive to suffer. There was a shine like tears in her eyes. Harry had no idea if it was truly that, however, or simply the reflected light of the moon on the amber of her gaze, since she was so close to becoming a werewolf.

Ignifer and Honoria came into their way, but Lucius and Hawthorn avoided them both, only raising shields against Ignifer’s fire. Ignifer soon enough left them, when she saw she could do no good, and concentrated on defending the others from the wrath of the two Death Eaters—when she could. It was not often she could find someone who was not already wounded.

Harry was at a loss for a moment, and almost forgot to fight. If not Ignifer and Hawthorn, then who were the two Voldemort meant?

And then the scene shifted, and he saw Sylvan Yaxley entering the room where Medusa sheltered with Eos.

_No!

Harry lunged against the dark barrier of Voldemort’s strength once more, and again was forced down. He tried to break free, to open his eyes so that he might rejoin the waking world and fly to the Manor’s defense and theirs, but he could not. He could not even close his eyes and will the vision away.

He had no choice but to watch.

Medusa was awake, holding Eos close to her chest and crouching behind a very powerful Shield Charm. It did her no good. Sylvan softly spoke a spell that Harry had never heard before, his left hand held out and slightly crooked, and Eos flew out of Medusa’s arms and into his.

_Sylvan stood gazing down at her for a moment. Harry’s vision went gray and he felt a warning twinge in his chest as he watched the monster looking at his goddaughter. He had to reach her. He was supposed to protect her. He wanted—

_What you want makes no matter, Voldemort crooned in his ear. Watch, Harry, and learn the folly of opposing me.

Sylvan gripped Eos by her legs and stepped back. As she cried, he whirled and slammed her, head-first, against the nearest wall. Her wailing silenced as her skull smashed open, and Harry couldn’t look away from the mixture of blood and brains that slid down the wall. Medusa made a sound like nothing living and tried to attack, but Sylvan had a plan in place for that, too. Harry saw him catch her on a diamond point of light and hold her there, even as his body rippled and wavered and cycled into Oaken.

_Oaken had bronze-brown eyes that showed no emotion at all. Harry had no doubt in that moment that he was looking upon Adalrico’s killer. His own heart was hot in his mouth, as was the taste of bile and the pain like a branding iron piercing his throat.

“_Diffindo,” Oaken said, and Medusa’s robe split open down the middle. The diamond point of light pressed forward at the same moment, and ripped her back open, continuing inward until it rested against one of her internal organs.

Oaken took a step forward, opening his own robes.

_He’s going to rape her. He will.

Harry flopped again like a wounded fish, and still he could not move, and still he could not close his eyes, and still he could not stop this. The ruins of Eos’s small body still slid down the wall, and still Oaken walked forward until he stood in front of Medusa, gaze uninterested.
He pushed forward, and she screamed.

Harry could remember feeling what he felt then only twice before, once when he watched a boy butchered by werewolves while he was bound to the altar stone in the graveyard at the end of fourth year, and once when he watched Loki, in werewolf form, tear open a door and evade his magic to get to a former Auror Harry was guarding. Every other time, even when he’d had to kill the children in the Life-Web, he’d at least been able to do something. He’d saved them, though at the cost of a good part of his honor and his integrity. He had to be able to save Medusa. It was too late for Eos, but—

And he could not move. When Voldemort’s magic clamped down around him like the jaws of a werewolf around its prey, he lost even the slight freedom to struggle that he had had so far.

_Do you see?_ Voldemort asked, voice stern and proud, as if he were narrating the exploits of a favorite child to a friend. _Each time he rapes her, he pushes her onto the spike behind her. She is impaled from both front and behind. It is almost poetic._

Harry screamed and lunged again. He could hear the ripping of her flesh, and her cries. Then the spike pressed inward enough that she could not scream. Harry knew it had most likely pierced a lung.

_I have to. I promised her. I said I would be Eos’s godfather. I promised to protect her. I named her. And she’s dead, and Owen’s mother is dying in front of me, and I said she would be safe, and she isn’t, and I have to—_

There was only one choice, and he knew it.

Even as Medusa expired, even as Oaken exhaled a loud sigh and slumped forward over her dying body, Harry reached out and opened the first of the many gates that kept the dark part of him which enjoyed domination locked up.

He heard its eager whining, and then it slid forward, and then Harry flung all his will to hurt and hate and torture and cause pain against Voldemort.

Even as Voldemort flinched, Harry could hear him laughing.

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Draco was already awake, because he had felt the damage to the wards around the Manor, and it had hurt. He had seen the blood pouring from Harry’s scar and tried to wake him up, but he couldn’t do it. Harry only kept twitching and mumbling and sometimes crying out. Then he’d lost his voice and been unable even to do that. He just uttered little half-choked moans that made Draco frantic with concern for him.

The rational part of his brain urged him to leave Harry and get Snape, who might be able to wake him up. But Draco couldn’t bring himself to leave. He just stayed there, Harry’s body twitching like a nerve in thrumming flight, and whispered words of love and longing and desire for him to come back.

Later, he would have cause to bless the irrational part of his brain.

Harry abruptly stiffened and fell silent. Even his breathing seemed to stop. Draco had to lower his head to Harry’s chest, so that he could hear his heart pounding and reassure himself Harry was still alive.

And then he saw the walls turn to ice, and all the lights in the room went out at once.

Draco did not hesitate. It had been years since Harry was this angry. He didn’t care. He recognized the sensations of the fury that had accompanied them when they went together to face the Chamber of Secrets.

This time, though, he didn’t have to stand there, a helpless, frozen statue, while Harry faced death and danger without him.

He closed his eyes and jumped, following the old familiar trail of his possession gift into Harry’s head, prepared to share his thoughts and the danger—

Save that what he found when he opened his eyes in the mental world was unlike anything he’d seen before.

******
Harry knew a distance separated him from Voldemort, even now. The scar connection was a tunnel flowing with magic, or led into the tunnel flowing with magic, and Voldemort had littered it with traps to prevent Harry from having easy access to his mind.

But that did not matter.

His rage surged beneath him, released from its confinement, a deep black horse that bore Harry on racing legs along the path of traps. Voldemort’s Legilimency snapped at him, and Harry answered with crushing force of his own, and Voldemort’s Legilimency lay down and died. Mirrors tried to baffle and confuse him, but Harry could not see anything in them darker than his own soul. His own resemblance to Voldemort was dangled before him as a bait to pity. Harry laughed it off.

*He is like me? Then it will make it all the easier for me to destroy him.*

Harry leaped the last distance, and became aware for the first time of someone racing beside him. When he turned his head, he was stunned to see Draco there, clinging to a second black horse that was a representation, Harry supposed, of the possession gift that had let him ride the trailing edge of Harry’s thoughts.

“What are you doing here?” Harry snapped.

“Learning, apparently.” Draco leaned forward to clutch the neck of his horse. “I never knew you had such darkness inside you.”

