

"Warning: The last ten chapters of this book contain **severe gore** and **severe emotional upset and abuse**. Please do not read past Chapter 61 if you think that you cannot stand to read this. I'm not going to blame anyone who quits now."

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Chapter Fifty-One: Troubled the Twilight

Millicent waited, patiently, her hands linked together on her lap. Both her parents would have been proud of her, she thought. Mother would have said that her daughter was showing the calm determination that any good pureblooded witch should, and Father would have sensed the busy activity of her mind and nodded at her for concealing it.

Millicent's body was patient, but her mind was indeed racing around, snatching at ideas and dragging them forward.

I knew that Harry might have some allegiances to magical creatures. Of course I did. It isn't surprising.

But I thought he only wanted to free...centaurs, and unicorns, and all the others who might be pretty but aren't really good for anything. I didn't realize that he was mad enough to want to free house elves.

The door she was listening for opened. Millicent sat up a bit and peered towards the stairs. Draco came down first, of course, turning around and talking to Harry, who walked behind him. Harry had been a bit warier since yesterday, when he had begun to realize that not everyone greeted his announcement with wide smiles and gestures of surrender.

"Potter," said Millicent, not indicating anything by her tone. She would use his surname instead, and then Harry would know that she was angry with him. "I want to speak with you."

Draco turned around, hovering between her and Harry like he was a bloody dragon. Millicent rolled her eyes. *It's not as though he needs protection from his own Housemates. I just want to ask him a few simple questions.*

"Of course, Millicent," said Harry, stepping around Draco. His expression was blank, more neutral than it was usually, but his voice was utterly polite. "What did you want to talk with me about?"

"Oh, you know very well." Millicent folded her arms.

"I'm afraid not." Harry looked as he sometimes had in second year, an impression that the unnerving lack of emphasis in his words only added to. "You're the one who began the conversation, so you're the one who should introduce the subject, properly speaking, Millicent."

Millicent took a deep breath. Speaking so directly went against all her instincts as a Slytherin, but though a few people were watching their conversation, as always, most were at breakfast already. *Really, boys are always so abominably late.* "Your little declaration of war in the paper yesterday," she said. "I want to know if you mean to free house elves."

Harry tilted his head. "I intend everything that I said in that article, Millicent."

Not working. Millicent narrowed her eyes. "I want to know your schedule, Potter. How soon do you intend to free house elves?"

"I don't know," said Harry. "It'll depend on the individual free wills of the wizards involved." His face grew more animated now, and Draco, who had been looking as though he wanted to hex Millicent, relaxed a bit. "I want to persuade them to release them, or get their permission to cut the webs."

"Don't you need the elves' permission, too?" Millicent forced an arch tone into her voice. "I would think you would want it, since you're so big on magical creatures having their own way."

"They wear a web that makes them think they like slavery, as well as one to make them serve." Harry's eyes had a depth and clarity that she had never seen before, not even the day they went into the Forest to visit his little nest of snakes. "When I cut the one, then yes, they want to be free. One of Mr. Malfoy's house elves had a raveled web, and I was able to make out that he had more free will than the other elves, too. He begged me to free him. I did."

Millicent felt a deep thrill of terror move through her veins. If what Harry was saying was true, then that meant house elves might strike back at the wizards and witches when released, as vengeance for their long imprisonment.

“That’s—it’ll change too much.” Millicent swept her hand in a circle around the Slytherin common room. “Do you know how much of the labor in Hogwarts is done by house elves, Potter?”

“I have some idea, yes,” said Harry. Millicent had often thought him insufferable, but never more so than now, now that he was just refusing to get angry. “I did research on it when I was working out a way to free Dobby. They cook the meals, do the laundry, clean our bedrooms and all the other rooms, tend the fires, dust, take care of any items that we don’t want anymore, light the torches, return lost items to their owners, care for our—“

“So you must see,” Millicent interrupted, “what a great change you’ll be producing.” Her skin crawled at the thought of what would have happened the night Marian was born, if they hadn’t had house elves to change and clean the bed. Mother might have died before they were able to save her. “You can’t want that, Potter. You benefit from everything that they do, too.”

“I know,” said Harry. “I’m as guilty as everyone else. And the most I can do right now is try to persuade other witches and wizards that things will be better with elves freed.”

“But they won’t,” said Millicent. “And, anyway, Potter, if you wanted to, you could make freeing their house elves part of the price of alliance with pureblood families. Or you could use your magic to *make* them free them.” She supposed she was pushing in a stupid direction, but anything that would wake Harry from his calm contemplation was something to be desired. He couldn’t be aware of the consequences to what he was saying. He just couldn’t.

Harry stilled for a moment. His eyes at last burned, but not with the emotion that Millicent had wanted to see there. Instead, he simply looked angry and half-contemptuous, as if he would scorn her, but understood too well what had motivated her to act as she had. Millicent had got that look from her mother sometimes during her childhood. She’d always hated it.

Harry said in clipped tones, “I’ll never do that, Millicent. The whole point of this is to do it without stepping on anyone’s free will. If a family voluntarily offered to give up their house elves, I’d take the offer gladly. Until then, all I can try is persuasion.”

“But you aren’t going to *win*.” Millicent hammered the point home with a sharp tap of her voice on the final word. She hated the thought of Harry pouring half his power and time down the hole of a useless cause. He had enough battles to fight that were going to take all his concentration and perseverance.

Harry snorted at her. “You can’t know that,” he said. “Maybe I can win.” He stepped around her and made his way towards the door. Draco was talking to him about Karkaroff before they got out of the common room.

Millicent stared after him. She still thought that it was useless, that Harry would fail. House elves were a necessity, not a luxury, to keep places like Hogwarts and most pureblood family homes running. She was sure that he would lose.

On the other hand, she’d also thought that he would acknowledge his ties with the Bulstrode family to be more important than he’d so far showed he thought them, and that he would say he chose the Dark pureblood families first and foremost, over any of his other allies. They’d given him the most, so far. Surely he should feel the claims of a reciprocal obligation. And she’d been wrong.

She briefly envisioned a future where Harry had won, and changed her family along with the rest of the world, and made them *like* the change. And he wouldn’t have accomplished it with compulsion or any of the other forcing magic he could have used. He would have accomplished it with their full compliance.

Millicent shuddered, and swallowed. Then she turned towards the Owlery. She could miss breakfast to send a letter to her father. She badly wanted his reassurance. She’d been wrong so far about what she thought Harry would do. Maybe he thought about it differently.

He did say that we couldn’t lose him no matter what happened. I thought that he meant he didn’t want Harry dying in battle or going to Light families, but maybe he meant that we can’t lose him because of what he could do for us, rather than just because of what he could do for someone else. What he could do for us with our full and loving cooperation, even.

Millicent lengthened her stride. She would ask.

Pansy disdained Millicent’s tactics. She didn’t know why the other girl had chosen the Slytherin common room to speak to Harry. It was exactly the wrong environment. Of course Harry would hurry out of the conversation, not wanting to be late to

class. And of course he would say some things, whatever they were, that turned Millicent's face a very unhealthy shade of pale.

And Draco was with him. That was the biggest mistake. Harry always spoke more confidently if Draco was there. Pansy thought he spoke those things whether or not he meant them. With a little persuasion, a little luck, and a little contrivance, then he might be pressed to admit any insecurities, if he had them.

The persuasion would have to come from Pansy herself, but the luck came from Professor Karkaroff releasing them early from Defense Against the Dark Arts, so that they didn't have to run quite as hard to their next class, and the contrivance came from Blaise, who still rolled his eyes at Harry and Draco most of the time. Pansy got him to agree to drop behind and ask Draco a series of flattering questions. Draco, caught up in the novelty of Blaise actually wanting to listen to what he had to say, fell for it like a Squib woman for a pureblood wizard.

That left Harry walking by himself, listening behind him with an amused ear, and Pansy falling into step beside him, as if by chance.

"Harry."

Harry's head shot up, his eyes turned to her, and, to her surprise, he shut his eyes and groaned. "Not you, too," he said.

Pansy narrowed her eyes. *Did someone already try this way of getting him alone?* "What do you mean?"

"You want to talk to me about that bloody article, too," said Harry. "I'm sure of it. That's all anyone wants to talk to me about today, except Draco." He frowned at her. "Well, say your piece. I'm sure that you'll have a few pertinent points to make, even though they're no different from anyone else's."

Pansy tossed her head. She wasn't about to back down just because she'd been caught, however. "I just wanted to know how you could do this, Harry. I can see allying with some of the magical creatures, the ones who could be useful in battle, and of course I want you to work on freeing the werewolves, so that my mother can find some way to escape her curse." She kept her voice low on that last; Hawthorn Parkinson's condition was still not common knowledge, or she would have been forced to go to the Ministry and register long before now. "But *all* of them? Really, why? I don't understand." *Oh, I understand, but that talk about free will is a romantic vision that I would never have expected of him. He's never shown any inclination to offer "free will" to the Light families, and he doesn't just dash about tearing webs randomly. It has to be something different. I can understand saying that so he'd look good for the article, but his real motive has to be something else.*

Harry's anger bled away. Pansy wondered what she'd said, and whether she should try to find out for future reference. It was true, of course, that Draco had told Harry he loved him and they'd somehow both survived it, but his tricks with Harry weren't a set that Pansy could imitate—unless Harry really did get tired of Draco someday and looked elsewhere for a bit of companionship.

Harry's voice recalled her from her wondering. "I mean to offer freedom to as many people as I can, Pansy, in the end. That includes Light families, and it includes Light magical creatures, and it includes the ones who want to be free but don't want to fight with us—so long as their vision of freedom doesn't involve stepping on the free will of others, of course. If they do that, or if they join Voldemort and fight at his side, then I'll battle them, too. But I can't know until I ask, can I?" He paused, then added, "That's the reason for the publicity of the article, too. Everyone deserves to know what's coming. I don't want to sneak up on people, not with this. I want them to know what I'm saying, and what I'm asking, and what I stand for." He smiled. "Offering so many possibilities to so many people is the thing I'm most serious about."

Pansy gnawed her lip. She *had* wanted to know why Harry had so suddenly struck out for publicity after shunning it. But that wasn't her main concern.

"You don't want to just do what's useful, then," she said.

Harry shook his head.

"Then you want to do what's right?" Pansy wasn't sure how she felt about that. Of course, she knew Harry wasn't some idiotic Gryffindor, but she'd thought he was acting more Slytherin since he took the old fool's magic from him. And if he wasn't, if he did want to do what most people thought of as right, then she wondered if he really knew how the wizarding world was liable to look at him. Light was a synonym for "good" in most wizards' minds, even where it wasn't. The Dark families and wizards had been a political minority for a long time. Conform to Light standards in any way, and Harry was stepping into a slavery that wouldn't let him go.

Harry shook his head. “There’s no convenient word for what I want to do. *Vates* comes closest, maybe. Is there a *vates* for wizards and witches as well as for magical creatures?” He shrugged.

“But a *vates* is someone who unbinds magical creatures.” Pansy had studied a bit over the summer, since her mother had insisted that she understand certain key concepts anew. She’d had to learn more than how the Dark families had lost power to the Light families over the centuries, more than the history of Dark Lords and Ladies. “That much, I know.”

Harry shrugged again. “I told you, there’s no name for it. Freedom and possibility, and I want to offer those even to the people who oppose me. At least they’ll know what they’re doing. Then, if they choose to fight me, I can fight them, too, with a clear conscience.”

Pansy shook her head slowly. She wasn’t sure if that was better or worse than what she had suspected Harry of doing: acting Slytherin and Dark. “Do remember that if you do something the newspapers disapprove of, they can as easily flay you alive as applaud you, and then there will be an awful lot of people angry with you,” she murmured.

“I know that,” said Harry. “That’s why I’m not going to depend on just the newspapers.” He turned around and dropped back smoothly, and Draco joined him, giving Pansy a suspicious glance.

Pansy had said what she wanted to say. She went down the corridor, her brain busily working. Perhaps she would owl her mother later and ask for her opinion, but she believed she already knew what Hawthorn would say, because she knew what Dragonsbane would say. On this subject, and always assuming that Harry was sincere and really did know something about the way the world worked, her parents would speak as one.

Leave him to it. There is no one else in the world who can understand what magic he is doing so well as the wizard who does it. And do you really think that you could stop him anyway?

Pansy shook her head ruefully. All right. So the project’s much bigger, and Harry’s much more complicated, than I ever thought him. I believed he was becoming more Slytherin by deciding to take advantage of his fame and draining Dumbledore’s magic, but maybe those were just steps along a much longer road. And he doesn’t even seem to care if he dies before he reaches the end of it.

Best leave him to it.

She did add one phrase to the end of that sentence, one that she thought neither of her parents would dispute. *And do what I can to help.*

Harry sighed and pulled his plate out from under the ashes of the eighth Howler he’d received that evening. He determinedly went on eating as the voice ranted and raved around his head, demanding to know what he thought he was doing by insisting that wizards give up house elves.

Regulus made sarcastic comments in his head the while. *Insisting that they become less like the pompous windbags they are and learn some simple cleaning charms is more like it.*

Harry managed a half-hearted smile, but he was far less amused than he appeared. Draco and Regulus, at least, could feel it. Regulus made a wordless sound of sympathy, and Draco leaned across to whisper to him, “What’s the matter?”

“I didn’t expect *this* much attention,” Harry whispered back.

He had been sure that the article was the best step yesterday, that his possible opposition deserved to know what he was doing so that they could respond. A political machination might be hidden, or a simple alliance. But what Harry wanted to do was larger than that, and he had no intention whatsoever of hiding that he wanted freedom for magical creatures.

It seemed he’d underestimated how many other wizards *didn’t* want freedom for magical creatures.

He wondered for a moment, dismally, how many Howlers he’d received that day.

Thirty-two, Regulus answered promptly. *And you’ve had seventeen conversations trying to explain what you meant, and received about seven hundred odd looks.*

Harry nodded. Then he sighed as another post owl bore towards his table, wondering who could be writing to him now. At least the envelope this owl carried wasn't red.

It landed beside him, and Harry caught his breath as he recognized the official Ministry crest on the seal. Of course Scrimgeour would respond that way, rather than as the Head of the Auror Office. Harry kept forgetting his new position, even if he had helped him achieve it in some small way. Scrimgeour was busy cleaning up the Ministry, from all accounts, sacking and hiring like mad, and had not yet had time to turn his attention to the outer wizarding world except for the most important things, like the incidents after the Second Task.

As he opened the letter, Harry wondered if his message about the Death Eaters' probable attacks had changed that, and redirected the Minister's focus.

Dear Mr. Potter:

I would like to thank you for your invaluable warnings. Your dangerous friend has risked his life to gather this information, you said, and I can well believe it. Now that we know that one of the raiders was Fenrir Greyback, we can guess how he penetrated the wards around the prison. They were not guarded against a werewolf's nose. That has been corrected. As for his attacks in the north, we will warn northern wizarding families, though without specifics we can do no more than that. Please let me know if you uncover any other details.

I must admit I was rather surprised at your article in the paper yesterday. I shouldn't be, since you often have the effect of producing sudden and unexpected shocks, but this one was from a direction so unexpected that it astounded me. Free all the magical creatures, Mr. Potter? I think you know the general state of regard for nonhumans in wizarding Britain, and even for those unfortunate individuals born human but afflicted with a curse like lycanthropy.

I must know what you expect me to do about the anti-werewolf legislation. Fine words about free will aside, you know that you could interfere with the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures quite easily. You have already done so, in fact, using the Starrise boy as your stand-in. This became obvious once Umbridge was removed from power completely.

As odious as Dolores Umbridge is and was, you were mucking about in my Ministry. I have warned you about that. (I think you should also find a better tool to use than Tybalt Starrise, as the boy is utterly wild and will not follow the rules no matter what happens, but that is neither here nor there).

I understand your motives and your emotions. I could wish I did not understand them so well, since that makes my duty harder than it should be.

Do it again, Mr. Potter, and you may consider me your enemy. The Ministry should remain a place for ordinary wizards. I will tolerate no Lords interfering in it. Leave the softening of the anti-werewolf laws to me. I intend to bring them back down to what they were before Cornelius in his fear pushed them to a ridiculous height, but I intend to do it. Your urging only raises my hackles.

*Rufus Scrimgeour,
Minister of Magic.*

Harry had lost his appetite entirely. He stood, pushing his chair back from the table, and made for the door of the Great Hall.

Draco caught up with him before he'd left, of course. "Problem?" he inquired lightly.

Harry handed him the Minister's letter without speaking and bowed his head. He had a dull pulse of regret working in his throat. He had not even considered that sending Tybalt Starrise and John Smythe-Blyton after Umbridge would constitute interfering in the Ministry. He had simply done it, determined to stop the hunting of the Many, and roused Scrimgeour against him as a result. He could not say that he'd not been warned, not when he'd known Scrimgeour's feeling about Lords in the Ministry from their first meeting.

It's stupid, said Regulus in his head. *He's reacting to something that happened even before he became Minister. And he's mucked around himself, hasn't he? What's he so upset about?*

That was him, Harry thought back in misery. *A Ministry person, someone who would give his life to defend it—or at least what he thinks it could be, if it was under the proper guidance. And I think he did try to ignore it as long as he could; the*

letter implies that by saying that my deception became obvious once Umbridge was out of power.

Deception? Do you really regret what you did?

Harry sighed. *No. But I regret making him angry, and I regret what it may cost us in the future.*

Regulus made a disgusted sound. *You're too young to be thinking about this, Harry. Politics and compromise and the be-damned Ministry. You should be thinking about Quidditch and classes instead.*

No Quidditch this year, and I skim through classes, you know that. My mother foresaw that. She couldn't teach me everything, but she wanted me to be as prepared as I could be, so that I could devote more time to guarding Connor and less to worrying about schoolwork.

"What are you going to reply?" Draco asked quietly, handing the letter back to Harry. He tucked it into his robe pocket.

"I don't know," he responded, just as quietly. "Not yet. I'll have to think about it. After all, I don't intend to stop pushing for an end to the discrimination against werewolves. I don't want to alienate Scrimgeour—Merlin knows this would be an easier battle with him on our side—but I think I'm going to end up doing it anyway."

Draco half-closed his eyes and shook his head. "Sometimes I think you *should* act more Slytherin, Harry," he murmured. "Couldn't you just promise him that you won't push right now, and then do it later? Or offer him a compromise, a trade, doing something he'll want in exchange for his softening anti-werewolf laws?"

"Both of those would only make him distrust me more in the end," Harry pointed out. "And I don't think he'd believe me, anyway. He knows me, and he's an honest politician. We have an honest Minister at last, Draco, someone who really does want the Ministry to do what it's supposed to do." *I just never thought one of the things he wanted the Ministry to do would be this.*

"Trust you to find the one honest politician in Britain, Harry." Draco shook his head in mock regret. Then he reached out and clenched his hand on Harry's shoulder. "I'll help you."

That he didn't specify what he would help with made the offer more precious to Harry. He lifted his hand and squeezed back, enjoying Draco's look of delighted surprise. It still wasn't often that Harry made a move to return one of his touches. "Thank you, Draco."

They went to their room then, and Harry felt contented for the half minute it took him to identify the stink of a Dungbomb. Several Dungbombs, probably. He put a hand over his nose and stared at his bed, which was soaked with the odor and the remains of the bombs. A mocking message floated above the bed, written in green letters that Harry couldn't help comparing to the light that created the Dark Mark and *Avada Kedavra*.

Welcome to a world without house elves, Potter!

Harry sighed, then coughed as the odor infiltrated his lungs. He supposed he should have expected something like this. Conversations and odd looks were not enough to express some of the students' antipathy towards him, and all the Howlers so far had come from outside the school. He cast several spells to remove the odor and clean the sheets, then paused and eyed his bed thoughtfully. The mocking message vanished along with the rest as he considered the idea that had just come into his head, and reconsidered his conversation with Millicent from this morning.

Yes. Why not? I'm a wizard.

Harry—Regulus complained in his head.

Harry shook his head at him. *You were the one who said that people who didn't want to use simple cleaning charms were a lot of pompous windbags.*

He sat on the bed, and only then turned to face Draco. To his surprise, Draco's hands were locked into fists, and he was shaking.

"If I knew who did this, I'd kill them," he whispered.

Harry rolled his eyes and leaned back, sniffing carefully. No, no trace of the odor. That spell would do nicely, he thought. "It

was just a Dungbomb, Draco. Or Dungbombs. And a message. That's all."

"But it must have been one of the older Slytherin students," Draco insisted, sitting down on his own bed with a thunderous frown. "They're the only ones who would have a chance of access to our rooms."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I don't think so, not for certain," he said, thinking of the Weasley twins. "Listen, Draco, it's all right —"

"It is not." Draco lunged upright and glared at him. "You shouldn't have to endure this treatment!"

Harry raised his eyebrows. "But I asked to endure it, didn't I, with that article? Complaining about it would only let people see that it bothers me. Besides, they gave me an idea. Don't you want to hear what it is?"

Draco paused for a long moment, obviously conflicted between that and the need to keep urging revenge on Harry, and finally said, grumpily, "Yes."

"I'm going to put a ward around my bed so that no house elves can touch my things," said Harry firmly. "Then I'll use cleaning spells on my own sheets and robes, and care for my own part of the room." He concentrated, remembering the blue cage of light he'd used on Dobby when he first met him, and one of them sprang into being around his bed. Harry stretched out a hand and passed it through the barrier, which didn't hinder him at all. He smiled at Draco's stunned expression. "Humans can still get to it, but no house elves."

"But why are you doing this?"

"Because I do depend on house elves for plenty of things I can do myself, and I really shouldn't." Harry squinted thoughtfully at the ceiling of his four-poster. "I'm not sure what to do about things like the torches and the fires and the meals. I can't cook very well, and conjured food isn't very filling. And I can't insist that everyone else light their own fires and so on just because I want to live that way."

"But don't you expect me to do it?"

Harry frowned at Draco. "Of course not. Why would I? This is my decision, but you know that you're free to do whatever you want. That's always been true, Draco."

Draco climbed into his bed and tugged his curtains shut. Harry hesitated, thinking about calling out to him, but in the end he shook his head and let it go. He was more exhausted than he had realized he would be. Dealing with the Howlers and the stares and the conversations and this prank was enough without dealing with an angry Draco as well, angry for one of those reasons that Harry had to just leave him to be angry about, because Draco would bounce back from it more easily than Harry could understand it.

Usually, at least.

Harry ran his last words through his head again, and then sighed. *I said he could do whatever he wanted. He probably imagined that I was implying some sort of disregard for him with that, like it doesn't matter to me what he does.*

This normal thing is hard. There's so much I don't understand about what normal people want and think and need.

Harry hesitated a long moment, and then climbed out of his bed and padded over to Draco's. A tug on the curtains revealed a startled and blinking Draco, trying to muster a scowl and not succeeding very well.

"Listen," said Harry, leaning on one of the bedposts so he could study Draco. "I didn't mean you don't matter to me. You do matter." Terror crawled up his spine, but he managed to go on. "I was thinking the other day about what it meant to me that Snape might have used compulsion on you on purpose. I got angry."

"You always do that when you think about compulsion." But Draco had inched a little nearer the edge of the bed and was looking at him intently.

"But I got angrier than usual," said Harry. "Angrier than I would have—" *Merlin, this is hard.* "If he'd used it on Millicent or Neville or Luna," he finished in a rush. "I thought you should know that. What you do matters to me." That was easier, because he'd already said it. "You're more important to me than a lot of people, Draco. I don't know if I should want it to be like that, since I'm supposed to give equal weight to everyone, but that's the way it is." Harry looked away, tense and

miserable. It was true, but he often wondered what it meant, that he gave Draco preferment in the way he'd once given Connor. At least he'd known that putting his brother before so many other people was right, and permissible. Here, he was floundering along on a muddy road, and he knew some of his allies would be displeased with him for thinking of Draco first, before them.

Draco reached out and put a hand on his shoulder. Harry hunched before he could help himself. It felt too intimate right after he'd made a confession like this, too much like something he wanted.

Draco pulled his hand back. "Thank you, Harry," he said softly.

Harry didn't have empathy, but there was no mistaking the depth of gratitude in those three words. He nodded and walked back to his bed, climbing into it and leaning his head back. He was more exhausted than before.

He had to wake up and face another day like this tomorrow. And, from certain stern glances he'd got today, Harry was pretty sure that Dumbledore would break his long silence and approach him about the article soon. And now he'd started doubting that what he'd done was the right course, after all. Perhaps he should have waited to launch an article like that.

Harry closed his eyes. *I'm so tired.*

Then go to sleep. Regulus's voice was gentle. *Nothing to hurt you here.*

Harry remembered his scar, but he was so exhausted—as much by the thought of the future as by the thought of the present—that he curled up and took Regulus's advice.

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Interlude: Son of Mine

February 22nd, 1995

Dear Harry:

It's quiet here. I don't think I've ever realized how quiet. Snow is melting from the fall we had last night, and I can hear the drops of water coasting down the sides of the house in between my own heartbeats.

I could liven up the silence, but I find I don't want to. I sit and look out the windows for at least half an hour each morning, using the sight to relax me and fortify my mind for the day. Even in the winter, Lux Aeterna is beautiful: a stern place, of stone and sere grass, but shining like a mountain. I almost don't want to look away from the sight of the courtyards and the yew trees all draped in snow.

Then I go up to the study, and write any letters I need to, and begin reading. I've ordered books on modern Auror training and the history of the last ten years from Flourish and Blotts. I said once that I wanted to become an Auror again, join the fight against Voldemort, but it's painfully obvious that I can't do that until I know what they do differently now. Ten years of ignoring the outside world left me woefully behind, and the official Ministry pamphlets are no help at all. (They never were. They trick trainees in by promising them a life of fame and respect without mentioning all the hard work. Half the wizards and witches I trained with never made it past the first two months).

It's fascinating work, though hard. I practice the dueling spells by myself, and it's a good thing that some of my study includes healing spells. Not only are they useful in the field, they help me when I'm recovering from a hex bounced off one of my own shields.

Precisely at noon, the brownies serve me a light lunch; this never varies. Then I go flying outside. It's the active equivalent of the staring I do in the morning, I think. It suspends me in chill air above the grounds, which are all white and silver metal laid out below me. February changes this country more than any other month. I find it hard to hold on to any discouraging thoughts that might have crept in during my morning study, like ones mocking my hope of becoming an Auror again at all.

Then I return to my study, though usually I spend more time with history in the afternoon. A light tea comes at two, and dinner at five o'clock. Then I write until I go to bed.

I'm not sure I should tell you what I'm writing yet. It might sound wrong. But this is a description of my daily routine, which I wrote because I didn't know what else to write.

Sincerely,
James Potter.

February 24th, 1995

Dear James:

Thank you for the description of your day. This is the kind of thing I want to know about you: simple, seemingly nonsensical things that will give me a glimpse into who you are when you're not trying to just be a father to Connor and me.

I could try to give you the same courtesy, but it would be silly because my days are so varied. I wake up at almost the same time every day, eat breakfast, go to class, eat lunch, go to more classes, and eat dinner. Those are usually the only things that are remotely the same. Oh, and Draco's always with me. That's the same, too.

Sometimes I study. Sometimes I teach lessons. Sometimes I have tense conversations that usually teach me more about the other person than they learn about me by the time they're done. Sometimes I free magical creatures. Lately it seems I've spent a lot of time listening to people complain about their love lives. Connor complains to me about his girlfriend, and Blaise moans that his girlfriend is too temperamental—she's a Weasley, and she stands up to him as well as her brothers—and Hermione rattles on at me about her jealous boyfriend. I offer advice that they never take. Of course, perhaps I'm not in the best position to be offering advice, but they act as if they want it. Mine mostly consists of being honest, which is too hard for most of them, and, Merlin knows, nearly too hard for me most of the time.

I want to know what you write every evening after dinner.

Sincerely,
Harry.

March 1st, 1995

Dear Harry:

I'm sorry for the delay in responding. I found myself nervous, and hesitated for a long time before I wrote anything at all. That's a joke, considering how much I write every day anyway, until my hand cramps, but it's the truth.

I write about you and Connor. I want to put down all the memories I have of you. Sometimes I just make lists: what I remember you doing on your birthdays, how fast you two could run, how many books were in your room at Godric's Hollow. Sometimes I try to cast the memories into a story, so that someone looking over my shoulder could read it as if it happened very far away and long ago. (The longest, and the one I'm proudest of, is a retelling of a wizarding legend with the two of you as the heroes).

Sometimes I think about everything I've forgotten, and then try to remember it. Those entries are the messiest, and they degenerate into a scrawl quickly. I usually give up on them and go to bed early on those nights.

Is it all right to ask how you feel about the newspaper articles? I know the Daily Prophet won't stop yammering about you.

Sincerely,
James Potter.

March 4th, 1995

Dear James:

Thank you for telling me. I don't know if you would like to show me the book that you've written those memories in, or even if I would like to read it, but it helps to know that someone is writing down the memories of our childhoods.

Yes, the newspaper articles are annoying, but I'm bearing up under them. Really, they're more tiresome than anything else. The Howlers are worse, but even they are more tiresome than not. People have a perfect right to object to me, and who could stop them? I can see why some people think I'm taking the glory away from Connor.

Connor doesn't think I'm taking anything away, though. He scowls when most people mention the Tournament, so they shut up. Or perhaps that's pity for him having been laid up in the hospital wing for so long. I don't know for certain. Perhaps I shall mention that possibility to him and see where it leads.

Fewer people speak to me about their love lives, now. Connor is still dancing around Parvati Patil, but Zacharias and Hermione had an argument that ended with her slapping him, and Ginny Weasley hexed Blaise for one remark too many about her brothers. Finally, some peace!

What do you dream about?

Sincerely,
Harry.

March 8th, 1995

Dear Harry:

I dream about a lot of things.

At night, I mostly dream nonsense. I always did. I know that some people have the most amazing, connected, story-like dreams, but that's not a gift I possess. The other night there were wooden gargoyles chasing me while I wielded a diamond sword. The night before that, I was trying desperately to find a box that would keep me from turning into a cat, and I know there were also dragons in there somewhere, but it's as much as I remember.

During the day, I concentrate on my ambitions of becoming an Auror again. The more I learn, the more it seems I have to learn. I'm studying law now. How many edicts did the Ministry pass in the last ten years, anyway? And do they really expect all their Aurors to be conversant with every single one of them? Sometimes it seems that way.

When writing, I dream about you and Connor.

Sweet dreams, Harry.

Sincerely,
James Potter.

March 15th, 1995

Dear James:

Now it's my turn to be nervous about writing you a letter, but I thought I owed you this much honesty for being so honest with me. I dream quite a lot, and I can't remember the last time I had a normal one. Or maybe I do have normal ones, and they just shred before I wake up.

I keep having visions of the Dark Lord. I see him—or, at least, I see the place where he's sitting—and his Death Eaters. So far, it's an advantage, because I can hear his plans, and he doesn't seem to notice me. But listening to his voice is disgusting. When I wake, my scar bleeds and my head hurts. It happens every single time, and I can't account for it. You'd think I'd get used to it at some point. At least I'm tolerating the headaches now. You should hear Draco fuss about them. It quite fulfils my quota of pointless fussing for the day.

Not that anyone else believes I've reached that quota. Blaise apologized to Ginny, and now they're happy again, so he complains about Ron almost hexing him in the corridors. Parvati said something cutting to Connor, so he mopes at me. The only really amusing romance is watching Zacharias try to take a seat at Hermione's table in the library without her noticing

him. He waits until she's deep in a book and then sneaks over. She always notices him and moves. It's like a very slow game of musical chairs.

I'm not sure why I'm everyone's romantic woe repository. Perhaps because I listen well?

Is the landscape around Lux Aeterna changing now that there's less snow?

Sincerely,
Harry.

March 17th, 1995

Dear Harry:

Have you been to see Madam Pomfrey about your headache or your scar bleeding? I'm honored that you gave me your confidence about your visions, so I know that I have no right to press you, but if she could help you at all... I don't like to think of you suffering.

The landscape around Lux Aeterna looks oddly fragile right now. The first bits of grass are stirring, but they always get buried again by a faint snowfall or a frantic rain. The severe gray and silver grids are gone. The landscape wavers back and forth between mud and dirt. I remember loving this time of year when I was a boy. It made me think that spring was coming every day.

I changed into Prongs and ran today along the beach where we performed the Midsummer ritual. I'd forgotten how much I love running as a stag. The sheer song of the wind in my ears and the weight of antlers on my head and scent in my nostrils is something I should really always remember when I change back to human, but I don't.

Afraid I can't help you much on the romantic front! I was always the one who poured out his woes into other people's ears. Remus was the one who had to hear them.