Harry snarled. He’d told Draco about the attack from Aaron, but not about the darkness in its pool, thinking they’d have plenty of time for that conversation. “Then you should know to fear me now, and go back.”

Draco threw his head back and laughed. Harry just stared at him until he finished, and shook his head. “Harry, don’t you admire the darkness in you. I wish you used it more often. Why wouldn’t I? I’m a Dark wizard.”

Harry didn’t have the time to answer, and he certainly didn’t have the time to examine his own mind, identify the hooks by which Draco had latched on, and cut him loose. They were almost upon Voldemort. Harry could feel his power building, getting ready to slam into the snake-faced bastard.

“Hang on, then,” he said, and the full force of his hatred went home.

Harry had never wanted to hurt someone so much in his life. Fudge, Umbridge, Lily, Juniper when he had taken Snape, Dumbledore, all of those were pale shadows before this, his true enemy. He summoned everything black and dangerous from within himself, backed it with the will that let him remain *vates*, and pushed it into Voldemort’s head through the scar connection.

At the same time, he drew their conjoined magic tightly to him through the tunnel in which the bird flew, and whipped it around and around his body like thread coiling on a spindle, trying to keep Voldemort from using it to defend himself.

The Dark Lord repelled the first onslaught, of course. He was stronger than Harry was, the most powerful wizard in the world. He seemed a little shaken, which Harry told himself was the best he could hope for.

And then he opened his *absorbere* gift again, and began to suck magic from the wounded inhabitants of the safehouse.

Harry knew he could hurl himself at that gullet and accomplish nothing except to get both him and Draco drowned and drained, made Squibs. He circled away, therefore, kicking the black horse beneath him until they were racing through what looked like a high and starry sky, and then came in from behind.

This time, his rage was deep, and quiet, and he concentrated all his will on the one overwhelming thing he wanted from Voldemort, as he had wanted it of Fenrir Greyback. *Vanish. Disappear. I want you to cease existing. Now.*

The boundaries of Voldemort’s body and existence trembled. Harry snapped at them, tore at them, and went howling on. His progress had slowed now, and the black horse beneath him kicked, hooves scrabbling for purchase as though in mud, with Draco silent beside him. But he had to make it forward, and he would make Voldemort vanish if it was the last thing he did.

*Go. Cease existing. Hear me. Vanish. Now.*

He wanted to control Voldemort, dominate him, separate one atom of his body from another. He could feel them parting, if he concentrated. He shoved, and more and more magic came howling up from within him, as he drew on Voldemort’s own power to make him do what Harry wished.
His throat drew tight. His heart beat in his ears like wine. He labored, muscles straining like those of a draft horse, and still he threw himself into the push again, and again, and still again.

_Collapse. Die. Fold inward. I command it. Now._

And Voldemort was melting beneath him, rolling away, collapsing like a pile of snow on a high summer day. Harry opened his mouth in a thin, bird-pitched screech of triumph—

And then he realized that Voldemort had only Apparated, and not melted away at all. Harry hissed in frustration, and his magic coiled around him like a series of scorpions, tails lashing, all angry, all wanting to kill something.

His magic and his temper tumbled around him, and the darkness, loosed from its cage, roared and panted in gladness.

And Harry could not control it, could not draw it back.

He felt the rush gathering itself beneath him, the black horse solidifying, drawing greedily on the strength he’d invoked. It wanted to go further, unfold and explode across the world, hunt down every Death Eater and every Ministry official who believed in Juniper’s nonsense and kill them all.

_No! No, damn it!_

But his own desires were struggling against his own desires. Even though he wanted what he had always told everyone he wanted—the freedom for everyone to make his or her own decisions, and the ability to think through their actions without fear—he also wanted to see a world where the webs were unraveled already and he had accomplished everything he wanted to accomplish.

And now the world lay flat and gleaming beneath him, his power rearing like a wave, like a herd of horses of the night wind galloping past the moon. No one could oppose him, not if he chose to use what was his, the power of his birthright. He could drink magic as Voldemort could, and from a wider variety of sources, and then he would locate the Horcruxes by ripping their places from Voldemort’s mind, and convince Death Eaters to die as willing sacrifices, and end this once and for all.

The vision tempted him. He wavered.

And one moment of wavering in this dark world of power, where he hovered on the edge of Lordship, was eternity.

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Draco did not at first understand what was happening, and then he did. He felt a sting of mild annoyance.

_All of this would have been much easier if Harry had just told me he harbored such darkness from the beginning._

But he could direct the dark horse he rode, at least while Harry wasn’t actually galloping away with him, and he directed it around now in a large circle until he was in front of Harry. He reached out, and put his hand on his lover’s shoulder.

Harry’s green eyes rose to meet his, seething with power. Draco caught his breath, and trembled with his own weakness. Part of him wanted to tell Harry to go on and ravage the world, end the war, do whatever was necessary to keep that magic burning. Even though he knew Harry would hate it, that part of him didn’t care. It was the part that had embraced the Dark with the most dangerous Justification possible, and which rather loved the thought of Harry the Dark Lord. Draco was not of the Light, and never would be, even if he changed his mind about Muggles and Mudbloods. The Dark was far more than a matter of blood.

But because he had no fear of what Harry was, he could guide him back to what he wanted to be.

“Harry,” he murmured. “Listen to me.” He gestured to the black horses and the starless sky around them, being careful not to loose Harry’s gaze as he did so. “What caused all this?”

“I saw them kill Eos Rosier-Henlin by smashing her head open against a wall.” Harry’s voice was flat. “I saw them rape Medusa even as a spike tore her apart from the inside.”

Draco winced, but slowly nodded. “But was this darkness always inside you? Or did it rouse itself only because of those things you saw?”
“Always there,” Harry whispered.

“They can guide it back to its place,” Draco whispered in return. “You aren’t caught up in something alien to yourself. This is you, Harry.” He spread his arms, and felt the winds of Dark magic travel past him, making him shiver and start and yearn to follow. “You can command it the same way you can command your compassion, and put that aside when necessary. Put this aside, too.” He lowered his voice even more and leaned forward. “You could have told me about this. I would hardly have rejected you for it.”

Harry frowned. “But you would have insisted that it didn’t exist, the same way you would have insisted that I shouldn’t grieve for my parents.”

*I knew it.* But that was a conversation they would have later, not right now. Draco shook his head. “Not once I saw proof, I wouldn’t have. You can trust me more than that, Harry.” He made sure to keep his voice reassuring, not accusatory. It was probably the accusations, like the ones he had made after the slaughter in Cornwall, that had made Harry so certain Draco would turn away from his darkness and his emotions over his parents’ deaths. “Besides, this doesn’t frighten me, or make me despise you.”

“How does it make you feel, then?” And the intensity of Harry’s gaze, which actually made Draco’s face begin to bleed, told Draco how important his answer was.

He answered honestly. “Rather like fucking you, actually.”

Harry blinked, and the darkness around them began to falter. Draco could see starlight through the clouds now, and the black horses no longer tossed their heads as if impatient to run away.

Draco nudged his mount closer to Harry’s and wrapped his arms around his chest. “Come on,” he murmured. “You made Voldemort back off. Come back to yourself, Harry. You’ll have other chances to fight him like this.” *Merlin, I hope so.* Draco had never been further from afraid in his life. His skin was tingling, and he wished there was some town of wizards associated with Voldemort nearby, so that Harry could smash them into smithereens and relieve some of his frustration. “Come on.”

Harry gave one deep shudder, and then the horses dissolved beneath them and Draco was tumbling, with Harry in his arms, down a bleak, featureless pit. He didn’t let it bother him, even when the sensation of spinning grew acute. He merely held fast to Harry, and felt Harry finally cling back, with an openness that he hadn’t shown in months.

They landed with a bump on something soft, and the darkness tore away, and they were back in their bedroom. And Harry was crying without sound, so that if Draco hadn’t been able to see the tears on his face, he would never have known he was crying at all.

“Voldemort is going to take everything I’ve loved from me,” Harry whispered. “One by one. He took Medusa and Eos, and he let Honoria and Ignifer escape, just so he could kill them later. How long before you’re dead, Draco? Or Snape? Or Connor, Peter, Henrietta, all the rest—”

“Hush,” Draco said, and dragged him closer still. “We will protect ourselves, Harry, and you can help, given that magic of yours. Weep for Medusa and Eos now. We’ll plan later.”

Harry might have protested, perhaps, if he wasn’t so very weary and traumatized. But instead he put his head down and cried, still without a sound, though now and then his shoulders shook.

Draco smoothed his back, and, awful as the deaths had been, and ruined as the wards around Malfoy Manor now were, he found that his major emotion was contentment. He had not known Medusa and Eos Rosier-Henlin, not well. He cared about them mostly for the effect their deaths would have on Harry. What *did* matter was that Harry had faced the darkness within himself, and he seemed more willing to trust Draco with it now.

*These will be Dark times,* Draco thought, feeling rather like Harry had looked after Lily and James were murdered: intent on fighting anyone who tried to drag Harry away from him. *But I’m a Dark wizard. All the better to flourish in them.*

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Chapter Twenty-Five: Swear Not By The Moon

He had not expected that, had Lord Voldemort. He had been sure of himself when he went to Malfoy Manor, but he had not been
sure enough. He had not expected Harry’s return strike to open wounds in his body along every joint, all the places where Harry had tried so hard and so earnestly to part bone from bone and sinew from sinew.

Harry had tried his very best to will him out of existence, and had not been successful. Lord Voldemort knew the reasons he had failed. The Horcruxes bound him here. As long as they existed, then he would exist. If a reflected Killing Curse had not driven him completely away on that dark and bloody night here sixteen years ago, then a simple blast of will, no matter how strong, would not, either.

He took to his throne room, and allowed only Indigena in to see him. She came with her eyes on the floor, as if she could not bear to take in the sight of his wounds. “My Lord?” she asked.

He considered her with the wisdom of snakes, the deep and long-sliding coil of serpents, while he stroked the flesh-snake around his waist. There was warmth brewing in his belly to match the warmth that brewed under the sand in one corner of the burrow. He considered sending her out to make the next strike.

But Indigena was a valuable servant, and with Harry as maddened as he was—but not maddened enough to yield to his hatred, alas and alas and may the darkness cover him—then he might kill her on sight. He would not risk losing her.

“Send Hawthorn to me,” he said.

Her words “My Lord,” were almost soundless, but he heard them, did Lord Voldemort, and he smiled. He would have known her reason for not answering to him if she had dared.

He would let Hawthorn smell the blood from his wounds before she looked upon him, he decided. That would push her closer to agreeing to what he wanted her to do, and not fighting his pull. Of course, the moon’s call, rising full the next night, would in fact do most of the work.

He would keep his word to his heir. He would not kill too many of those Harry had loved, too quickly. But he would kill one or two a night. Surely he could stand that pace.

And there was one Harry had loved, in London.

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Harry let five minutes pass while he cried and Draco comforted him. When they had passed, then he pulled away, shaking his head and ducking from the hand that Draco reached to comfort him. Draco frowned in exasperation.

“Harry, now that you’ve told me that you recovered from your parents’ deaths less well than I thought you had, and now that you’ve just been through trauma, I would hope you’d forgive me for wanting to worry over you.” His voice cooled and sharpened to a blade as thin as an icicle.

“I would forgive you, if such a thing needed forgiveness,” said Harry, and hoped that his smile reassured Draco. “But I’m not the one who’s traumatized.” He turned and began to pull his clothes on over his pyjamas.

“Of course you are—"

“It’s the victims at Malfoy Manor who know the meaning of trauma,” said Harry steadily. He could feel the darkness still spreading icy tendrils through him, less banished forever than dismissed from the forefront of his mind. That was well enough. He would endure that. It was probably what he deserved for not facing it, and not telling Draco about it, in the first place. “I need to check on them, and prepare St. Mungo’s to receive them. And then I have to call on Kanerva to return, in whichever way she’ll answer me, because I need her winds to guard the safehouses. And then a speech to make. It’ll have to be a damn inspiring speech, given what we’re facing.” He paused, then shook his head, wondering how he could have forgotten this. “No, wait. First, I’ll need to tell Owen and Michael about—about Medusa and Eos.” His throat closed up. He would have sobbed again if he had the choice. But he didn’t.

Draco was not impressed, and Harry knew it both from his voice and the way he let his hand fall on his shoulder, as if could hold Harry in their bedroom by sheer pressure. “You can wait until your tears have dried, Harry. Come on—"

“No, I’m sorry, Draco. I do love you, and you handled yourself magnificently tonight, and without you I would have been lost.” Harry caught the hand and squeezed until he almost forced the blood from it. He wanted Draco to understand how much he truly appreciated what he had done, and how little he could do in return. “But there’s no one else who can do all this.”
“Someone should be able to,” Draco muttered, as he reached for his own robes.

Harry gave him a thin, fleeting smile. “Believe me, I’m working on that.” *I could have died tonight, or fallen victim to my own darkness, and the war effort would have faltered. It’s time that I made people stop relying on me and start relying on my principles.*

His scar had bled streaks across his face to join the tears, Harry found when he touched his face. He thought about that for a moment, and then decided to leave them. Hopefully, they would drive home the point of his speech better than any mere words could have, and why it was necessary that people stop thinking he was the last best hope for everything.

The images of Medusa being raped and Eos’s shattered skull tried to come back.

Harry forbade them. Give in and start thinking of himself as traumatized by those images, and he would be traumatized by those images. As long as he could continue convincing himself otherwise, then he would.