Sincerely,
James Potter.

March 22nd, 1995

Dear James:

You've probably heard about my having a bunch of snakes come into the Great Hall and hiss at people by now. But they're free. Free, and I shattered the web on them! And it was a great day in other respects, too. Regulus came back! And something else happened that, well, it's important, but I think I'd rather hold the joy to myself for a while yet, because it still makes me nervous.

There's so much beauty in the world, Dad.

Did you perform a special Light ritual for the birth of spring?

Sincerely,
Harry.

March 27th, 1995

Dear Harry:

Thank you very much for your last letter, Harry. It means the world to me to know that you're happy.

For the birth of spring, there is a ritual, but it's one that each member of a Light family has to perform by himself. It's silence

around the moment of sunset, when there's equal Light and Dark, day and night, for a single poised instant of time. For that moment, we remember the ancient time when Light and Dark didn't war with each other. We're dedicated to our Declared side the rest of the year, but we can pause and step outside the year just once.

I performed that ritual on the beach, too, and though it shouldn't have felt silent with the sea sighing and crashing all around me and gulls screaming in my ears, the absence of a single human voice really did matter.

I hope you continue happy.

Sincerely,
James Potter.

April 4th, 1995

Dear James:

I suppose you've heard about my article by now, and the attack on the Ministry prison. I dreamed about it, but I couldn't warn anyone in time to prevent it. I thought the article would be a good first step, but now I'm getting pelted by Howlers and Dungbombs.

I'm cleaning my own clothes and blankets now, because I thought it would set a good example to not have house elves serving me. (They're all up in arms about house elves—most of the people I've upset, I mean. I didn't foresee that). I haven't decided what to do about meals yet.

I never realized that I would upset everyone so much. That wasn't my intention. Some discomfort if they fought against me, sure, but I thought I could approach them on rational ground. Apparently not.

A few Slytherins are urging me to retract the article, but I won't. I do think I need a little time to recover, though. I'm so exhausted with dealing with everyone every day that I need a place where no one can come up to me and start a debate on the morals of freeing house elves. And being away from the romantic fits would be a fringe benefit.

Could I come to Lux Aeterna for Easter?

Sincerely,
Harry.

April 6th, 1995

Dear Harry:

You are more than welcome here. I am proud of you for standing up what you believe in, but I can understand the need to retreat for a few weeks and build up your tolerance for stupidity.

Connor has already written and told me he'd come, because he wants to give me a piece of his mind. Whether for that or any other reason, I am always happy to have you near me.

Sincerely,
James Potter.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Chapter Fifty-Two: Walking on Eggshells

Harry stretched his hands above his head, and tried to ignore Draco's gaze burning on the side of his face.

"When were you planning to tell me about this?" Draco's voice pushed at him, demanding his notice. Harry looked down at his toast instead, and started eating as though it were the most interesting meal he'd ever had. In a sense, it was. He didn't

think he'd ever eaten another meal with Draco staring at him quite that hard.

"A bit later," said Harry, and cast a *Tempus* charm with one hand, pleased that the wandless magic obeyed him so easily. *It is much more convenient to have it come through my fingers than my shoulders or my eyes or my feet or wherever it likes.* "In about two hours, actually."

Draco hesitated a moment, caught flat-footed by Harry's admission. Harry kept on eating. He refused to feel bad about Draco's reaction. It wasn't Harry's fault that Blaise had noticed Harry packing his trunk while Draco was in the loo and opened his mouth about it when he came out. Then Draco had asked Harry where he was going for Easter, and Harry had said that he was going to Lux Aeterna, with perfect truth. Draco hadn't asked why before starting to fire other angry questions, so he might as well put up with the inconvenience of Harry answering calmly and when he wanted to.

Draco grabbed his wrist. Harry turned and looked at him. Draco's eyes were blazing. *That's unusual*, Harry thought, leaning back enough that the hold on his wrist didn't hurt. *He normally doesn't show emotion that way, but through the flushing of his cheeks and the way he sits in his chair.*

"I want to know why you're doing this, Harry," Draco said.

"You'll know in two hours." Harry tugged lightly on his hand, but Draco wouldn't give it up. Harry shrugged and returned to eating. "I was planning to tell you and Snape about it at the same time, and I don't see any reason to change that plan."

Draco was silent for a long time. Then he said, in a voice so low Harry had to strain his ears even though he was leaning close, "I thought you wanted to come back to the Manor with me."

"You didn't ask," said Harry quietly, even as the toast turned to a sticky little lump in his stomach. "I would have told you the truth if you'd asked, Draco, though I still would have wanted to wait to explain my reasons. You just assumed I was coming with you, and now you're upset because I messed up your schedule."

"That's not the only reason." Draco brushed the back of his hand across Harry's cheek, and Harry shivered, because that wasn't playing *fair*, damn it. "How can you think that's the only reason?"

Great, Harry thought in dismay. Now he'd hurt Draco, when the whole reason he'd waited was so that he wouldn't have to. He was going back to Lux Aeterna for Easter, with Connor, and he wouldn't bring Draco or Snape along. He was going to tell them both at once on the last day of term, so quickly that their major emotion towards him was anger and not hurt. If Blaise had kept his big mouth shut, then everything would have been fine.

A post owl appeared with another Howler at that moment, and Harry had never been so glad to see a distraction. He reached out with his free hand to accept the letter, which began yelling at him about the dangerous irresponsibility of a boy of fourteen wielding such power.

Harry's determination to get away increased as he listened to it. The major reason was peace, just as he'd written James. He'd been inundated with so many insults and pranks that they had started to blur together in his memory, which normally never happened. He wanted a place where he could take some deep breaths unhindered, and Lux Aeterna was that place, from James's letters: quiet and peaceful, stern and austere, with wards that no Howlers could get through.

But the other reason had taken root in his mind two days after he had Skeeter release the article, as he received more and more evidence that moving so boldly, and in a way that impinged on so many people's lives, was a mistake. He had to switch tactics. He knew a way to do that, a way that would draw on him and a few people who might want to help him, no one else. It had several steps, and the first one he could only accomplish by going to Lux Aeterna.

However, he was almost certain that neither Draco nor Snape would let him go through with the tactics switch, because they would worry he was endangering himself. There was a simple solution to that. He was not going to tell them he was doing it. The decision had seemed so simple to him when he was lying in bed the night he made it, aiming for a greater goal and stepping over a few obstacles in the way.

But he was being reminded now that Draco wasn't an obstacle, but a human being who, Merlin knew why, loved him, and was listening to the Howler with an expression that truly frightened Harry.

Harry turned his head away, and pretended that his upset came from the insults when Draco asked him.

Draco had dragged Harry to Snape's office immediately after Potions—it was a half day of classes—and settled him on one of the Transfigured chairs with a forbidding expression. Harry nodded and faced his guardian, who already looked grim.

“It is obvious that you have something to say to me, Harry,” he said. “The way you were squirming throughout class rather confirmed it. Now.”

Harry nodded again. “Draco already knows this,” he said. He had decided that he could get through this best if he adopted an expression and tone of gentle regret. It was perfectly true that he regretted hurting them. It was also perfectly true that that wasn't going to stop him from staying with James for Easter holidays. “I'm going to Lux Aeterna for Easter.”

Snape's nostrils flared like a Grim's scenting prey, but he simply inclined his head, as though the news had not been unexpected. His voice was clipped, staccato. “Why?”

“I need some peace,” said Harry, and made a vague gesture that he knew would encompass the Howlers and the pranks and the rest of it in both Draco's and Snape's minds. “I didn't know what I was doing with this article. I admit that.”

Snape tilted his head to the side. “I knew you were calling a storm,” he murmured. “I did not anticipate all the winds.”

Harry nodded back. Snape had listened to him when he complained and offered him dueling lessons to distract him from his troubles, but he hadn't mentioned a desire to ignite the people who sent the Howlers and the Dungbombs like Draco had. Snape thought he should know the consequences of his own mistakes, Harry knew. “And Lux Aeterna is peaceful. It keeps letters out if my father doesn't want them to come in, and I know that he'd keep the Howlers away from me. And it's a very different environment from school. That's what I need most of all.”

“It was not peaceful this summer,” said Snape quietly, “when I rescued you from the Blood-Burning Curse.”

Harry sighed and bowed his head. “I know. I've learned my lesson, sir. I don't intend to venture outside the wards this time.”

“Nor was it peaceful inside the house,” Snape went on, with a mildness that Harry was coming to fear more than his sharpness, “where your father and your brother sent you into a near-frenzy.”

Harry shrugged. “This time, James knows more about me. We've been writing back and forth. He's changed now, I think. I was the one who suggested coming home for Easter. He never would have said anything about it, because he promised not to. It'll be awkward in close quarters, but awkward's a lot better than the closeness he thought we had and which I feigned this summer.”

“A man may appear one thing in letters,” Snape murmured, “and another when you actually meet him.”

Harry let out his breath. “I know that, sir. But I really think he has changed. Connor's still angry with him—“

“I thought you said you needed peace,” Draco interrupted him. “This doesn't sound like you'll get any, if your brother's going to be yelling at your father.” He'd taken Harry's wrist again, and stroked it in small, soothing circles.

“I talked to Connor yesterday.” Harry could still see his twin's hazel eyes widening in surprise when Connor realized that he intended to come home, and why. “He said that he would make sure not to yell at James in front of me. Really, what they need is to clear the air. A big fight, and they'll be back on the road to healing, although not quite there yet. They've talked to each other in letters except for James's visit to the hospital wing after the Second Task, and then Connor was still weak and woozy from his wound. Once they can see each other and have a long talk, or maybe shouting match, then they should be able to—“

“Harry.”

Harry jumped. He'd actually forgotten Snape, occupied both with memories of what Connor had said to him and with Draco rubbing his wrist. He glanced up and found his guardian leaning forward, watching him with eyes that made Harry drop his gaze at once. Snape was simply too good a Legilimens. He might enter Harry's mind without even realizing it and spy out his hidden motive, and then there would be no way he would let Harry go.

“I do not care that much about your brother,” Snape said. “I still want to know how this visit will affect you, whether you think it is a wise thing. You need peace, but I could give that to you. I did so this summer.” He lifted his chin slightly, as though daring Harry to deny it.

Harry swallowed. *That does sound wonderful.* That August, bar Rosier's attempt to kill him at the beginning of it and the kidnapping at the end of it, lingered in his mind as one of the best times of his life. He knew he could relax here, that he would sleep more deeply than usual, and that he might actually be able to forget about the article and the shame of the mess he'd created—

But then he remembered the Howlers, and sighed. "I'd still get a barrage of post each day," he pointed out, lifting his eyes to Snape's. "You told me that you couldn't ward me against Rosier's letters reaching me, sir, without driving post owls away altogether. That means that you couldn't ward against Howlers either, could you?"

Snape slowly shook his head.

"Malfoy Manor has the necessary precautions, Harry," said Draco. He'd leaned against Harry by now, and Harry wondered what it meant that he hadn't even noticed Draco's face so close to his. "You could receive ordinary post there, but not Howlers. And you know that the wards will let you through." He touched the back of Harry's neck. "And we'd be together there."

"With your parents," Harry pointed out, tamping down on the little cry of loss that wanted to rip out of him. "I'm more uneasy around your father than I am around my own."

"He would stay away from you if you wanted," Draco promised. "He's your formal ally now, Harry, and that's a small request. Besides, he's busy with some secret project of his own, always bustling in and out of the house. And I know that you don't mind my mother."

Harry felt his resolve waver. *A holiday with Draco and Narcissa when I'm not out of my mind with pain. Merlin, that sounds wonderful. I want to.*

But though that would give him the rest he needed, it wouldn't move him a step towards his final project, his more important goal, of switching tactics so that he could actually free the magical creatures without stamping on so many wizards' free will.

This is stupid, Regulus snarled in his head. *Harry, for Merlin's sake, no one expects you to solve the problem of the magical creatures tomorrow. They've been imprisoned for centuries. Go to Malfoy Manor and relax. If James has really altered, he won't mind if you change your mind.*

Harry ground his teeth. *Are you ready to tell me about the journal yet?*

Regulus gave another snarl, this one wordless.

Harry nodded back. *You don't want to talk about that, and I don't want to talk about this. So be quiet.* He glanced back at Snape and Draco. Draco had a hopeful look on his face. Snape's was closed, and his eyes held nothing but blankness.

"I do not think that this is a good idea, Harry," he said.

"I do." Harry kept his voice firm, and as gentle as he could. He turned to face Draco, who was blinking as he realized that he wouldn't be able to persuade Harry to come to the Manor after all. "I promise, this isn't a reflection on you. Neither of you. I just want to step away for a while, into a different place, and think about different things. I'll come back the stronger for it."

"With a man who abused you," Draco said. "I don't call that a different place, Harry, or one likely to make you stronger."

Harry felt the fretful panic lash at him again. "Draco, you said—"

"I promised about your mother, Harry," Draco said. "Not about James. Let's be honest, here, the way you're always telling me we need to be." He met Harry's eyes squarely. "I think you'll come back broken."

"I am willing to trust Harry when he says he will not."

Harry gave Snape a quick, grateful glance, but his guardian's face had not altered. Nor had his opinion, as he proved when he added, "If he comes back broken because of something James did, then he will not see James Potter again."

Harry opened his mouth, then ducked his head. *I can't blame him for saying that. Besides, argue too much, and he might*

think there's something I want to see there beyond James.

“Thank you for trusting me,” he said, and then glanced at Draco.

Draco's face wavered several times, before he looked away. Harry squeezed his shoulder. “Draco, I promise I'll come back. Trust me?”

“I do,” Draco whispered. “But sometimes I think you trust yourself too much. You might try to bear more than you really can.”

“Connor's going to be there, and he wants to yell at James,” Harry pointed out. “He should protect me.”

And I will be there, too, said Regulus in the depths of his mind. *If I cannot persuade you out of this, I will at least go along and make sure nothing too terrible happens.*

Draco muttered something about Connor not being able to protect a fly from spiders, then sighed. “I understand,” he said. “Come back safe.” He gave Harry a quick, rough hug, but pulled away when he tried to return it, and trotted out the door. Harry understood. His empathy as well as his own emotions would be telling him there was no chance for Harry to change his mind, and he wanted to deal with his disappointment in private.

“I do wonder, sometimes,” said Snape, his voice gone remote, “if Draco is right, if you subject yourself to pressures that you cannot bear.”

Harry faced him. *I can't give up now, not when I'm so close to winning my goal.* “Does that mean that you'll forbid me to go after all, sir?”

Snape raised his eyebrows. “Of course not, Harry. I trust you, as I said. I was merely echoing an interesting observation.” His eyes locked on Harry's face for a moment. “I doubt Draco realizes how interesting it is.”

Harry looked away. Snape had been much better lately—dueling with him, not mentioning his family at all, quietly giving him headache potions when he awakened from another vision. But there were moments like this when he *would* go quiet and thoughtful, and the things he said made Harry feeling as if he were looking straight at Harry's heart and soul.

“Thank you, sir,” he said, choosing to respond to one part of Snape's declaration and not the other, and then slipped out the door.

This has to be the right thing to do, he thought, as he made for the Slytherin common room and his trunk. He would join Connor in the hospital wing, and they would Floo to Lux Aeterna from there. *I made a mistake. I see that now. I'm going to make up for that.*

Your priorities disturb me, Regulus said at him, but sulked when Harry brought up the image of the journal again. He'd refused to say anything about it, retreating into a stubborn silence that had a strong tint of shame. Harry decided that he could wait until Regulus was ready to speak. For now, he seemed safe, and Harry believed him when he said that he still had no idea where his body was, and that the journal could provide no clues to that.

Snape leaned back against his desk and followed Harry's departure with his eyes, in silence. Harry was hiding something, he was almost certain of it, but he had trained the boy too well. Harry could raise the Occlumency shields without thinking now, and they kept almost all of his emotions in check and a good portion of his motives. Snape would have pushed, and Harry would have felt it, and that would be another chipping away at the trust between them.

Snape was willing to wait. He *did* trust Harry, but he did not have quite the same level of blithe trust in his ward's ability to recover from shattering events. Harry seemed to think that because he survived, that made everything all right, without realizing that suppurating wounds were not, in general, a sign of good health.

And if Harry had stewed and brooded on that article, as Snape knew he had, then he would almost certainly have come up with some plan to use instead of it, or, as Harry would conceive of it, to make up for his stumble. And if he was not telling them about that plan, it was risky or dangerous or both.