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Indigena had not heard all the plans for tonight’s raid before the twins, Lucius, and Hawthorn left. She had only known that they planned to attack Malfoy Manor, and that they were leaving her behind.

She found Oaken washing the caked gore from his hands in a fountain that her Lord had raised from the side of the burrow with his newfound power. When Indigena asked him why, he told her, in a tone that made it clear he found the slaughter boring.

A moment later, he glanced up, and seemed to notice that she was still staring at him. “Cousin, what is it?” he asked, his voice seamed with concern for the first time. “Did I do something wrong? Does our Lord wish me punished?”

“No at all,” Indigena whispered. “No, nothing like that. I shouldn’t have been staring, Oaken. Excuse me.” She turned and strode rapidly towards her own chamber, her heart pumping with shock and the rose on her left wrist, the rose that had killed Minister Scrimgeour, opening and fluttering convulsively. She placed her other hand over it to shield it from sight, and sat down on the soft, smooth dirt as soon as she was able, closing her eyes.

It was no wonder that her Lord had left her behind. They’d had a—“conversation” was the only word Indigena could find for it, the night after he regained his power. He had asked her what else she would not do for him, besides meaningless torture. She’d told him that she could not be a witness to rape. She found it distasteful, partly because it reminded her of what happened to her under her sister Peridot’s magic.

And this was his version of kindness, in sparing her from seeing this sight.

Indigena still could not move against him unless she wanted to wind up a puppet, unable even to refrain from torture or rape herself. But there was a rule—in fact, it was almost an unwritten law—that said Death Eaters could move against other Death Eaters.

She needed to stop Sylvan and Oaken. They did not care about what they did. They had not come to serve her Lord because of honor, but because they knew there would be no place for their kind of magic in a world where Harry ruled. If they stayed in the Dark Lord’s service, then rape would be a weapon he regularly used, and one Indigena would be tainted by. *Low magic, filthy magic.*

She knew who could destroy Sylvan and Oaken, whose magic was wild enough to do so, who might grow interested and take it up as a sort of mad quest.

She had no idea how to currently contact Evan Rosier, however.

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Ignifer started when her left wrist chirped, and nodded to Honoria, who was sitting next to a woman and comparing her lost leg to the woman’s lost arm, to show that they had someone contacting them at last. They’d fled from Malfoy Manor with everyone they could rescue—pitifully few, only fifteen—and were now crowded into Honoria’s house. Honoria had contacted Tybalt Starrise. As soon as he could ready places for everyone, he intended to take them, and contact St. Mungo’s.

It wasn’t Tybalt’s voice that spoke from Ignifer’s hand, though, but Harry’s. “Ignifer? Are you well?”
“A few wounds, is all,” Ignifer replied automatically, before she remembered that Harry shouldn’t know about this at all. She frowned. “Harry? Where are you? Did you go to Malfoy Manor?” She hoped not. She had felt the power of Voldemort’s magic backing Lucius’s attack, and if Harry had arrived, then Voldemort would have remained to fight him.

“No. I saw it in a vision.” Harry’s voice was more than sane, as if he had a tight grip on his emotions and wanted to keep them from exploding. “I need to know how many of you there are, Ignifer, and what kind of wounds you have.”

Wearily, Ignifer pushed her hair out of her eyes and studied the people gathered around them. Everyone was missing at least one arm or leg, even the children. One man had been reduced to nothing more than a torso and head. It had taken several powerful Light spells for forcing life back into the dying to keep him alive. Ignifer forced herself to gaze at him with open eyes, and remember the costs of war. “Fifteen rescues,” she said. “So seventeen with me and Honoria, but we don’t have more than minor wounds.” Honoria flashed her a small smile, confirming that, and Ignifer felt as if someone had reached in and squeezed her heart. “Everyone’s missing at least one arm, Harry, and we have one limbless case.”

“All right,” Harry said calmly. “I’ll be firecalling St. Mungo’s, and telling them to expect—”

“Tybalt Starrise is already doing that.”

There was a momentary silence, and then Harry whispered, “You called him?”

“Of course,” said Ignifer, wondering if something was wrong. Had Harry learned something worrying about Tybalt that made him suspect he was a traitor? Had Death Eaters attacked Tybalt’s house, too? “Should we not have?”

“No, you should have, that’s perfect,” said Harry, still whispering. “I simply thought—I’m too used to acting alone, Ignifer, to having to make every single arrangement, and you just reminded me that I don’t have to. Not all the time. I just—thank you. Thank you. And thank you for sparing as many lives as you did.”

The deep and simple gratitude in his voice stiffened Ignifer’s spine. This was what it meant to have a place, a belonging, a home. Harry fought to protect her, both from ordinary danger and from more subtle, insidious ones like the danger of losing her soul to misplaced vengeance, and in return she fought to take care of the more helpless, dependent people around her.

“If you need a lieutenant, Harry, I am always here,” she said.

“And me, too,” Honoria added behind her.

“Tell Honoria that she’s too flighty to be a lieutenant,” Harry said, his voice relaxed and almost cheerful, at least compared to the first tone he’d addressed Ignifer with. “I’ll be doing other things. For now, Ignifer, these people are your charge. Remain with them, no matter where they go, or at least until the Healers at St. Mungo’s are done with them. Then you can bring them back to Hogwarts. We’ll be establishing other refuges, ones I hope are safer, but I can’t blame them if they never want to live anywhere outside Hogwarts’s walls again.”

“I will remember that,” said Ignifer, feeling pride pour into her like lead that stiffened her spine and her will. “And you may count on me, Harry.” She hesitated, then, hating to say what came next, but having to say it. “Harry. You should know that Medusa and Eos—”

“I know,” said Harry calmly. “I saw them die. And death came as a mercy, Ignifer, and I have no doubt they perished.”

Ignifer decided, carefully, that she would not ask. That too-sane tone was back in Harry’s voice again. She did not know what had happened; she had simply noticed that, when they made it out of the safehouse, there was no sign of Medusa or her daughter.

“Then we wait your next commands,” vates.”

Harry spoke a final soft thanks, and the communication spell cut off just as Honoria’s fireplace flared to life. Ignifer turned to face it, her wand held out, but it was only John Smythe-Blyton, Tybalt’s partner, one hand held up as if that would actually shield him from a curse should Ignifer decide to cast one.

“St. Mungo’s is ready,” he said. “There are Healers here, and they’ll come through the Floo connection, with your permission, and help you into the hospital.”

Ignifer stared. Even granted that this was Tybalt, who had a way of getting things done, she had expected this to take longer. “So quickly?”
John smiled, an expression that warmed his brown eyes from the inside out. “There may possibly have been overuse of Harry’s name. And a few delicate reminders that while Harry welcomes allies who use all kinds of magic, the Acting Minister outlawed Dark Arts, which could conceivably include a few of the more important spells that the Healers use.”