Snape clenched his hands. *I promised. I will wait. I will hold back. He needs an adult he can trust absolutely.*

But let him return in pain from any abuse or neglect, and I meant what I said. He need not concern himself with James Potter again. Nor will I kill him, though I am sure Harry would fear that I meant that.

Snape's gaze went to the innocent-looking desk in the back corner of his office. One drawer held the Pensieve Potion. Another held rolls of parchment covered in close writing. Another contained books.

I have my weapons. I need not use them if there is no need, but I have them ready if there is.

James wiped his hands on his robes. It was the fourth time in five minutes. They were so sweaty that if a troll had appeared in Lux Aeterna's waiting room at that moment and charged him waving its club, James wouldn't have been able to fumble his wand up to react in time.

His sons were coming through the fireplace in a few minutes. Harry and Connor were coming home.

He'd wanted to go to Hogwarts and meet them, but Connor had sent him a letter that forbade even the possibility of that, and James was not anxious to push. His letter-writing in the last month and a half had been an exercise in holding back, in not mentioning Snape, or Lily, or the past, or anything that might hurt or anger Harry or Connor. Surely, now that he was finally going to see his boys again, he could exercise a bit more patience.

It was harder than he thought. James supposed the letters and the writing he'd done had moved him closer to Harry and Connor in a way that neither could appreciate yet, because it was all in his own mind. He would *remember* that. He would be conscious of that this time. Too much of the pain in the past had resulted from his ignoring what he should have paid attention to. This time, he would wait for one of his sons to make the first move, and when they did, then he would let his own moves be guided by theirs.

The fireplace flickered to life, and the flames glowed green. James took a deep breath, as much to reassure himself he wasn't hyperventilating as to be ready to say something when Harry and Connor stepped out of the fireplace.

Harry came first, springing adroitly out of the hearth and over the slight step that might have tripped him. He whirled his trunk out of the way, dusted soot from his robes with one hand, and still had the other free to help Connor as his brother stumbled out, coughing and choking.

James swallowed. He discovered that he wasn't ready after all. He'd dreamed of his sons at all different ages throughout the late winter and early spring, but it was nothing to seeing them now, turning and looking up at him as the teenagers they really were at this point.

Well, Harry's eyes are nothing like a teenager's, James corrected himself, as he noticed the glaze of exhaustion on Harry's face, and the deep circles beneath his eyes. *They never were, really.*

He held out a hand, not ready yet to risk an embrace, and Harry took it. "Welcome to Lux Aeterna," James said, not quite daring to call it "home" either. "Do you want the room that you had this summer?"

Harry smiled at him, which was a much more pleasant expression than he'd worn in a lot of the ways James had imagined this moment. "Thank you, that'd be fine," he said. "I'm very tired, and I'm going to lie down and go to sleep right away, if it's all the same to you."

James nodded. His self-consciousness felt awkward, but this was still so much better than he'd done with Harry during the summer. "Of course. I do think that you'll find you have a visitor soon."

Harry paused, so arrested that James felt a bit bad for trying to make it a surprise. *He's trying to figure out who it is, what he'll have to do to deal with it.* "Who?" Harry asked at last.

"Fawkes," said James. "He showed up here yesterday, and he's been flying the grounds most of the time, singing. But he spent the night in your room, and I think he'll be happy to see you."

Harry blinked in wonder. "I—yes, and I'd like to see him." He smiled at James. "Thank you." He dragged his trunk out of the room without waiting for anything else. James watched him go for a moment, then turned to face Connor.

The moment he saw his younger son's face, he had a good idea why Harry hadn't wanted to wait around. James swallowed. Connor glared at him. In some ways, Connor looked more like him than Harry did, and eye color was a minute part of it. James knew, very well, that expression of mulish stubbornness. It was the kind he'd seen in mirrors just before battles. Connor didn't intend to abandon this battlefield, that much was certain.

James nodded at him. "Hello, Connor," he said.

"Oh, *that's* a good beginning," said Connor, and James flinched. He'd only heard Connor use that sarcasm on a few occasions. Most of the time, he didn't need it. He'd been an indulged child, and he tended to get his way by fussing or yelling—straightforward, honest anger. Harry was the one who'd had the tongue dipped in acid, or at least James had thought that when he allowed himself to notice anything strange in his elder son's behavior. "At least you're not going to pretend that I'm a statue or a chess piece. What, got tired of having one of them to pick up and move around?" Connor's eyes flickered in the direction Harry had gone.

James stiffened. *That was unfair.* "He and I have been much better to each other," he said. "It's the reason he agreed to come home. And—"

"But see," Connor cut in, "I don't trust you."

James flinched again, more sharply this time. He had not imagined that Connor would say the words, nor that they would cut so deep.

"You've changed your mind before, apparently." Connor's eyes were narrowed, steady with something that James thought was dislike. "You were going to be different when Harry was in the hospital wing second year, and then you weren't. You changed your mind at the end of term last year, and then you slipped right back into hurting Harry and insulting Snape. Oh, yeah, some of it wasn't deliberate, but a lot *was*. And then you didn't write Harry for months and months, just because you were childish enough to want him to write you first. And then you wanted to start over again. But how do I know that this is the real starting over this time? Maybe you'll collapse again and run like you did after—after Harry took Mum's magic away." Connor took a deep breath, and the soul-deep horror in his eyes sliced off another piece of James's heart. "Do you even know what that was like?" Connor whispered. "You don't. You just ran. Harry had a reason for leaving, but *you* didn't. You should have stayed and helped me."

"Connor—" James began.

"But this isn't even about me," said Connor, pulling himself back together again with a snap. James felt another pang, that both of his sons had had to learn to do that. "It's about Harry." His eyes burned as he took a step forward. "This had *better* be real, this change of your mind. You'd better want what's best for him. You'd *better* not let something happen to him through negligence. Frankly, I think I have to be more afraid of that than of you hurting him on purpose, though after you brought charges against Snape, I don't know that for certain."

James bowed his head. "I didn't—I didn't realize that affected you so deeply," he whispered.

"Harry's never talked to me about it," said Connor. "He knows that Snape and I don't get along. But of course it affected me. He's my *brother*. And I've made plenty of stupid mistakes in the past, but I've changed my mind now, and I'm not some stuffed toy that he has to protect, either. I can protect him *back*." He paused for a moment, breath heaving in and out of his lungs, and then added, "And I will. Protect him back, I mean. Harry's too Slytherin, sometimes, and way too forgiving. He'll hold back and try to placate someone who wants to hurt him, to see if he can calm them down and get out of the situation. That's why it's a good thing I'm in Gryffindor. I can just launch a good, hard hex if there's need."

James let out a breath that seemed to catch at several places in his throat. Then he nodded. He was sadder, and prouder of Connor, than he could say. "I know," he whispered. "I'm sorry."

Connor studied him for a moment, then nodded in turn. "I hope that'll be good enough this time," he said quietly. "That's another way I'm not as good as Harry is. He just keeps giving people chances, you know? But it's more limited with me. And a damn good thing, too. Sometimes you have to stop forgiving people."

James smiled at him and said, helpless to stop it, "I'm so glad you've grown up this way, Connor."

Connor blinked twice, then relaxed with a huge *whoof* of air. "Good," he said, and his speech wavered for the first time. "I—I do want us to be a family again, Dad. I'd like that. You and me, I mean. I don't think you and Harry can. But I can't do that if I think you're going to hurt him."

“I won’t,” said James. “I promise it, in Godric’s name.”

Connor scanned him intently. James looked back, and wondered if Harry really was, all the time, the more complicated of his sons.

“Good,” Connor said, and then abruptly stepped forward and hugged him. “I did miss you,” he whispered against James’s robes.

James slowly, carefully, put his arms around Connor, and thought of him as he’d been the last time he saw him, lying in a hospital bed with bandages swathed all around his chest and belly. “I missed you, too.”

Harry had barely put his trunk down on the floor of his room when a bright burst of flames coalesced over his pillow, and transformed into Fawkes. Harry put out a hand, smiling, and the phoenix soared over and landed on his shoulder, a warm, comforting weight, nudging him until Harry petted his neck. Fawkes closed his eyes and crooned.

What’s he doing? said Regulus abruptly. *Go away, bird! I was here first!*

Harry blinked. *What are you talking about?* he asked, but felt it a moment later. While Regulus’s presence in his head was limited to a voice and occasional touches on his memories, he could feel a presence of light and heat now. He closed his eyes, and saw a brilliant orange glow behind his eyelids.

For a moment, he panicked, thinking of the phoenix web. But the orange glow was different from the golden one, and Fawkes trilled reassuringly into his ear. Harry relaxed. The warmth spread around his brow, soothing away a tension headache he’d barely noticed he had, so constant was it now. Harry let out a long breath and sat slowly down on the bed.

I think he’s bonding with you, said Regulus in awe.

Harry blinked and tried to move, but the warmth had bound his limbs like the cocoon of sheets that tied him on a lazy summer morning. Then it let him go, and he found himself leaning back against the pillows. Fawkes sat on his shoulder chirping at him, and Harry could see visions in his head when he listened, rather like the images that might form from a vivid piece of music.

He could see Fawkes winging above an unfamiliar sea dotted with brilliant islands. Fawkes dipped and skimmed over one of them, and Harry caught his breath as a woman’s head covered with snakes thrust into view. Fawkes sang to her, and though Harry didn’t catch a sense of words from the music, he knew that the phoenix was telling her that a *vates* was abroad in the world. The woman cocked her head as she listened, and the snakes ceased to snap and hiss at each other and lay down tamely.

Fawkes coasted above a wide expanse of sand, and an enormous creature bounded into view. Harry caught his breath. It was a unicorn, he knew that, but its tail streamed out like a lion’s instead of a horse’s, and its feet revealed multiple hooves on each one, and its horn was black. It reared up challengingly at Fawkes, screaming and trying to stab him with its horn, but Fawkes sang, and implanted a vision of freedom in the unicorn’s mind that stayed with it when it lowered its head and began to run again. Fawkes soared along above its back, casting his shadow down to mingle with its and releasing a chorus in praise of stern, proud power.

Fawkes sat on a branch in silence, until a giant leopard prowled beneath his perch, paws shaking the ground with soft thunder. Harry gasped as he recognized a nundu, which could destroy whole villages if it wanted, and which a hundred wizards working together could barely bring down. Fawkes chose a different song, understandably, a darting, trilling thing that made the nundu whirl about, chasing shadows that gradually resolved into an image of the *vates*. Fawkes vanished in a ball of flames that time. The nundu was so dangerous that he could only plant the idea in its wild mind and hope it took root eventually.

More and more images, and Harry knew Fawkes had been all over the world, and given the message to more and more magical creatures. There was a *vates*, and while he might never reach them or free them, they deserved to know that he existed. It might at least bring some hope and make the waiting in confinement easier.

Harry opened his eyes, and let out a long sigh.

It's so big, Regulus said quietly. How can you do this?

Harry shook his head. "I don't know yet," he whispered aloud. "Step by step along the road, I think." He thought of the letter he'd sent to Scrimgeour, proposing that they meet some time after Easter and discuss their differences. It wasn't the perfect solution, but it was a step to a solution. "Bit by bit." He reached up and gently stroked Fawkes's feathers. "I'm honored that you chose to bond with me," he told the phoenix.

Fawkes crooned at him, as if to tell him to stop being silly, and then began the soft song that had lulled Harry to sleep before. Harry smiled, and lowered his head to the pillows, and obliged, taking the seed of hope that Fawkes had meant him to have, rather than the idea of duty.

Harry took a deep breath of wonder. From what James had said in his letters, he'd thought that Lux Aeterna would still be caught up in that muddy vision of half-spring, somewhere between seasons, and that he would see only the most stubborn and earliest of flowers, if any at all.

Instead, Fawkes had led him straight to a flourishing patch of blossoms in a corner of the lawn, flowers with delicate red-gold petals surrounding a blue center. They had shot up through the mud as if disdaining its power to hold them back, and now they rippled and shone like—

Like flames, Harry realized. He touched one of the petals, and found it softly warm. He gave Fawkes a suspicious glance. "You had something to do with this?"

Fawkes lifted with a cry and hovered over the flowers. They twitched and rippled as if called by the wind from his wings, and when Fawkes began to sing, they spun around on their stems, increasing their resemblance to small, dancing fires.

Harry wasn't sure exactly how Fawkes had made the flowers grow, but James had said he was flying over the grounds the day before Harry and Connor arrived. He might have had time to make them grow. Maybe.

Fawkes interrupted his song long enough to give the smooth warble that Harry already recognized as a smug equivalent of *I'm a phoenix, therefore I make the impossible possible*.

Harry leaned back against the yew standing nearby and enjoyed the song and the flowers, feeling the memory of Howlers crisp away into ash and leave him at peace.

...and they protected each other, and they taught each other, and they lived happily ever after.

Harry very gently closed the book and stared at it a moment. He knew his cheeks were wet, and he was very aware of James's tense, nervous stillness on the other side of the room. He hadn't refused when Harry asked him if he could look at the journal in which he wrote about Harry and Connor each night, but he had hesitated, and hadn't seem that relieved when Harry had told him he'd only wanted to read the retelling of the wizarding legend.

Harry knew the legend, of course, about the wizarding children who had brought the unicorns out of the sun. The original children were brothers, not twin brothers, but the story worked even better when they were. Harry hadn't got used to his name appearing on each page, along with Connor's. He touched the book's cover as if he were touching something sacred.

Or is it that I haven't got used to knowing James cares enough to write about us like that?

He met his father's eyes, and felt a deep, satisfying lurch somewhere in him, as though something in flight had finally settled. He smiled, and for all that James couldn't possibly have known the reason for it, he smiled back.

We'll be all right, Harry thought in wonder. We really will be. Not father and son, but something else. Even friends, maybe.

Harry woke, slowly, and stretched luxuriously. He'd gone to sleep at seven that evening, tired beyond bearing, and though it was five in the morning now, that still meant he'd got ten hours of sleep. He stood and looked through the window of his bedroom briefly, wondering what Draco was doing.

Probably still dead to the world, he had to admit, as he reached out gently towards his sense of Connor's and James's magic. Still in their bedrooms. What had been an oppressive sense of constant presence during the summer was comforting now, even though he'd only been in Lux Aeterna two days. *Draco is not a morning person.*

In a way, it would have been a comfort to have Draco with him now. Harry took a sharp breath as he reminded himself why that was impossible. Draco would never have let him do this.

Fawkes let out a soft noise, and settled gently on Harry's shoulder. Harry scratched his neck. The phoenix ducked his head, and rubbed it against the side of Harry's throat.

I suppose that you have to do this, if you're ready, said Regulus reluctantly.

"I'm ready," Harry whispered aloud. "As ready as I'll get. And I want to. I do have to make up for my stumble with the article, but more than that, I want to know more about myself. Snape and Draco help, but they can't force me to be honest with myself, just with them."

Regulus stayed silent, making his opinion quite clear, but Fawkes crooned and took off, soaring ahead of Harry to his bedroom door.

Harry left his room, and went downstairs, and traveled the appropriate corridors, and opened the right door.

In the room before him, glittering, silver-edged, he felt the Maze's alien awareness open one eye.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Fifty-Three: May The Maze Be Unending

Harry felt sunlight on his face, sunlight shining on his skin, sunlight all around him, as he stepped into the room where the Maze waited. He had seen the artifact before, of course, so he knew what it looked like, but he had never realized, or perhaps just not remembered, that the radiance it shed was this intense.

Or perhaps the radiance really had increased, Harry thought, as he lifted a hand to shield his eyes. Ahead of him, the Maze glittered and twined. The light made it hard to see where one wall slid into another, and Harry no longer thought it looked like a jumper someone had dropped on the floor. It had the look of a restless, surging sea instead, as if he were back on the Northumberland beach and watching the waves dash towards him. The sun somewhat dazzled him and kept him from making out what was foam and what was driftwood, what silver and what white.

On his shoulder, softly, Fawkes began to sing.

The Maze sparked once, as though accepting a reply Harry hadn't been aware he was making, and then some of the silvery lines of light dropped. Harry found that he could walk nearer than he had been able to before, though he still couldn't see very well. He lifted his glasses off and looked at them, but that didn't help, unless he considered his eyes watering an improvement.

He stopped and waited, wondering if he had to give a special signal to approach the Maze. James had spoken of using a mirror and shedding three drops of blood, but in vague terms; he hadn't wanted to reveal much of his time in the Maze, which Harry could understand. Harry could fulfill those conditions easily enough with his magic, if that was what the Maze wanted.