Ignifer smiled grimly and put her wand away. “That’s a cost I can accept.”

Harry could not believe how much strength Ignifer’s pronouncement had given him. So long as he did not have to do everything by himself, so long as other people would bear part of the burden, then he thought he could get through this.

He stood on the Astronomy Tower, with Bill and Charlie seemingly plastered to his back, and Draco to his side. It was the only place he could be sure Kanerva would hear him, and thus he shouted for her, lofting his voice into the winds. “Kanerva Stormgale! Dark Lady of the winds blowing up and down! I have a challenge for you!” He dearly wished he could simply set her on Voldemort—she would probably relish that, even—but the rules of the Pact said that Jing-Xi and Kanerva could not help him with offensive attacks, only defensive. Thus, he’d put her magic to use protecting the safehouses, if she listened to him.

He received no response for a few minutes. Harry narrowed his eyes slightly. He knew how to manipulate Slytherins, though, and Kanerva was not so very far from that most of the time.

“She’s afraid, I suppose,” he said, letting disappointment color his voice, and turned back towards the school. “Well. I can’t blame her for being so. Now that Voldemort has returned to full power, she may be considering leaving Britain altogether—“

A gust of wind seized him and tried to blow him over the side of the Tower. Harry felt Draco grab for him, but he forced strength into his own limbs and broke the hold. He had to go with this. He had known what calling Kanerva afraid would do, and he was prepared to face it.

He hung in midair, while her face formed out of the wind in front of him, blue eyes keener than usual, black hair streaming behind her. “I am not afraid,” she told him, while her fingers flashed like raking talons around him and Harry felt the strum of the nails along his skin.

Harry regarded her calmly, and ignored the terrified shouts from his sworn companions and his partner. “You refused the idea of a challenge,” he said, with a slight shrug of his shoulders. “What else could you be?”

She snarled at him, and her nails dug bloody furrows along his back. Harry simply raised an eyebrow. “Voldemort has caused me worse pain than that, this night,” he said.

Kanerva was distracted. “What did he do?”

“Killed a baby by smashing her head open, and sent one of his servants to rape her mother,” said Harry.

“And why does that hurt you?”

_Sometimes_, Harry thought, while ignoring the ground far beneath him and the way he lazily spun, _I forget that the transition to the Dark snapped her sanity, and she needs the simplest things explained to her._ “Because it does,” he said, since he knew that she recognized next to nothing of morality. She had the same savage innocence as any windstorm.

Kanerva’s face flicked away and appeared floating at his shoulder. “Very well,” she said. “It does. And the challenge?”

“Now that Voldemort has returned to his full power, he can eat wards,” Harry told her. “No refuge is safe, unless we conceal it with Unassailable Curses—and most of those we can use, Voldemort could also bypass. He can drink the magic. He can drink wards, and the shells Thomas has made that repel the ward-eating stones. But he cannot drink your winds.”

Kanerva formed two hands again and clapped them together with a clicking of nails. Harry watched some drops of his blood fly away from the long fingers and towards the ground. “You are clever,” she praised. “No, he cannot swallow them all, can he? And if my magic flies from wind to wind—“

“As your consciousness flies,” Harry said, remembering their wild journey over the ground and through the various air-currents on the night of the Cornwall attack.
“—Then he cannot swallow it,” Kanerva ended dreamily. “Every time he tries, it will flee somewhere else. And the physical winds, those not made of magic but which come to my call because I love them, he cannot drain as he drains magic. They will shield and conceal my spells. A whirlwind of moving wards.” She suddenly looked at him with an anxious snap in her blue eyes. “Can the pattern be different for each safehouse? One pattern would be boring.”

*And unsafe, Harry thought, since Voldemort could attack all of them at once if he figured out the key to one. “They can be,” he assured her. “Can you take this challenge?”*

“I can,” said Kanerva, and started to blow away in her excitement. Harry sucked in his breath as he fell, but a moment later she had snatched him and set him back on the Tower. “We cannot have you falling,” she said. “Your ideas are too good. Unless you wish your head smashed open to match the baby’s? To show solidarity with her?” She paused anxiously, to await his verdict.

“Having my head whole will be fine,” said Harry.

“This is a challenge,” Kanerva said contentedly. “Why did you not call on me to attempt it before?” She sounded more curious than chiding.

“Because I did not know that Voldemort would return to full power.” Harry rubbed his head, which ached, and then grunted a little as Draco’s arms wrapped around him again and stole his breath. “I thought the wards we had would be enough, once we learned to repel the ward-eating stones. Now we need to guard against his *absorere* gift, and your winds are the only things that can do that.”

Kanerva purred at him, sent a breeze to ruffle his hair, and then vanished. Harry closed his eyes, letting himself enjoy the cool sensations for a moment, and then stood, shaking his head at Draco when he would have restrained him.

“Now to tell Owen and Michael,” he said quietly.

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Owen felt as if a safe, secure castle—Hogwarts, perhaps—had opened a door and left him to stand in chill, constantly blowing air. He bowed his head and fastened his hands over the back of his neck.

Harry had quietly told the story, holding emotion back from his voice. Owen knew why he had done that. He was trying not to intrude on their grief, or make it seem as if he felt more sorrow for their mother’s and little sister’s deaths than they did.

Unfortunately, it seemed that Michael didn’t know that.

“And you don’t *care*?” Michael sat in the middle of his bed, staring at Harry in disbelief. “You can speak of these deaths as if they were something you saw at a distance and—speak like that?!”

They were in the Ravenclaw seventh-year-boys’ room, the place where Michael was currently sleeping. Harry had had a terrible time putting both his own sworn companions and Draco outside it. They seemed to assume that Michael and Owen would want to hurt Harry when they heard what had happened.

With Michael, they seemed to be right. He was rising to his feet now, clutching his wand, his eyes wet and red-rimmed. Owen knew he didn’t look much better himself. And he didn’t feel much better, having to step between his brother and his Lord.

Michael leaned forward, straining to fire a curse around him at Harry. Owen seized his wrist and squeezed it, listening to bones and tendons grinding until Michael uttered a pained, choked sound and released his wand, letting it plummet to the carpet.

“How can you justify this?” he whispered. “*Even you* shouldn’t be able to, Owen. You swore to him, and look what it’s done to our family. We entered this damn war, and we’ve lost our parents, our sister, our honor, our dignity. Rosier-Henlin doesn’t even exist as an independent family anymore, only a footnote on the bottom of a list of Harry’s allies. He’ll get us all killed in the end. You heard what he said about Voldemort. He’s killing people who are important to Harry. That’s the only reason he killed Mother and Eos. The *only* reason.”

“Listen to me,” Owen said quietly, bending his head and putting his lips near his brother’s ear. “Every loss we’ve sustained has been an honorable one. Eos is the only member of our family who died without conscious choice. Mother knew she was in danger, no matter where she went. And Father died on the battlefield, and committed suicide to save us. We’ll win no vengeance and no honor by blaming Harry, Michael. Can’t you see that’s what Voldemort wants you to do?”
Michael closed his eyes and stood still, shaking his head. Then he said, “I should have been there.”