Fawkes's music poured over him, and Harry understood that Fawkes believed the Maze had already accepted, and approved, his intention of approaching it. He did need to show that he was Potter blood, but in the tense, eager awareness the Maze projected towards him, Harry could feel no doubt.

He held up his hand, hardly aware of what he was doing. He felt as if he stood on some high mountain in the sunrise, looking to the east, and the light filled his mind with a golden haze. He felt one of Fawkes's talons score his wrist, and then three drops of blood were shining up at him; he hadn't been aware of starting to bleed, or of the pain. He tilted his hand, and the blood splashed on the floor.

What are you doing, Harry? Regulus whispered.

“I don’t know,” said Harry honestly, and lifted his head as he saw more of the silvery barriers, invisible until now, fall away like folds of gauze, leaving the Maze in all its unwrapped glory.

His steps were soft as he once more approached. He had considered consequences, endlessly, before he stepped into this room. He had known that he might be gone for months, as James had been, though he didn’t really think it likely. According to his father, what had cost him the most time was his refusal to face certain of his mistakes. Harry intended to face them all, as painlessly as he could, because he was willing to accept that he had made them. Besides, he hadn’t lived as long as James had, and his life would take less time to relate.

He could die in the Maze if he refused to go on, but that was simple. He would not refuse to go on.

But now, the thought of consequences tumbled away from him. The Maze was a great and living thing, like the sky, like the sea. Harry felt a kind of vertigo sweep him, as if he were about to plunge off a cliff and into the heart of a fall.

Besides, Fawkes continued to sing, quietly, and seemed to think it was quite a good idea for him to go forward.

In that cocoon of music and light, Harry stepped into the Maze.

It both was and was not what he had expected, Harry realized. He had known he would be in a tunnel of mirrors, and indeed he was. He had expected a floor beneath his feet and curved walls on either side, and that was the way the Maze was shaped. He had thought images would begin appearing on the walls, and that was what happened.

He had not imagined the slight warmth of the floor beneath his feet, as if he walked on silk instead of metal, or the way that pulses of light raced beside him and then trailed away, like constant small sunrises, or the way that Fawkes’s song seemed to soften and calm the extreme edges of the Maze, glittering diamonds that Harry knew could cut him if he tried to climb out.

He walked, and the pulses of light resolved into images.

Harry saw himself at four, almost five, struggling to lift a heavy book. He dropped it, and the crash brought Lily running. Harry sighed as he watched his mother kneel down beside him and give him a smile he knew he would never see again.

“Harry, what have I told you about conserving your strength?” she asked.

“That I should do it.” His younger self looked up at his mother, and Harry was startled. He had not thought his face would look like that. Closed in concentration, he’d expected, but there was an underlying tension to the expression that made him look as if he might burst out in rebellious defiance. *Well, I hadn’t been under the phoenix web for long then*, Harry reasoned. *I probably still had some thoughts of my own close to the surface.*

“Yes, and what else?” Lily prompted.

“That I should decide what’s necessary and what’s not,” said the younger Harry. He looked at the huge book lying on the floor. “And find the best way to do things,” he added, with a sudden weight of inspiration. “Always use what’s around me to my benefit.”

He held out a hand, and struggled for a moment. His magic was no longer as great as it had been when he was younger, Harry decided while he watched, because so much of it had gone tame under the web. But it was great enough to lift the book in the air, wobbling, and return it to its place on the shelf.

Lily smiled at him and stroked his hair. “Good,” she whispered. “That’s good, Harry. When you levitate an object over an enemy’s head and then drop it, that will serve your brother. And you love your brother, don’t you?”

The younger version of Harry turned his head so that it was pressing against his mother’s robe and nodded.

The image dissolved. Harry blinked, unsure why the Maze had wanted him to see that. *I made a mistake trying to put the book away with my hands. Is that it? I had thought I’d forgiven myself for that already.*

The Maze sparked at him. Fawkes’s song rose and dipped, and the answer formed in his head.

No, Harry realized suddenly, with a wave of diamond-like terror rising inside him. *No, the mistake was thinking that that was*

a demonstration of my mother's love for me, when it was nothing more than...training. He knew the names that Snape and Draco and the rest of them would call it, and the Maze could not make him use the word.

But it could dig at his heart, and make him realize that the emotion he'd thought he'd seen his mother expressing in that scene wasn't pride in him as a child, but the kind of pride that a person showed for a well-trained dog.

She didn't love me.

Harry shook his head at once. *I—that's not possible. It's true that her love did me no good, but I know that she believes she loves me. Why would the Maze say that she didn't?*

Silence, and then the light and the song, or perhaps just his own understanding, which was never quiet when he wanted it to be, batted the answer back at him.

Because it's the truth. And the Maze is absolute truth, Light, honesty.

She didn't love me.

Harry felt tears gather like hot dust in the corners of his eyes. He swallowed, once, twice, and no longer wondered at his father's vague hints that he'd often collapsed, vomiting or weeping, and perilously near refusing to go on.

Harry breathed deeply, once and then again, and wrenched himself a step forward in his journey. He had to get along with this, and he could no more question the Maze on this point than he'd been able to question the justice ritual when it took his mother's magic away, or the unicorns.

I...that's true, then, I guess. She never loved me. Maybe she thought she did, or maybe she even did, but it was a different kind of love. Maybe she loved me as a sacrifice. Maybe she loved me as a pet, or a useful object. But not a child. Not a human being.

And Vera had told him that he didn't really see himself as human. That no longer seemed a wonder to Harry.

Harry shuddered once and opened his eyes, refusing to let more tears fall. He knew the truth, then, and he could accept it. There were events in his past that had prepared him to accept it. The revelation, and what it might do to him, mattered little to him next to the ideas he might get from the Maze.

"Thank you," he whispered, and then shuffled along his path. Light ran ahead of him, beside him, around his head, and Fawkes sang.

Harry winced as he watched his seven-year-old self take a tumble from a large rock next to the house in Godric's Hollow. He'd watched several more scenes out of his past, with minor mistakes about himself and the world around him and times that he'd become impatient with Connor or James, but none with the devastating impact of that first image. He had known this one would probably be coming, though, as his mind came alive with memories of things Lily had actually said to him, lessons she'd stated outright.

Harry-the-younger didn't cry; by then, he'd already learned to cast mild hexes on himself and endure pain under a certain threshold, which this easily was. He just blinked and picked himself up, watching the large gash in his knee pool with blood. He didn't know a healing spell, though, and so he did go to find Lily, once he'd checked that Connor and James were flying a kite in the yard and wouldn't see him.

Lily saw him and came over at once, kneeling and extending her wand. A whispered, "*Integro*," and the cut healed. Harry watched her in wonder and silent delight. When his mother cured him like this, he imagined they had a bond, just as they did when she explained the vows he made to Connor to him, or when she impressed on him, again, the need for secrecy and for him to learn as much as he could, even when he was certain that he couldn't learn any more.

"Will I be able to perform healing spells someday?" he asked.

Lily sat back and looked up at him with large green eyes. "You will, Harry," she said gently. "Healing spells would aid the war effort. It's a great advantage to know how to cure yourself on the battlefield. But they're more powerful than the magic you're learning right now. It will take some time."

Harry nodded. Then he thought about another thing. “Can I perform healing spells on my children someday?”

Lily’s face changed so rapidly that Harry-the-elder winced right along with his younger self. He knew what was coming, and he suspected he knew why the Maze had wanted him to see it, and he was filled with an overwhelming, consuming sorrow, and he didn’t know for certain whether it was for himself, or for the boy in the image, or for the woman who actually rose, and put her hand on his shoulder, and whispered what she did to him then.

“Harry, you’ll never have children.”

Harry-the-younger blinked at her. “Why not, Mum?” He rather thought he might want to have children, so that he could teach someone else all the things he was learning. Right now, he had no one to teach, because he had to keep his skills secret, and Lily already knew all his spells and tricks.

Lily gently smoothed his hair. “Because children take time,” she said. “They take almost all your time when they’re little, and they would be little for several years. Do you remember being little for several years?”

“Some of it,” said Harry.

Lily nodded. “And you would have to devote all your time to them, and to your spouse or partner.” She paused, waiting for him to reach the natural conclusion.

Harry could, of course. His vows sang in his head, and he gasped. “I wouldn’t have any time for Connor!”

“Of course you wouldn’t,” whispered Lily. “And it wouldn’t be fair to your spouse or your partner, would it? Just like it wouldn’t be fair to your father if I had someone to serve like you have Connor, and I spent all my time away from him.”

Harry nodded, soberly, understanding now. “Connor has to come first,” he said. “To be his brother and his friend and his guardian. To never let anyone else know that I’m so close to him.” It was permissible for him to only say parts of his vows sometimes, in order to make a point, since he knew them so well in their original form.

“Exactly,” Lily whispered back. “So it wouldn’t be fair to anyone. You couldn’t spend time away from Connor, and a husband or wife would want to know why you were so close to him, and you’d have to break your vow to tell them.”

Harry nodded. “Besides,” he said, wondering why he hadn’t thought about this before, “I’ll probably die protecting Connor, so there wouldn’t be time for children, because I’d be too young to have them.”

Lily hugged him, briefly. “That’s my brave boy,” she said. “Now, go practice the spells in the second book I showed you the other day. I think you’re ready for it.”

Harry nodded happily at her and trotted off. The image wavered into clinging white shreds of mist, and dissolved.

Harry-the-older—no, he was just Harry, just himself, no matter how involved he had been in the consciousness of the child the Maze had shown him—shook his head and closed his eyes.

So, yes, it was a mistake to go on believing her, to think I’d never have a future. In fact, I thought I’d accepted that, since I’m letting myself spend time in Draco’s company instead of driving him away.

I did accept it, didn’t I?

Harry swallowed thickly when he realized that perhaps he hadn’t. When he thought about the future, the first thing that came to mind was duty—maintaining his relationships with his allies, being *vates*, trying to defeat Voldemort or help Connor defeat Voldemort. Look at how easily he’d put Draco aside to come to Lux Aeterna. That had been as big a mistake, in its own way, as getting Skeeter to write the article about his stance towards freedom for magical creatures in the first place. He thought of the future in terms of how he could serve people, and that was the main reason he’d come into the Maze.

Harry sighed, softly, and opened his eyes. *I really have just transferred my longing to serve Connor to my longing to serve other people.*

I’m not sure how I can change it, though. Trying to enjoy myself with Draco and think of a future we can share together will just turn the enjoyment into another duty.

Fawkes trilled at him. Harry smiled faintly. The image of a path appeared in his mind, clear for a moment as the Maze before him was, and he suspected that both of them were pushing at him for a reason. The answer lay somewhere up ahead. The Maze would not only drag him through his mistakes, but make sure that he received the answers he needed.

As long as he could go on facing his mistake.

Harry shot a glance back at the wall where the image of himself at seven had been, and nodded. The Maze had not yet told him that his desire to help other people was a mistake, only certain manifestations of it. So he could keep going, he could face himself, for the sake of other people.

He turned and strode on.

Most of the mistakes after that were the ones Harry expected. Mistakes in spells, in schoolwork, in the efforts he'd made to spare himself notice and give Connor glory in first year. He watched calmly as he lied to Dumbledore after the second time they faced Voldemort together, and pretended that his magic had done nothing to help in the battle. Yes, that had been a mistake. Of course, perhaps telling the truth would only have alarmed Dumbledore and caused the Light Lord to *Obliviate* him, but the Maze was interested in showing him what he had done wrong, not in suggesting fixes for the past.

Fixes were for the future.

Lies, and deliberate attempts to make sure people couldn't hurt him that hurt people in return, and lies of omission, and casting aside attempts to help him. Most of those, Harry thought as he watched the image of himself leaving Malfoy Manor early the summer before third year, he'd accepted just before or after Sirius's death. The destruction of the phoenix web had destroyed a good number of his compelled loyalties to his brother, and learning what Dumbledore and Lily had actually done had inspired him with anger deep enough to reject some of the conditioned ones, too.

He did wince as Sirius slipped steadily under Tom Riddle's control, as he committed suicide, but though he would always mourn Sirius and wish he had seen the signs of something wrong earlier, he knew that had not been his sole fault. He suspected the Maze would have made the memory much more painful for Connor.

To his surprise, though, the next scene that appeared after that one was not, as he'd expected, himself releasing magic outside Lux Aeterna's wards and so summoning the Death Eaters. In fact, he walked for a long time, expecting at any moment that his duels with Rosier or his hiding of his nightmares or his lashing at Umbridge and Fudge with Dark magic would appear, and nothing happened.

The cool light and air of the Owlery opened around him, and Harry saw Rita Skeeter eagerly taking down the article he dictated to blackmail James into dropping his charges against Snape. Harry nodded. It was a mistake because he should have found some better way of handling the situation. Then perhaps he would not have exacerbated the friction with his father so much.

But the image remained steady, and this time the Maze forced Harry to see the widening of Skeeter's eyes as she asked him if he had been abused, and the suspicion that remained in her face when he denied it. Harry's heart pounded loud in his ears as he realized that he hadn't really convinced her, though he'd thought at the time that he had. She still had thoughts of her own on that particular subject, even though she'd said nothing about it since.

Shit. Skeeter might not seek to cause Lily and James harm if she knew about his training in the way that Harry was almost certain Lucius and Narcissa would, but she had the power to make a taint cling to their names, if she only desired it.

If I'd known, Harry thought in misery as the Owlery faded away, *I would have kept my knowledge about her being an illegal Animagus quiet in exchange for her silence on this subject, instead of her writing that article.*

Too late, now. Harry bit his lip until it bled, and moved steadily forward. At least the Maze had made him aware of that vulnerability.

"Thank you," he whispered.

As expected, the Maze did not respond, and as Harry expected, it showed him Grimmauld Place, where he had almost succumbed to the singing creature behind the door—somewhat to his disappointment, it did not show him what the singing

creature actually was—and his driving himself further and further into exhaustion, rendering him near useless to anyone else. He had to wince and stand with his eyes shut for a moment before the image of himself refusing Vera and Peter’s “invitation” to the Sanctuary. The image simply remained still, however, until he opened his eyes and viewed it again. The Maze quite obviously thought he should have gone.

“I wonder if Seers built you in the first place?” Harry muttered as he accepted that he’d made a mistake, and even why he had made it—that he didn’t want anyone seeing him and knowing him that well. “You certainly have enough in common, and Merlin knows you keep making me think of Vera.”

Fawkes’s song turned, and brought back to Harry a memory of James telling him the Maze had come from elsewhere, that certainly no human hand had constructed it, though human wizards might have summoned it here.

Harry nodded. “All right,” he said, and slogged forward grimly through more memories, mostly slight insults done to other people, until he rounded one corner and saw the darkness he had expected ahead. It had a faint silvery sheen to it, like stars. Harry drew in his breath and crossed the final distance between himself and this memory, one he had been dreading.

Once again, he stood just outside the rose garden on Christmas night, and saw himself reach out towards Lily with magic driven by hatred. Harry watched as coolly as he could. It was quite something, to see how feral his eyes were from outside, narrow and nearly empty of sanity. He had come within a hairsbreadth of simply giving himself to the Dark music and exploding outside of all bounds. Of course it had been a mistake. Though it hurt, again, to hear his mother’s words resonate in his ears, he was not surprised that the Maze had chosen to show this to him. He had lain awake in his own bed regretting it enough.

The Maze sparked, and Harry froze, lifting his chin. Once again, as with the image of himself levitating the book, when he had misunderstood what the Maze was showing him, he felt a pendulum of truth swinging and coming in hard at him.

It hit him.

Using magic borne of hatred and pain was a mistake only in the sense that I could have hurt someone else with it. I was mistaken to think that—

No. He couldn’t—that wasn’t true.

Fawkes’s song swelled.

The Maze could not lie. It could no more lie than a justice ritual could, than Seers could, than unicorns could. Doubt that, and he would have to doubt the certainty of all that other magic.

The truth landed in his brain and pushed its way relentlessly forward.

I was mistaken to think that there was any truth in her words at all. I was mistaken to think that my magic is foul, and that other people only tolerate it because they pity me or there’s something foul and twisted in themselves. She is utterly blind to me. She doesn’t understand the person I became. Plant me in front of her and ask her to predict my behavior, and she will be mistaken every time.

She not only never loved me, she has no idea who I am now.

Harry shuddered softly and closed his eyes. Hadn’t he faced this before, with the unicorns? Hadn’t he accepted that his mother was wrong about him? Then why was it so hard for him to face this now?