“And don’t blame yourself, either,” said Harry, appearing silently at Owen’s side, and nearly startling him enough to make him let go of his brother. “He would want you to do that even more. I don’t think you could have saved her. He sent Sylvan and Oaken there with the intention of r-raping your mother and killing Eos.” Owen had to admit he was gratified to hear a slight tremble in Harry’s voice when he spoke of the deaths, now. He was not entirely unaffected. “You would have become a third victim, or you would have been immobilized and forced to watch.”

“You don’t know that,” Michael whispered. “Just as you don’t know that Voldemort only killed them to spite you—“

“Voldemort told me so himself.”

Michael tore his body away and tossed his head proudly. “Not everything in this war is about you, Potter,” he said, and then turned and stormed out of the room, even if it was his room.

“I’m sorry—” Owen started to say.

Harry’s hand covered his mouth. “You’re hardly the one who needs to apologize,” he murmured. “Perhaps I should have waited longer to give you this news.”

“No,” said Owen quietly, while the feeling of cold, black wind blowing around him increased. “We needed to know. Michael was especially close to our mother. He’ll need time to recover.”

“And what about you?” Harry’s eyes were steady and compassionate, even as they were also filled with too many shadows of things that no one should ever have to see. “I’ll understand if you want to time to recover without fighting at my side, or if you want to be released from your oath.”

Owen shook his head. He was—

He was hurt.

But not mortally wounded. Voldemort had intended him to be when he heard this news, and that only made Owen all the more determined to ignore and defeat the snake-faced bastard’s intentions for him.

He gripped Harry’s arm, and felt his oath scar burn, crackling and humming with energy like a real lightning bolt. “I am in this for life, my lord,” he said. “It will take more than this to make me release my oath.”

Harry stared at him intently. Owen held back the shiver that wanted to overcome him, and willed Harry to see his soul, his seriousness, his determination. He owed Harry his life for being freed from the torment of Durmstrang, and he owed him his life because he had freely given it over. Not even his mother and sister perishing could induce him to break his oath, even if his twin ran. Owen had a separate existence from his twin, one that combined family honor and personal honor.

At last, Harry appeared to believe him, and nodded. “If you change your mind and wish to be free, you have only to say so,” he reminded Owen.

“I know,” Owen said, and quashed the temptation to say that he would never wish to be free. Now was not the time for that. Given Harry’s loud objections against the idea of someone surrendering his free will entirely, even if he did it of his own free will, it might never be time to say that.

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Connor leaned against the doors to the entrance hall, shading his eyes with one hand as he watched his brother walk out on the lawn of Hogwarts. It was mid-morning now, and Harry had called all the reporters who would heed and hear him—mostly ones from the Daily Prophet—so that he could say something they needed to hear. Most people had heard something about the attack on Malfoy Manor now, though hardly anyone knew all the details. If nothing else, the arrival of fifteen maimed people in St. Mungo’s would have been cause for comment.

Connor knew the details only because Draco had told them to him, with Harry’s permission. Harry seemed determined to protect Connor from them. And, Connor thought, with a newfound cynicism, he seemed to believe that Connor shouldn’t know he’d witnessed them in a vision.
Harry had come to a halt, his face set and calm. Cameras flashed, and voices called for a statement. Harry inclined his head back to them, but didn’t speak until the voices had quieted. Until then, he looked out over their heads and fixed his gaze on the Forbidden Forest.

Connor couldn’t look away. He didn’t know what else Harry would say besides giving the news of the attack on Malfoy Manor and Voldemort’s return to full strength. He only knew that Harry seemed to be gathering his strength from a source deeper than would be needed merely to confess those things.

While he waited, Connor watched the back of his brother’s head, and remembered their brief, aborted conversation from half an hour ago.

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“Make the Switching Potion again.”

Harry had glanced up from a map. Connor had sought him out the moment Draco told him the truth, but Harry obviously wasn’t expecting him. “What?”

“Voldemort can get through your Legilimency again, can’t he, since he sent you that vision?”

Harry glanced down, lips pursed, and nodded.

“Then brew the Switching Potion again, so that I can take on the visions for you.” Connor thought the solution simple enough, and didn’t understand why Harry was hesitating. “You need to get some unbroken sleep, Harry, and you need to be relieved of the idea that he’s doing this just to torment you.”

“That’s the major reason he’s choosing his victims,” said Harry, too calmly, rolling the map back up. “I know that. He’s told me so himself, many times. And he let Honoria and Ignifer go last night, when he could have easily killed them with Lucius and Hawthorn. Of course, he’s also trying to make other people so scared that they never think about helping me again.”

Connor snorted. “It’s one thing to know that, Harry, and another thing to watch people dying in your head. I want you to brew that Potion so that I can take on the visions. We’ll trade off, if you insist, with me dreaming one night and you another. But—“

“No.”

Connor reached out, grabbed Harry’s shoulders, and shook him hard. Harry let him do it, eyes deep green and stubborn and so calm that Connor thought about slapping him, too. Draco was right. No one who had witnessed what Harry had last night should be acting this way.

“I’m offering to help you, you stubborn prat,” Connor said through gritted teeth. “Why is that so hard for you to accept?”

“I don’t want anyone else to see that,” said Harry. “It’s bad enough that I need to see it. Someone needs to bear witness to their deaths, but it doesn’t have to be you.”

“It doesn’t always have to be you, either, you know,” Connor pointed out. “That’s probably what Voldemort wants, so that he can wear you down further, but why should you oblige him?”

Harry laughed then, and it went too far before it cut off. Harry put a hand on the table in front of him to steady himself, and shook his head. “You think it will calm me to know that you’re seeing those things?” he whispered. “I won’t subject someone else to torture in my place. I can’t spare everyone pain—Voldemort is making me learn that, each and every day, over and over again—but I can spare you this.”

“You did it once.”

Harry looked up. “When I thought that I could wall Voldemort from my mind forever. This is different. No, Connor.”

“If you’d just—“

“The answer will never be yes.” Harry’s voice ended the argument. He swept up the map and walked out of the room.

Connor hexed the table.
And now he was standing here, watching his magnificent, stubborn, stupid brother getting ready to make some announcement. He shook his head. “Stupid prat,” he muttered.

“On that we agree, Mr. Potter.”

Connor staggered in surprise, and looked up in time to see Snape’s lips twitch. He considered calling the professor on it, then decided it wouldn’t do much good. Instead, he looked back towards Harry and shook his head again. “Why does he have to be so stupid?” he mourned.