The truth crawled determinedly out of his thoughts and sat there staring at him until he had to meet its eyes.

I was thinking that she might still be able to know some things about me. She did train me, and I’m still a product of that training. She was wrong about my magic being as foul as dog vomit, but she could be right about the way I’d respond when she asked me a certain question, or how I’ve just changed my desire to serve Connor into desire to serve other people.

I am more than that. I have made mistakes like those, but there is still more to me than those mistakes. None of what she taught me makes me able to hold back from charging to the Ministry prison when people were in danger or to love Draco...

Harry cried out, and the light around him swelled, gorgeous golden-white, and Fawkes’s song soared after it like a comet arcing around the sun.

The Maze had crept up on him with these two truths, perhaps unable to find a single memory that embodied them, perhaps unable to work through the thick intricacies his thoughts twined them in. They were alive in Harry's head now, though, twisting around and braiding with each other like the Many during the hatching of the new hive, and dragging in the first one, so that there were three snakes of truth circled in his head, without beginning and without end.

His mother had been and was wrong about him—so wrong that he did not have to keep thinking he owed her a debt because of all that his training had planted in him.

He was more than a sacrifice. He always had been.

He could love Draco, and in many ways, he already did.

Harry shuddered, barely aware that he'd dropped to his knees on the Maze's floor. Fawkes's song had slowed to a warbling croon, and Regulus was whispering something that Harry couldn't make out under the waterfall-tumble of his own thoughts.

He knew that he was crying. It didn't seem to matter right now.

She can't hurt me again. Never again. That last weapon she had against me, the most potent one, the conviction that I was only worth something if I was helping people, has been taken away.

I cannot stop being a sacrifice all at once. But now I know I can, eventually. It's not the same thing as getting there, but now I know the road exists.

And all those little things like worrying when Draco was angry and preferring him to most people and not wanting him hurt and being able to dare to kiss him back when I would have run away from anyone else are all right, they're perfectly all right, and oh Merlin I was wrong and this is all right and I can have a future I can have a life I can have love...

His breath came and went in sobs. Tears clogged his throat. He knew he was sniffing, and though his hand came up to shield his face and prevent anyone watching from seeing the tears and snot, in response to long-ingrained instinct, he knew that it didn't matter, because everyone here had already seen far more than that.

It was all right. Regulus was not going to betray him. Fawkes was not going to betray him. The Maze had known this was there from the moment he entered, and had given him the ability to see it, too.

Harry slowly stood. As much as the realization had struck him and cracked him wide open, kneeling there would only waste time, and he didn't want to spend months in here. He felt a rushing impatience now, like a warhorse tossing its head and pricking its ears on the edge of battle. He wanted to be out of here so he could continue living, continue accepting the truths the Maze had shown him, and continue—

Oh, Merlin.

Did that mean that *he* could have the same kinds of possibility and freedom that he envisioned for other people? That his will mattered, too, and not just if it was guarding someone else's will or opposing an injustice?

Harry didn't know how long it would last, he suspected it would start fading the instant he left the Maze—the Maze could not *compel* good behavior, or James's resolve would have remained iron—but for just a moment he caught a glimpse of himself as one of those people he admired and valued so much, all the illogic torn, all the ill reasoning gone, able to see himself as human in the way that Vera had said he didn't, and the revelation pierced him like a lance of sunlight.

The vision faded in the next moment, leaving old doubts and uncertainties to plague him, but he had seen it.

Like a vision from a mountain, looking east as the sun rises.

“Thank you,” he whispered, a third time.

The Maze waited, gently, and then led him on through the few minor mistakes he had yet to make, had made, had made and could correct.

Harry felt the Maze exhale around him, and breathe him out. He stood on the other side of it, not such a long distance from the door after all, though there were so many bends in the silvery coils that he knew he could have walked for miles, appearances aside.

The distance he had walked was far longer than that.

Harry turned towards the door, his head light and buzzing with ideas. The Maze had shown him, after the mistake he'd made just spreading all his intentions in front of the world with that article, a path he hadn't considered. After all, if he might be human, if he might have the chance to consider himself so, that might mean that other people would be willing to aid him out of love and loyalty, and not just because they owed him debts or had made bargains with him. And there were rituals he could use working with people in cooperation that he could not if he tried to do everything all by himself, or with just Draco and Snape helping him.

Now that that simple idea had got into his head, he knew a few rituals he could look up that should prove of extreme help in freeing the southern goblins. Slytherin had cursed them, bound their web to the interchange of money. Harry knew he would hardly convince anyone to close Gringotts, but he didn't have to. What he *could* do, with the help of other people to have a chance of equaling Slytherin's web in raw power, was create a substitute for the web to be tied to instead of actually destroying it. It amused him to know that this couldn't be just a Light ritual, even though most cooperative spells were, because he would have to convince the goblins' web that it was still attached to Gringotts even as it fastened to the copy. That would involve subterfuge, and lying, and thus probably some glamours or illusions—Dark magic if one wanted to stretch the definition.

His magic roiled eagerly under his skin, like a school of fish. It wanted to be about creating things. Fawkes trilled as if in agreement.

Harry cast a glance over his shoulder at the Maze, and stopped. He could feel it regarding him—happy, proud, satisfied, and amused at him.

Harry took a deep breath. "Thank you," he whispered, one more time. "I'll try to remember. I don't know if I can—" already the sheer clarity of the memories was rushing away from him, obscured by the mask of time and everyday reality, as visions and inspirations tended to be—"but I'll try."

The Maze gave a soft rumble, like a nundu, and then closed its eyes and went back to sleep. The silvery lines of light sprang up again behind Harry as he made his way confidently to the door.

He opened it, and James grabbed him by the shoulders in a fierce hug, apparently too far gone to remember that they were being careful with each other. "Harry," he whispered. "I didn't know if I was ever going to see you again. You've been gone a week."

A week, only? Better than I could have expected. Harry closed his eyes and leaned against his father, unable to prevent a silly smile from crossing his face. Fawkes flew off his shoulder and soared around them both, trilling.

A week is better than you had any right to expect, Regulus grumbled at him. *You are lucky.*

I am, Harry said. *Merlin, I am, aren't I, Regulus? At least, I feel lucky for right now. I could sing. I wish Draco were here so I could kiss him.*

Laughter swelled in him and bubbled out, and James jerked back, looking startled.

"Sorry," said Harry, smiling at him.

He wasn't that sorry. Oh, yes, there was scolding to come, of course there was, but he could get through it. The Maze had burned away a great deal of the thick ugly foliage on the forest of his mind, and sunlight was falling through the branches, awakening the withered grass, coaxing up young trees in place of the vanquished old ones.

At the moment, at least, the world was heavy with possibility, vivid and young and full of the morning.

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Fifty-Four: Expanding the Covenant

Snape did not like to think of how much the past two days had hurt him, when the term began again and Harry was not there for it.

He did not like to think of it partly because he was bound to start blasting things apart if he did, and partly because he was already busy setting things in motion for vengeance on James Potter, and partly because it was obvious that Draco Malfoy was suffering worse than he was.

Draco had trailed into Potions class that day with eyes so blank that Snape had thought at first he must be sleepwalking. He'd assigned Draco to partner with Blaise Zabini, only to rouse the boy into a screaming temper tantrum, of which the only distinguishable words were "regular partner" and "Harry." Blaise had confessed that Draco had been impossible to live with for the past few days. He was liable to flicker between savage sorrow and equally savage hexing. Snape had given him a Calming Draught and sent him to the hospital wing.

He tried to imagine what had happened, and wound up setting those thoughts aside, too. What mattered was dealing with what Harry had left behind—a thoroughly shattered Draco and a brother who had returned to school saying he had no idea where Harry had gone.

And James Potter, of course—James Potter who had responded to Snape's letters about Harry by turning post owls away from Lux Aeterna.

Snape wondered if he was thinking of taking vengeance because it was the easier course, but then pushed it aside, because that was of a piece with thinking about how much the last two days had hurt him.

He was checking the temperature of the potion he'd chosen as the first part of his revenge when someone knocked on the door to his office. "Come in," Snape snapped, not looking away from the potion. When it bubbled, then he would be able to dip out a vial of it and douse the fire under the cauldron, but he had to watch for the *exact* moment when it bubbled. This was probably only a student come for a detention, anyway, which made it less important than this was.

The potion bubbled. Snape dipped out his vial, and then flicked his wand to douse the fire and turned to deal with his erring student.

Harry bit his lip and looked up at him. "Um, hi," he said.

Snape cast a spell that should remove a glamour. Harry remained stubbornly the same. He cast one that should dispel the solid illusions that Harry had used before to trick him and Draco. Nothing happened. He murmured, "*Legilimens*," and found himself pushing into a startled but accepting, and very familiar, mind.

He caught a glimpse of a shining maze of silvery light, and Harry walking along its twists and turns, before Harry gently firmed his Occlumency shields and pushed him out. "I want to tell you about it," he was saying, "rather than just having you read it out of my memories."

Snape came back to himself, and stood breathing for a moment, unable to think of anything else to do. He had been tipped from vengeance, something he understood, to a moment full of violent fear and relief and joy. He wasn't used to being here. What was the right course of action?

Harry settled that by moving forward and embracing him. "I missed you," he muttered, in a voice like and unlike his own. The Harry who had left them for the Easter holidays could not have said anything like this. "I'm sorry that I caused you so much worry, but I honestly thought I needed to enter the Maze. And it did work. I know what to do next, and it helped me and healed me and—" Harry let out a sharp breath and shook his head, a movement that Snape felt against both his chest and his arms. His arms had somehow risen without his own volition and settled themselves around Harry. "It left me this way," Harry said, and moved forward and lifted his head so that Snape could see his face again.

His eyes shone. There were lines of relaxed tension around Harry's forehead that Snape had never thought to see relax in his lifetime. He gave a smile, and it was the smile of someone who had witnessed something very good and great.

Snape stared some more, and was about to speak when a burst of light came into being above Harry's shoulder. Fawkes appeared and landed there, his head twisted as he combed his feathers with his beak. Then he seemed to notice Snape for the first time, and gave a casual trill.

“Fawkes bonded with me,” said Harry, as if that were the most normal thing in the world, and stroked the phoenix’s shoulder affectionately.

Snape spent a moment waiting for the boulder to fall. His life did not change this way, moving towards joy. There had to be a counterweight. Perhaps his left arm would begin to burn in a moment, announcing the Dark Lord’s full return to strength.

But Harry smiled at him, and Snape found his tongue.

“You stupid, idiotic, imbecilic, moronic, idiotic—“

“You said that one already,” said Harry, and had the audacity to laugh at him.

“You did not tell me about entering this Maze!” Snape roared, finding his tongue at last. Vaguely, he was aware of raising his voice, which he normally never did. Mostly, he was just aware that Harry appeared to be merrily mocking his fine display of temper. “You did not tell me that you intended to endanger your life and sanity and disappear for what could have been months!”

Harry eyed him patiently. “Of course I didn’t,” he said. “You wouldn’t have let me go to Lux Aeterna if I had.”

“That is not the point!” Snape hissed, finally getting control of his voice. “Do you know what it did to those of us you left behind, those of us who had no way of knowing what happened and no reason to believe you would ever return? I am badly off enough—“ the admission burned his tongue, but he knew what he had to say next would shatter any concern just for him in Harry’s mind “—but Mr. Malfoy is in the hospital wing, and even your brother goes about as pale as if he had just realized his own stupidity.”

Harry’s grin disappeared. “Draco’s in the hospital wing?”

“Of course.” Snape folded his arms. “You did not believe he was here? He would not have let me speak with you so long without interruption, but sprung on you and perhaps done something unforgivable, or Unforgivable.” He shuddered slightly. He did not wish to be there to see the two boys’ reunion. He was sure it would be even more emotional than this one, and this one was already too much so.

“I—I didn’t know.” Harry turned distractedly for the door, obviously meaning to burst through it at once and pester Madam Pomfrey for permission to see Draco.

“Harry.” Snape reached out and caught the shoulder Fawkes wasn’t sitting on. Harry turned and looked up at him.

Snape took a deep breath, and burned his own tongue again. “I was worried about you. I missed you. I am glad that you found peace and happiness in your Maze, but you could have told us that that is what you were seeking.”

“You wouldn’t have let me go.” Harry gave a fretful tug against the hand on his shoulder.

Snape ruthlessly buried any hurt that caused him, making himself remember that Harry had hugged him of his own free will. “Perhaps not, but you might have been able to persuade me. And as I do not enjoy feeling constant worry like that and having my ability to work destroyed,” he said, moving back onto territory he understood. “You will have detention every Tuesday and Thursday night for the rest of the year, starting at eight o’clock.” At least then he knew where the boy would be for a few hours a few times a week.

“Professor Snape—“

“In this matter, I am not your professor,” Snape interrupted. “I am your guardian. And I do not wish you to think that I will simply nod and stand back while you risk your life.”

“I’ve never thought that,” Harry muttered, and gave another little tug towards the door.

Snape restrained him. “And what did you believe would happen when you came out of the Maze? Or what did you think would happen if you died there, and never returned, and we did not know what had occurred?”

“I—“ Harry’s exuberance dimmed for the first time, and he lowered his eyes. “I didn’t know,” he whispered. “I thought I needed to find some solution to my problems in freeing the magical creatures, and I didn’t think beyond that. I’m sorry.”

“You must accept some restraint,” Snape said quietly. “If it is the restraint of those who care about you, that makes it more precious than the impersonal grip of hands which do not.” That was something Dumbledore had told him long ago, and though the man had altered, that saying was still wise. “I have asked for promises from you, Harry, and you have broken them. I have trusted to your own emotions to restrain you, and they have not worked. Your other emotions, the ones that tell you you must be a sacrifice to be worth something—“

“The Maze taught me I didn’t,” Harry whispered, and lifted his head to smile at Snape through tears in his eyes. “I’m going to have trouble remembering that, but I can think about it now, since I just came out of the Maze. It showed me that I didn’t have to be a sacrifice, and that my own life is just as important as other people’s lives. If I can keep hold of that, I can live a very different life.”

Snape closed his eyes, and this time he was the one who pulled Harry close to him and held him there, making Fawkes utter an indignant little squawk and vanish. Harry remained obediently still for a moment, even hugging back, before he wriggled. “I should go to Draco,” he whispered.

Snape nodded, and let him go. “You did not see him when you came through the Floo in the hospital wing?” he asked, because it still seemed strange.

Harry blinked. “Oh. We didn’t return by Floo. Dad Apparated me to Hogsmeade, and we walked from there.” He held up a hand before Snape could say anything, and went on, “And I know that you think this is his fault, somehow. It’s not. He didn’t know I was going to go into the Maze, and neither did Connor. I never mentioned it. Please don’t take vengeance on him for this.”

For this. Snape grabbed hold of and treasured that phrase. In a way, it was easy for him to promise this. The notion that James Potter had no connection to Harry’s face looking as if he’d bathed in sunrises was pleasing. “I promise,” he said gravely. “And now, go see Draco. He is longing to see you.”

Harry gave Snape a quick nod and smile, and then slipped out of his office.

Snape turned towards his cauldron, and looked at it and the vial of the potion in his hand.

He waved his wand, and Vanished both.

If he was going to keep his word to Harry, better that he did not have such a temptation nearby.

He kept his glance away from the locked desk in a corner of his office, too, because there the temptation was greater still, inspired anew each time he looked at another memory in the Pensieve Potion.

Snape shook his head and forced the thoughts away for one night. Harry was back, and he was free. That would suffice.

Draco woke slowly. He knew something had changed, that something was right which had been wrong, but the Calming Draught covered his mind with such a maze of oblivion that it took him long moments to force his eyes open and focus his empathy on the new presence in the room.

No, not new at all. Old, and familiar, and beloved.

Draco put out a hand, and felt it claimed and securely held. Another hand touched his forehead, shaking with something that might have been hesitancy or might have been remorse, but it was there. And Draco knew something of what it meant. Harry had not often touched him first.

“Harry,” he whispered, and didn’t make it a question. The Calming Draught was almost gone, he discovered, and his empathy was not swinging wildly now, trying to find its focus, as had happened earlier today. It had its focus. He sat up in bed, slowly, and turned his head, slowly, and opened his eyes, slowly.

Harry jerked his head up. He’d been sitting with it bowed. He looked at Draco now with wide eyes.

“Can you forgive me?” he whispered. “I—“

Draco narrowed his eyes and looked past the words, which didn’t matter anyway, to the emotions. Harry was feeling sorrow

like cool green ivy, but just beyond that was something else, something hardly dimmed, something that—

Draco cried out and put a hand over his eyes as sunlight appeared to explode on his face. Sunrise, from a mountain. Warm sun on deep green leaves. Joy, and wonder, and relief so great that Draco thought he might have fallen into a coma if he'd been near Harry when it was new.

Harry let out a choked laugh and hugged him fiercely. "Yes," he whispered. "I went into the Maze, Draco, and it showed me—it showed me a bunch of things that I never knew were true. That my mother didn't love me." His voice sank on that, as if he hadn't much practice saying it aloud. "That I'm worth just as much as other people. That I don't have to constantly sacrifice myself in order to justify my existence." He faltered and fell silent.

Draco opened his eyes. Harry held and met his gaze. Terror tightened the lines of his face, but that joy still mingled with it, so that Draco thought he might know what it was like to sit on a broom a thousand feet above the ground and then push out and fall into the clear morning air.

"That I love you," said Harry steadily, "and that I can love you."

Draco blinked, rapidly. He hoped that Harry didn't expect him to lean forward or lie back down. He didn't think he could move at the moment, with emotions storming his body like soldiers at a gate.

Harry did it for him, leaning forward and gently kissing him. It was the same sort of light caress that they'd shared on the first day of spring, and Harry blushed fiercely as he pulled back again.

"I shouldn't be doing this, you're sick," he whispered, and eased Draco back so that he lay flat on the bed again.

Draco caught and held his hands, and said, "Madam Pomfrey might not agree, Harry, but for my part, I think you can do it as often as you like."

Harry just muttered something about Malfoys and their notions of mediwizardry, and then squeezed Draco's left wrist and let it go. He left his right hand tangled with Draco's, though. "What happened?" he asked softly. "Madam Pomfrey said you'd gone hysterical."

Draco frowned at him. "You didn't come back, you *prat*. What was I supposed to do, assume you were having a happy holiday somewhere and just forget about you? My empathy went out of control. I was feeling too many emotions and had no place to put them. The worry and the magic combined, and of course they dropped me." He didn't care if he was ranting by the end. Madam Pomfrey's only other patient was a sixth-year Ravenclaw student who'd somehow managed to Transfigure her arm into a chicken wing, and Draco didn't care if he woke her up. He was entitled to shout. Harry had *left* him here, damn it.

Harry frowned at him, and said the last thing that Draco had expected at that particular point in time. "Draco, you can't control your empathy when I'm not around?"

Draco looked the other way. "I didn't say that," he muttered. "I didn't—that wasn't the point of my rant, Harry."

"Answer me, Draco." The grip on his right hand firmed.

"It's a lot easier when you're around," said Draco. "You provide me with a level of familiarity and focus. I'm interested in what you feel, and you have strong emotions, so of course I can concentrate on you. And it's fine at a place like the Manor, where there are only a few people around and I can separate out each person's feelings and learn who they are quickly."

"But in Hogwarts without me," said Harry, not even bothering to let the question trail off. Draco could feel him staring at the side of his head. Having Harry's full attention had always been pleasant for him. He hadn't realized how overwhelming it could be when he didn't want to answer the question.

I don't have to lie here and listen to this, Draco thought abruptly. *He's the one who did something wrong, not me. He's the one who went away and led to this collapse in the first place.* He dragged himself up and narrowed his eyes at Harry. Harry already had his narrowed, so this led to a staring contest for over a minute before Draco shook his head furiously.

"You can't intimidate me like that, Harry," he said. "You left us. You *lied*."

Harry nodded, but his eyes didn't fall and his face didn't look less mulish. "I did," he said. "I was wrong, and I'm sorry for

that. And I thought you were working on controlling your empathy, Draco, so that you didn't need one person near you all the time to act as an anchor. I certainly *believed* that you could distinguish other people's emotions from your own, and even bear them when you were agitated yourself. I suppose I was wrong about that."

Draco winced. "Harry..."

"The Maze changed that for me, Draco." Harry leaned nearer, and Draco squirmed. *Is this the way he feels when everyone in the Great Hall is looking at him? I mean, I've felt it from him, but being stripped naked myself is no promenade.* "I know something, now, about how you might love me, and feel when I'm in danger. That's why I'm more remorseful now than I would have been about this just a week ago. And I know that I love you. That means that I *am* concerned about you, damn it, and what happened to you. Just as concerned, just as worried, and with just as much right to get angry if you let something like this happen to you because you weren't working on controlling your empathy."

Draco swallowed, and tried to keep up the anger. It didn't work that well when he felt as if he were rolling in warmth.

"So," Harry went on, seeming to ignore the change of expression in Draco's face, "I want you to work harder on the empathy. Try to control it when I'm not around the way you would if I were there. Learn to distinguish between other people's feelings and your own. I believe it's changed you, but I don't want it to change you so much that you keep fainting in class." He raised his eyebrows. "That wouldn't really be becoming to a Malfoy, would it?"

Draco flushed at the thought of what his parents would say when they found out he'd fainted in class, and why. "Um," he said. "No."

Harry nodded. "Then I think that you should learn this, Draco. I'll help you."

"I don't want to add another duty to your—"

Harry had the audacity to laugh at him. "Do you even realize what you sound like, Draco?" he said. "Like a Gryffindor trying to convince me he can stand on his own when he's bleeding from both legs."

"I am *no* Gryffindor," said Draco, wincing as he remembered his unsuccessful attempts to get Connor Potter to go away and leave him alone this afternoon. Connor had acted as though *someone* had to be there at Draco's bedside, so it might as well be him. That he'd been doing it out of a sense of obligation to his brother made it intolerable. Draco had finally snarled at him and driven him away, but the length of time it took had also been intolerable.

"Good," said Harry. "So that means that I'll help you learn to control your empathy, then."

Draco blinked. "When did I agree to that?"

"When you didn't speak fast enough to prevent it," said Harry. "And also when you didn't go far enough in your resolve to control it." He gave Draco a stern glance, and stood. There was still a sense of sunshine as he looked down at him, though, and Draco smiled, deeply smug that he'd managed to coax this emotion out of Harry. Harry shook his head at him, and then broke into a reluctant smile himself. "We'll make an excellent empath out of you yet," Harry muttered, as he covered Draco up with one of his blankets.

"Stay here with me," Draco whispered, catching at Harry's wrist.

Harry hesitated, and then shook his head and sat back down. "Just until you fall asleep, then."

It turned out that Draco had wanted Harry to lie down in the bed next to him, while Harry preferred to stay in the chair, and there was a short argument about that. Harry won it by default when his amusement and joy grew so warm that Draco slipped into a half-doze, which gradually turned into real sleep. He felt one hand holding his wrist and the other slipping through his hair to bare his forehead, as though he had a scar there himself. Draco sighed, and reminded himself that Harry was alive and safe and loved him, and let his fears be lulled.

"I should have known."

Harry started and turned around. Connor was standing behind him, arms folded across his chest, shaking his head slowly from side to side.

“I should have known that you would come to his side the moment you got back,” he said.

Harry ducked his head. “I didn’t, at first. I thought he was with Snape, and it took me a little while to find out he wasn’t.” He hesitated, unsure of what to say to his brother. He didn’t know how angry Connor was with him.

“Let’s put it this way,” said Connor. “Your going into the Maze made me frantic, and made Dad frantic, and made the rest of my Easter holiday tense, and lost Gryffindor a hundred points in Potions today, and had me sitting beside Draco bloody Malfoy this afternoon and trying to comfort him.”

Harry blinked at Draco, who had gone to sleep with a faint smile on his lips but didn’t show any sign of relinquishing Harry’s hand. “He didn’t mention that.”

“Yes, well, it was a highly uncomfortable experience for both of us,” Connor snapped. He ran a hand down his face and sighed. “Harry, when are you going to stop doing stupid shite?” he asked wearily.

“I don’t have as much need to do it any more,” said Harry. “The Maze showed me the past, and the present, and it—well. It taught me a lot of things.” He took a deep breath. “Most especially, it taught me that I don’t need to do things like go into the Maze just because it might benefit someone else.”

“That’s why you went into the Maze,” said Connor.

Harry nodded.

“Harry, you don’t have to save the whole bloody world,” said Connor, and then stopped and listened to his own words. “Well,” he conceded. “Maybe you do. But that doesn’t mean you have to do it *alone*.” He turned his head, and his eyes pierced Harry. “Just because not everyone agrees with you about house elves doesn’t mean you’ve lost. Did you know that Hermione and I are both refusing to let house elves clean up after us, and it’s only a matter of time before we make Ron break down and learn the charms that he needs?”

Harry swallowed. “I didn’t know that, no.”

“That’s because you never bloody *ask*,” said Connor. “Bloody Slytherin prat. You just assume you’re alone, and you don’t *ask*.” He paused and studied Harry with a sharp gaze that made him acutely uncomfortable. “So ask from now on, and we’ll be glad to tell you when we think you’re making sense and when you’re being an idiot.”

Harry only nodded again, unable to think of what else he would say.

Connor sighed. “I knew you would come back,” he said. “I tried to tell Malfoy that, but he doesn’t listen to me. Something about only needing to listen to one Potter, and I wasn’t him.”

Harry snorted in spite of himself. Connor squinted at him. “Oh, yes, you think it’s funny,” he said. “That’s because you weren’t here when I was trying to talk to him. Gryffindors and Slytherins can get along fine, I think. It’s just Gryffindors and Malfoys who don’t.”

Harry grinned at him. “Thank you for trying, Connor.”

“Don’t run off like that again, and I won’t have to.”

“I’ll try not to.”

Connor shook his head. “The best I can hope for, I suppose.” He stepped up to Harry and hugged him tightly. Harry hugged him back with one arm, since Draco still wouldn’t let go of his other hand. “And if you tell Malfoy that I came back here to check on him, then I’ll hex you in the Great Hall tomorrow.”

Harry tried to say something, but Connor squeezed him hard enough that he lost his breath, and then left the hospital wing.

Harry leaned back against Draco’s bed, and smiled.

“Mr. Potter. Thank you for coming.”

Harry nodded calmly at Scrimgeour as Snape followed him into the Minister’s office. This was a much larger office than the Head Auror’s had been, Harry thought, but it didn’t really look much different. The broader walls just meant Scrimgeour had more room to hang his photographs and his maps, and to put up a large portrait of a woman with shockingly red hair and direct blue eyes. The witch tilted her head when she saw Harry looking at her, and then stuck her tongue out.

“Don’t mind Grandmother Leonora,” said Scrimgeour, as he stood up and extended his hand. “She was Muggleborn. She couldn’t help it. No notion of proper breeding at all.”

The witch in the portrait made an insulting gesture at him.

“Why do you keep such an ill-bred portrait on your wall?” Snape asked, as he took the chair next to Harry’s. He hadn’t offered to shake hands with the Minister, and Harry didn’t think it wise to press. He did clasp Scrimgeour’s wrist, and then sat down in his own chair as Scrimgeour limped back to his desk. Percy Weasley sat at a smaller one behind him, scribbling something furiously. Now and then he lifted his head and peered at them like a rabbit looking out of its hole.

“I like her,” said Scrimgeour. “Reminds me that I’m human, sometimes, no matter how high and mighty I become.” He turned his mild gaze on Harry. “And I think that you’re here for the same reasons, aren’t you, Mr. Potter?”

Harry took a deep breath. He’d asked for a face-to-face meeting, knowing it would be difficult, but unable to believe that he could say the kinds of things he needed to say in a letter. Before the Maze, he knew, he would have found this much harder.

“I am, Minister,” he said. “I have to know if you’re my enemy now, and if so, what the means for the cause of the magical creatures of Great Britain.”

Scrimgeour lifted an eyebrow. “I wouldn’t have minded if this were just another of Tybalt Starrise’s wild schemes, you know,” he said. “Or if Umbridge had pushed far enough to lose her friends, and leave herself vulnerable to her enemies *in the Ministry*. But you are outside the Ministry, Potter, and, traditionally, it’s been a very bad thing for my poor Ministry when a wizard with Lord-level power starts manipulating people inside her.”

Harry nodded, once. “You’ve got to know that I won’t stop, sir,” he said quietly. “I want the anti-werewolf laws utterly gone. I want the webs that enslave the house elves and all the others gone. I’m perfectly willing to wait as long as I have to, but that’s for the cause of making sure other people’s free will is intact, not for making sure I comply with Ministry laws.”

Scrimgeour leaned back and steepled his fingers. His yellow eyes were calm. “Why you, Potter? Why have the magical creatures chosen you as their champion? Or why did you choose to champion them?”

“It’s both,” said Harry, with a shrug. “Partly, of course, they need a powerful wizard to fracture the webs, and neither Dumbledore nor Voldemort are going to do it without making some bargain that would leave them worse off.” He suppressed a groan of frustration when everyone in the room twitched at Voldemort’s name. *Really, it’s just a word!* “And partly, I want to see them free.” He took a deep breath. *Courage. You can do this.* “I love free will, Minister. I love the idea of giving as many people as I can as many possibilities as I can.”

“You could do that without freeing the magical creatures.” Scrimgeour tilted his head. “In fact, some people might say that you could do it better by leaving the magical creatures tied in their webs. That way, there’s no chance of, say, someone getting crushed by a giant’s club, or raped by a centaur, unless they actually go to the places where those creatures live.”

Harry winced. *The centaurs are going to be problematic, too, aren’t they?* “Sir, I don’t understand. What do you—“

And then he paused. They were using different definitions. He had never realized they would cause so much trouble.

“Sir,” he said, “I consider the magical creatures people as much as I do wizards and witches. I think that might be the difference between us. You see your primary responsibility as being to humans. I see it as being to everyone. Of course the Ministry should provide services for them—that’s what it says it does, anyway—but I think the services should be of the same kind as the ones it gives to humans.” Harry leaned forward, feeling his heart bound and surge while Scrimgeour stared at him. “Don’t just ‘control and regulate’ werewolves, for example. Give them the resources to bring someone who hurts them for being werewolves to trial. Don’t just talk to the goblins, but negotiate with their *hanarz* as if she were a powerful witch or the leader of a foreign country. That’s what I want to see happen, and what the Ministry really should want to make happen, since it claims to serve the wizarding *world* and not just wizards. You’re not just Minister of witches and wizards, sir. You’re Minister of centaurs and house elves and merfolk and unicorns and all the rest. Expand the covenant you’ve made

with yourself and your duties. It's easy enough."

Scrimgeour went on staring at him. Then he said, "Mr. Potter, what you are asking is—" He went still, and looked at the far wall. Percy had stopped even pretending to scribble, and watched them openly.

"Big, I know," said Harry. "But it's really something that should have happened already. Think about it, sir." He could feel his impatience stretching, and forced himself to sit on it. He couldn't hurry Scrimgeour. Bad things happened when he did. "You want the Ministry to live up to its potential, its claims. It claims that it regards magical creatures just the same as wizards and witches. Everyone knows that's not true, but it *sounds* good, and there hasn't been a Minister who was concerned about making that part of its reputation true. You could be the first." He smiled as Scrimgeour glanced sharply at him. "And, yes, of course I'm saying that because I want them free. But if you want your Ministry to be everything it says it is, then I think you have to be willing to make those empty promises real."

Scrimgeour closed his eyes and held still for a long moment. Then he said, "We have wandered a long way from the original discussion of your manipulating people in the Ministry, Potter."

Harry shrugged. "This is the cause for which I'm most likely to manipulate them, Minister. Ministry laws about most of the creatures are outdated and ridiculous. As for Umbridge, she was part of the reason that I was sent to the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures to register myself as a Parselmouth. Putting her in charge of negotiating with them and protecting them was especially ridiculous. Of course I was going to strike back at her, to protect my allies and myself, but I didn't see any reason to stomp in with magic flaring around me. There are subtler ways."

"You are telling me that you would oppose me," said Scrimgeour.

"If you keep on going the way you have been." Harry met his eyes evenly. Snape was tense beside him, but he had not interfered. Harry was glad. "Minister, the world is going to change around me. I've finally accepted that. I want to change so much for magical creatures that the ripples are going to spread from that and affect other things and people in the wizarding world, no matter how much I might want to confine them. This is revolution. I'm going to try and make it as graceful and gentle a revolution as I can, but it's coming. I know that you have the ability to guide the Ministry through that intact. I'd be sorry to lose you as an ally. But I would rejoice if you could set the Ministry flowing with this new current."

Scrimgeour blinked several times. Then he closed his eyes, and said, "This is a grander vision than anything I came into office with."