“He believes that he must not yield, must not run,” Snape murmured, his own gaze fastened on Harry. “On that count, he is correct. But he also believes that allowing someone else to suffer for him, even willingly, is wrong. He cannot allow it outside of battle. And that is a weakness that the Dark Lord will exploit against him again, and again, and again. The only way to destroy a Horcrux is for someone else to willingly suffer. I wonder if Harry has reconciled himself to that yet, even as he claims that he has.”

Connor wanted to answer, but Harry started speaking then. His voice was quiet, but that didn’t seem to matter. Connor guessed he’d bent the air so that it would carry his words again.

“Voldemort attacked Malfoy Manor last night. He sent two of his Death Eaters to maim everyone they could capture, and caused eighteen casualties, of people who died of blood loss before they could be rescued. A third servant of his, Oaken Yaxley—who is joined with his twin Sylvan thanks to blood magic—raped Medusa Rosier-Henlin and destroyed her child Eos in front of her.”

A cascade of whispers sprang up, to be silenced by Rita Skeeter’s brassy call. Connor had never really learned to like the reporter, even though he knew she was (mostly) on Harry’s side. “Why were Madam Rosier-Henlin and her daughter such particular targets, vates?”

“Because she was my goddaughter,” said Harry, without a flinch in his voice that Connor could hear. “Because I had sworn to protect them. Because Voldemort has sworn to destroy everyone I love.”

Why is he telling them this? Connor thought frantically. There are enemies of Harry’s who will run with this. Juniper not least of them. By the look on Snape’s face when Connor glanced sideways at him, he was thinking much the same thing. Of course, it didn’t take a lot to make him scowl.

And then Harry’s voice soared, and Connor found out why he’d told them—including his enemies—this.

“Voldemort wishes to make this war about me. To make me fear so much for the lives of those I love that I won’t fight him, but will cast myself on the earth and plead for him not to hurt them. To wear me down with visions, and the people around me with terror. To turn Britain against me as an enemy, to make my enemies think they’ll be safe if I’m gone, to make Dark wizards forget that he will only want more, and more, if his desire for my life is gratified.

“That must not happen. He may be fighting this war as one of personal enmity, but it must not become that war for other people. I urge all around me to remember this: I am only one person. The power of magic I have, others have. The inspiration I can provide, others can look into their hearts and find.

“Ignifer Pemberley and her partner Honoria were the ones who rescued the survivors from Malfoy Manor last night. Freed house elves were the ones who most eloquently managed to speak for themselves in the cause of their freedom. The Midsummer Battle would have been lost without the sacrifices and the struggles of a hundred brave people, including young students. The vampire hive queen fell because three wizards, not one, of Lord-level power opposed her. I could not have done what I have done without Draco Malfoy, my joined partner; Professor Snape, my mentor and father; Connor Potter, my brother; Minerva McGonagall, Headmistress of the school; Peter Pettigrew, who taught hundreds of students last year more about Defense Against the Dark Arts than they’ve ever known; help from the Ministries of France, Portugal, and Spain; and all the other people who’ve vowed to study or teach defensive spells, patrol their hometowns, watch for danger, try to persuade reluctant neutrals to our side, and do thousands of other minor tasks that are no less important than what I can provide.

“This is not a war of Lords. I will not let it be. Voldemort wishes to make it so, and that would be enough for me to oppose him, but the root of my opposition lies in the roots of my own principles. What is important is allowing other people the freedom, the chance, the options, to help.
“I am asking for help. I am asking that you not think that all of your problems can be solved if Voldemort gains what he wants, and I am asking that you not hold back on helping because you think your own contribution too small to matter. It will take a hundred shoulders to turn this wheel, a thousand hands to make sure it rolls, a million wills to keep it moving.

“This is not my war. It is ours. I ask for help, and I ask for courage and clear eyes to look past the terror. If I fall, which may happen, this war cannot be lost, must not be lost.”

He bowed to the people in front of him, and turned back towards the school. In the silence that followed, Connor felt his heart beating oddly. It was partially the effect of Harry’s words, of course, because what he said was perfectly true. They should not succumb to Voldemort’s desires solely because he was Voldemort, even if they had no other reason.

But he wondered if Harry had even noted the great, glaring hypocrisy at the heart of his speech.

He let Harry know about it the moment he came level with the entrance doors, and thus with Connor and Snape.

“And what if I want to help you, Harry?” he asked, stopping his brother dead. “What if I want to help you turn the wheel by bearing your dreams sometimes? My gifts are limited to direct battle otherwise—my compulsion isn’t useful in everyday life. My other great talent is stopping you from being a prat.”

Harry hunched his shoulders and might have gone past without replying, but Snape spoke, too, his voice a smooth drawl. “I do believe that you should consider what Mr. Potter says, Harry, or stand convicted of violating your own principles.”

Harry swung around to stare at them desperately. Connor could see a new drop of blood starting in his scar, and wondered if he was aware of it. “Not this,” Harry said. “Anything else you ask for, Connor, including helping with research on the Horcruxes. But not this.”

“Why not?” Connor demanded. He didn’t see what the difference was between a sacrifice like this and the others Harry was asking of the British wizarding population.

“Has it occurred to you, Harry,” Snape whispered, “that the Horcruxes will require a willing sacrifice, each one?”

“Of course it has!” Harry hissed. “But the visions—they’re only meant to torture me. He would hunt and kill people I love no matter what, since that’s the filthy tactic he’s decided on. But no one else has to watch them die.”

“And neither do you.” Connor stepped forward so fast that Harry couldn’t get away, and wrapped his arms around his brother. “At least, not all the time. Let me take the Switching Potion, Harry, and bear the dreams for a few nights. They’ll be horrible. I believe that, from what Draco told me about your dream of Medusa and Eos. But I can spare you from them for a short time.”

“Connor, stop it, let me go—“

Connor took a deep breath, and forced his arms to release of his brother. “Will you accept that this is something I want to do?” he asked. “If Voldemort strikes you with the visions again, at least?”

“I accept that it’s something you want to do,” said Harry, eyes gone cool. “That doesn’t mean I’ll let you do it.”

“Harry—“ Professor Snape began.

Connor blinked as a dark shape began to come into being at Harry’s left side. It looked like a serpent, but before it could fully form, Harry shot out a hand and appeared to strangle it. Then he drew in a deep breath and held it, before blinking hard and forcing an expression of calm on his face.

“I’m tired of watching people I love die,” he said, each word accompanied by a twitch and crackle of magic that made Connor fight not to step back. “I’m tired of watching them suffer when I know I can prevent it. And I don’t want to watch you suffer, Connor. Is that really so hard to understand?”

Connor chewed his lip. He hadn’t thought of it from that perspective, he had to admit. And now that he did, he also had to admit that taking the Switching Potion would be wasted if Harry did nothing but sit up, watch him endure the nightmares, and brood.

He probably would, too, he thought, taking one more look at his twin’s face.
“I appreciate the offer,” Harry continued, more softly but also more intensely now. “I do, Connor. That doesn’t mean I have to allow it to happen.”

Connor glanced to Snape for support, but the professor’s face had gone nearly as cool and quiet as Harry’s, and he said nothing. In the end, Connor had to nod. “All right. I’m sorry. If you think it would be worse for me to take it and suffer than for you to suffer—“

Harry laughed. Connor didn’t like the sound, but he could hardly blame Harry. If the sound was exhausted and enraged, well, Harry had reason. “Of course it would be, Connor,” he said, when the laughter ended. “I’m used to enduring pain.”

I wish you weren’t. But Connor was determined not to argue further. He’d meant this gesture to support Harry, not to cause him more distress, and it seemed he’d unwittingly wound up doing that.

“All right,” he said.

Harry smiled at him, hugged him, and slipped into the school before Connor could say anything more. He stared after him, then looked up at Snape. “What can we do to make this easier for him?” he whispered.

“I truly do not know, Mr. Potter.” Abruptly, Snape seemed to realize that he was being almost pleasant to Harry’s brother. He snorted and turned on one heel, adding over his shoulder, “Except continue to do what we do best, help him if he asks for the help, and not put extra burdens on his shoulders.”

“You were just as eager to help him as I was a moment ago!” Connor yelled after him.

Another sneer was his only answer. Connor concealed a snarl at his back. He got along much better with Draco than he ever could have hoped to a few months ago, but Snape was still uninterested in any gestures of goodwill.

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Harry expected it when he felt the pain pressing on his neck that night, and opened his eyes to find himself swooping along a deserted street in London. Above him gleamed the full moon, its light reflecting here and there in puddles; Harry supposed it must have rained during the day. Beneath him ran Hawthorn in werewolf form, eyes mad and gleaming, her inner beast controlled by a touch of Legilimency from Voldemort. She could not be turned or stayed from her course of wildness, but she could be made to hunt a specific target.

Look at her, Voldemort whispered into his ears. Does it not sicken you, Harry, to know what I force her to do? Does it not hurt you to know that she will wake to find her hands and her jaws caked with gore, and recognize her murdered victim, and hurt because of it?

Harry said nothing. He lay as if dead beneath the uncompromising, iron hold on his mind. He could do nothing right now. He would bide, and wait for his chance.

It was torture to watch as Hawthorn splashed through a puddle, froth dripping from her jaws, and then dropped to her belly as she heard the sound of her prey approaching from around the corner. But after last night, Harry was again becoming practiced in enduring torture.

You can do nothing to prevent it.

And Harry gave nothing back to Voldemort’s taunt but a seemingly helpless wail, because if he moved too soon, he would lose his chance.

He had to watch as Hawthorn sprang, her shoulder dashing into Remus’s, knocking Moony’s gray body from its feet. The other members of his pack whirled, snapping, trying to gain their bearings and figure out who was attacking their alpha in the narrow alley. But Hawthorn had locked her jaws in the fur on Remus’s foreleg, the snarls nearly as horrible as the sounds Medusa had made while Oaken was raping her.

Remus reared and placed his paws on either side of Hawthorn’s head, biting her firmly on the nose. She let him go with a dance and a jerk, and he faced her, already limping. The sight of the blood splashing on the pavement made Hawthorn drool, and again she slinked towards him, then broke into a charge that hit Remus and carried him spinning into a black female werewolf.

The black bit back, and for one moment they were a mass of tumbling legs and jaws. Then Hawthorn soared above the pile,
ducked her head, and ripped sideways. The black werewolf’s blood covered her when she backed off. She’d ripped the other bitch’s throat out, Harry guessed.

Remus faced her with a shake of his coat and a growl that commanded the rest of the pack to back away. And then the true battle began.

They were far too evenly matched, Harry saw almost at once. Remus had been a werewolf for more than thirty years, while this was only the fourth anniversary of Hawthorn’s attack, and he had that perfect control over the four-legged body that only came to those bitten as children. But Hawthorn was not on Wolfsbane, and so had no human instincts and reactions to hold her back—and she had no pack members to worry about hurting. She could fight without heed for whom she killed or what hurt she took herself, so long as she inflicted pain.

And though Hawthorn was a bit smaller than Remus, the bite she’d given him on his left foreleg equalized matters.

They met in midair, leaping at the same time, and once again dropped to the ground, jaws working and clicking furiously, any sounds made muffled by thick fur. Fawn hairs gleamed, then gray, and Remus let out an undignified yelp as Hawthorn bit him somewhere tender. But then he unsheathed his fangs, and Harry knew the balance had tipped, and he was going to try his best to kill her.

A new pain pierced him. Since he could see this, the family alliance oath counted it as a betrayal that he would let Hawthorn be hurt like this, even while she tried to slay someone else.

Voldemort just laughed the harder when he felt that. Harry crouched beneath his hold, then drove all his concealed strength up in one smooth, coiled motion.

He burst through Voldemort’s slackening, surprised grip, and he used his one free moment to good advantage. He reached out, lashing his will to the Dark Mark that still remained part of Hawthorn, even if buried under her fur in her changed state. He envisioned her bouncing back to her master, rather as he had once forcibly Apparated Evan Rosier after a duel.

*Back! Now!*

She yelped as her legs scrabbled at the ground, and then she was torn free and flying. The pain of the oath scar on Harry’s left arm died. So far as the vow was concerned, he had kept it by removing Hawthorn from danger.

Of course, Voldemort closed back in then, and the anger he bore was thick and choking.

The pain was unspeakable. Harry rolled through it, since he knew that struggling against it would probably mean bursting or weakening his heart again. He screamed, the way that Lily had taught him to scream under torture, because there was no shame in that. All the while, he clutched one vision to himself.

Remus had halted in the dash after the vanishing Hawthorn and stared around in shock. His left foreleg was slashed well enough that he would limp for some time, but he was not further wounded, and the rest of the pack was already closing protectively around their alpha.

They would get him to safety, Harry knew, and then they would howl, spreading the warning to other packs. Even if Voldemort returned Hawthorn to London, the others would be prepared against her now, and she would not find victims as easily as she had found Remus when no one suspected.

He had spared the life of one more person he loved. For tonight.

And from the dashing, roiling madness in Voldemort’s mind as he pushed again and again, forcing pain down Harry’s body through their scar connection, *that* was unacceptable. Voldemort would not send Hawthorn, or one of the other Death Eaters, on a rampage again merely to destroy innocents. He was furious that his perfect target had escaped. From now on, he would only truly seek to hurt those Harry loved.

And that was his weakness, that personal hatred.

Harry would use it against him.

And he had saved Remus’s life. That was worth any amount of pain.
He still thought so even when Voldemort finally dropped him, disgusted, like a broken bird from the mouth of a cat, and he fell deeper into darkness, the pain slowly, softly melding into the mercy of unconsciousness.

*There is hope, so long as he hates me more than I hate him.*