Harry bowed his head, struck by the honesty of the admission. "I understand that, sir. I'm asking you to look beyond the Ministry and think even more about the wizarding world. But your people and your laws are all part of this. They're going to shift, and I think it should be a guided shift. And you'd be the best guide I know."

Scrimgeour sighed. "To make such a change, at my time of life," he said.

But Harry heard the undertone in his voice, and found a smile spreading across his face. Scrimgeour wasn't completely convinced, not yet. He would probably still hate Harry telling anyone in the Ministry what to do. But the vision had caught him. He was not the sort of person who ran from a problem. He made the impossible work when he thought it needed to, like keeping Harry from simply being returned to his parents once the *Fugitivus Animus* spell ended. And now Harry had fascinated him with this impossibility, and he wanted to see what he could do to make it work.

"The whole wizarding world is going to change, sir," said Harry. "And I think it'll take many years, longer than I'll live, even. But you can help start it."

Scrimgeour laughed abruptly, a deep and joyous sound. "Tybalt Starrise was in here babbling about revolution," he said. "I didn't listen to him. I owe the boy an apology for that, though not for threatening to curse me into invisibility and silence if I didn't stop questioning him."

Harry rolled his eyes. *Tybalt, honestly*. "To slow revolution, then, sir?" he asked, holding his hand out.

Scrimgeour met his eyes and clasped his wrist firmly. "Indeed," he said. "Merlin knows how we're going to do it, Potter, but you've convinced me that we're going to do it."

Harry caught a glimpse of Percy Weasley's face as he stood, and smiled to himself. Percy was caught between fiercely conflicting emotions, obviously. But then his shoulders straightened, and he gave Scrimgeour the look of someone who would follow him to the ends of the earth if necessary.

I'm glad that he has something of his own, now, and not just loyalty to Dumbledore, Harry thought, as he nodded to Scrimgeour and followed Snape out of the room. He switched the path of his thoughts then. He was wondering why his guardian had been so quiet during the conversation, when quite a bit of it must have been surprising for him.

“Sir?” he asked, and Snape looked at him. “Do you think that what I’m doing is mad?”

“No,” said Snape. “I could see where you would lead us, into revolution, as early as second year, and I made the decision to follow you then.” His voice was tranquil, though his eyes reflected a bit of amusement.

“Second year?” Harry tried to think of a time when he might have shown Snape a glimpse of the future in between being possessed by Tom Riddle and going mad, and couldn’t identify it. “*How?*”

“Some people see with clearer eyes than others, Harry,” said Snape, like the smug bastard he was, and then ushered him ahead of him and out of the Ministry, refusing to answer any more questions.

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Fifty-Five: Down, and Down, and Down

Harry dreamed.

“I am well pleased with you, Fenrir.”

“Thank you, my lord.”

Harry edged forward, light on his paws, watching every moment for some sign of a snake or Rosier. However, he could see only the man who must be Fenrir Greyback, in human form, kneeling in front of Voldemort’s divan with a look of adoration on his face. This was the same room Harry had seen once before, from which Voldemort had sent Rosier to attack Lucius Malfoy. Harry stopped when he was next to the divan. Not only might Voldemort see him if he came around it, but Harry might see him, and he had no desire to do that.

Greyback sat on his heels and looked up at his master. Harry could see that his hair was heavily streaked with gray and hung in front of his face; his body was powerfully muscled, and his teeth were yellow. Harry bared his own teeth and spat a bit. Greyback looked far more like a werewolf than Remus did, but the comparison was flattering to Remus, not the other way around. Along with the wildness came a sense of mindless brutality, as though Greyback would be as likely to savage someone important as obey a plan.

“Fenrir has accomplished his mission,” Voldemort announced in his high, cold voice to the rest of the room. “The three Light families who thought to defy me in secret have been taught how futile it is to oppose me.”

Harry felt his heart bound, once and hard. It didn’t sound as though the Ministry had managed to alert the right families when Greyback came hunting on the full moon, then.

“That is assuredly good news, my lord,” said Rabastan, moving into sight and then kneeling. “What are their names, if a servant may be so bold as to ask?”

Voldemort must have made some motion for Greyback to answer, because he did in a low snarl. “Gloryflower. Griffinsnest. Opalline. They had been persuaded to withdraw from the war, but still they would not give up less active means of defiance. Now, when they have werewolves of their own—in the family, so to speak—to deal with, they will know the weight of my lord’s hand.” Greyback grinned, and then laughed, a laugh that trailed off into a howl.

Harry carefully committed the names to memory. He did not know any of the families personally, but he recalled Tybalt Starrise saying that his father had been a Griffinsnest. Perhaps he could use Tybalt as a contact to send the victims the Wolfsbane Potion they would need.

“But what is this, Fenrir?” Voldemort was apparently trying to sound playful. He only sounded like a half-strangled child, Harry thought. “You did not deliver all the bites yourself? You left part of the work up to someone else?”

“Yes, my lord,” said Greyback, sounding unabashed. He reached out a hand towards a darkened corner of the room, and a woman Harry hadn’t smelt before under Greyback’s musk approached him. “Meet my consort, Cynthia Whitecheck.”

Whitecheek knelt in front of Voldemort, her golden eyes upturned to him. Harry felt himself twitch at the sight of her. She had a fixed stare, only slightly less mad than Rosier's, and her movements were quick and lithe and too graceful, a predator's. Her heavy brown hair swung to one side, and revealed that her right ear was missing, evidently chewed off.

"You have not come to my side before," said Voldemort.

"I would have, my lord," said Whitecheek in a murmur, "but I was but newly turned that horrible night of your fall, and then I fell prey to the deceptions of Light wizards and Ministry officials for a time. Fenrir was the one to convince me that that defiance of their senseless edicts, not submission, was the best course of survival." She leaned against Greyback and closed her eyes. Greyback licked her cheek.

Harry grimaced. *More werewolves. Great. Is he building a pack?*

"Then welcome, Cynthia Whitecheek," said Voldemort. "I shall test you for loyalty later." Whitecheek merely nodded, and then crawled backward into her corner again. Voldemort turned and studied Rabastan. "And the books?" he demanded, voice turning into a hissing lisp. "You have the books for me?"

"We do, my lord," said Rabastan, inclining his head. "They were not as well-guarded as we assumed, and a single raid managed to snare them all."

Voldemort laughed. Harry winced. His scar felt like a burning brand. "Excellent," he said. "Meanwhile, Bella proceeds in her incantations, and our long wait is nearly done." Then he paused, and both the Death Eaters Harry could see seemed to shiver, as though Voldemort's expression had changed. "We have a matter of great importance to attend to now," he said, and raised his voice. "Walden, bring us the traitor."

A burly Death Eater Harry suspected was Walden Macnair dragged someone else into sight. Harry couldn't make out who it was until Macnair flung him on the floor in front of Voldemort.

Evan Rosier pushed his hair out of his eyes and raised his brows. "What is this, my lord? I was napping. I was also dreaming of a pie, a most delicious blueberry pie, and I was about to eat it."

"You are a traitor, Evan," said Voldemort, enunciating every word like a tap on a drum made of glass. "I know that you have been writing to Harry Potter and to Severus Snape. You have sent them information." His voice altered further, and Harry laid his ears against his head in protest of the pain. "You will tell me what you have told them, and immediately."

"I would rather that you pulled the information from my mind, lord," said Rosier. "That way, you may trust to its accuracy." He fluttered his eyelashes and leaned forward to lock gazes with the Dark Lord.

Harry watched as Rosier remained, motionless, like that, not giving the slightest wince, though he was sure Voldemort had accepted the invitation. At last Rosier sagged slightly, and Harry waited in the tense silence that followed for some declaration of death, or at least maiming. He was not sure that he should stay here to watch that, and not just because Rosier had demonstrated some ability to see him in the last vision.

Then Voldemort began to laugh.

Harry cowered. This was worse than the last time, and not least because the other Death Eaters joined in—except Rosier. He kept hopeful eyes fixed on Voldemort's face, stroking his left arm as if caressing the Dark Mark, but had only a small, tranquil smile.

"Are you going to kill me, my lord?" he asked. "Will it be in an exciting way? Please tell me it will be exciting. I all but perish from boredom here."

"I can see that you do, Evan," said Voldemort, wrestling his merriment back under control at last. "And you have been playing a game."

"Everything," said Rosier, his eyes flashing intently, "is a game."

"Nevertheless," Voldemort said, as if he hadn't heard him, "this is a game that benefits me. So I will allow you to continue. Do speak your mind on paper to Harry Potter and Severus Snape. They will never learn the rules of your game until too late, and if my enemy and his pet traitor shiver in anticipation of their inevitable end, so much the better."

Rosier simply inclined his head, and then stood and moved behind the divan. He promptly grinned and waved at Harry.

Harry crouched, ready to rip out of the dreamscape, but Rosier didn't alert anyone else to the fact that he could see him. He just moved his lips, mouthing several words so quietly that Harry knew no one else would see them if they weren't looking at his face.

"I am mad because I see what's really there."

He turned away after that, and ignored Harry entirely. Harry shivered and returned his attention to Voldemort, though he kept one ear cocked for the sound of Rosier whispering his name or location to someone else.

"The time of waiting is nearly done," said Voldemort, "the time when we wake the sleeper and set our plans in motion. However, before that, there is one more great opportunity to raise our power. The night will be wild. I wish you to be on hand with some of the treasures that you brought us from the Ministry, Walden. Capture as much magic as you can."

"My lord," said Macnair with a bow.

The night will be wild, Harry thought. What night does he mean?

Abruptly, the answer occurred to him. *Walpurgis. Walpurgis Night is coming up, and there will be wild Dark magic there.*

He could not tell exactly what Voldemort planned to do, but he knew that he had heard enough information for now—especially as Rosier was now crossing his eyes at him, and someone would be sure to notice any moment.

Harry jumped and lunged, and the dream fractured around him. This time, he didn't hesitate before he found parchment and quill and began writing a letter to Tybalt Starrise. He did have to swat at the blood that ran down his face from his scar, but that was just so that he could see.

Maybe he can help, maybe he can't, but at least he might act as my go-between. No one will suffer unduly from being a werewolf if I can help it.

This time, because he knew what to look for, Harry saw the stirrings of Walpurgis Night before they properly began. A few days before, most of the students in Slytherin were lifting their heads higher, answering questions in class more crisply than usual, and laughing for no particular reason at meals and in hallways between classes, their faces bright with undefined excitement. Harry saw Pansy clutching her books to her chest and smiling as they walked to Defense Against the Dark Arts, and abruptly decided that he might as well talk to her. She might know more about mysterious magic than most of the students, since her father was a necromancer.

"Just a minute," he mumbled to Draco, and broke away to talk to Pansy before Draco could react.

Pansy looked up as Harry neared her, and her face rearranged itself in a mask of respect. Harry smiled slightly. Most of the Slytherins had reacted like that since he came back from the Maze. They could feel his new sense of self-direction, if nothing else, Harry thought, and there had been no more Dumbombs in his bed, though Howlers were still a daily occurrence.

"Pansy," he said, "do you know what kind of artifacts someone would have to use to capture magic on Walpurgis Night?"

To his surprise, her face turned utterly pale, and she snatched his wrist in one hand and dragged him a short distance away from the flood of students. Curious eyes turned towards them, as they always did towards Harry, but Pansy gave them a glare that would have done Medusa credit and got them to look away.

"Where did you hear that?" Pansy whispered. "What do you think you're doing, Potter?"

"I'm not going to do it," said Harry, shaking off her grip. *I understand her panic, but there's no reason to let her hurt me.* "I've received information that indicates Voldemort's going to try, though."

Pansy's face gained a high tinge of color along the cheekbones. "It should be impossible," she whispered. "But the Ministry's always meddling with things they shouldn't be, and if he got a hold of some of the devices they have..."

“We think that’s it,” said Draco over his shoulder. Harry reached back and held his hand. Draco gave him a reprimanding squeeze on his wrist. After all, Harry had told him about the dream, so, said the squeeze, there was no reason to try and talk to Pansy in private. “Through Walden Macnair, he has some, but we don’t have any idea what they are or what they do.”

“This is bad,” Pansy muttered. “If he does try to capture the magic on Walpurgis itself, then he’ll disturb the natural order of things. That magic is always supposed to be free, and you don’t *control* it. That’s the point. That’s what makes Walpurgis different from other holidays. You go dancing naked in the wildness and trust the magic to take care of you.” Pansy closed her eyes and stood still for a long moment. “I’ll have to talk to my father,” she said at last, shoving away from the wall. “I know that it’s bad, and why, but I don’t know what the actual consequences would be.” She locked eyes with Harry. “You’re absolutely sure of this information?”

Harry couldn’t blame her for distrusting him. He took a deep breath and lifted his fringe, tracing the lightning bolt scar with one finger and watching as Pansy’s eyes widened. “I’m very sure,” he said.

Pansy locked her mouth into a thin line. “I don’t know all your secrets, Potter, and I don’t want to know them,” she said. “But I’ll do what I can.” She turned and almost ran down the corridor, calling over her shoulder, “Tell Professor Karkaroff that I’m sick and won’t be able to attend class today.”

Harry nodded, and ushered Draco along. Draco did give him a punch on the shoulder before they entered the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, though.

“I already know everything,” he whispered. “You could have just taken me along to talk to Pansy in the first place.”

Harry gave him a faint smile and a shrug. As the days slid past since the Maze, the answers he had received there had lost some of their power. Most of the time, he still remembered—as he had when he told Draco immediately about the dream—but old habits were reasserting themselves.

“Potter, a moment, please.”

Harry turned, and forced himself to wait patiently. Over the two months since Moody had been exposed as Mulciber, he and Karkaroff had had several of these little chats. Draco would linger near the door, as much to make sure no one else would come in as to oversee Harry. Karkaroff had his hands folded in his sleeves this time, and was shivering, making Harry sure that something about this conversation was unusual even before he began.

“I plan to attend the celebration of Walpurgis Night,” said Karkaroff, letting the sentence fall like a hammer. “Do you believe that I would be welcome there?”

Harry opened his mouth as he thought about it. He knew that many others would distrust a former Death Eater, especially one who had such a reputation as a coward. On the other hand, from what he knew, Walpurgis was a celebration for any Dark wizard, regardless of his affiliation. Certainly, the witches and wizards who had not been Death Eaters had not flinched last year from the ones who had been.

Harry looked into his eyes and gave a small shrug. “I think the magic would welcome you, sir,” he said. “Perhaps not all the other celebrants, but who cares about them?”

Karkaroff didn’t look reassured. “That was what I meant, Potter,” he said, leaning nearer to whisper urgently. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Draco take a few steps closer. “I told you once that you are one of the two wizards setting Dark magic on fire all across Europe. You...know who the other is.” He shivered again, and his hand hovered protectively over his left forearm. Harry inclined his head in a short nod. “I need to know if you think I would be safe there. This Night will already be wilder than the others. I can feel it.” Karkaroff bowed his head and said no more.

Harry blinked. *Is that the reason I’m sensing it so much more than I did last year? I thought it was just familiarity and the anxiety of thinking about what Voldemort might do, but maybe I am sensing something that wasn’t there before. Of course, if Dark magic is really on fire, in Karkaroff’s words, then it might be more violent than last year.*

Hesitantly, Harry reached out towards the Dark music for the first time. He had a sense the song was always there, not just when webs were tearing, but most of the time, he didn’t try to hear it.

Now, though, he did, the chorus echoing in his ears the moment he reached for it, and he knew at once that something had

changed. The music had always been frenzied, but now it played so fast that Harry could barely distinguish individual notes. Throats screamed it, and Harry could hear the voices changing often. It sounded as though the singers were frequently collapsing in exhaustion, while others took their places.

Or they are dying, Harry thought, queasily, and fixed his eyes on Karkaroff's face.

"I can't say that it's safe," Harry whispered. "But then, I don't think that this holiday was ever safe. It's wilder this time, though."

Karkaroff gave a choked little sound, and bowed. "I shall rethink whether I want to attend, then," he whispered back. "Thank you."

Harry nodded to him, and then stepped out of the classroom. Draco's hand was firm on his shoulder, and he said, "I saw your face, Harry. You think there's some danger on Walpurgis, something even stronger than what the Dark Lord's planning, don't you?"

Harry nodded, though he checked up and down the corridor automatically to make sure that no one was near them. Draco rolled his eyes at him. "I already did that, Harry," he said. "Now. Tell me about this. What's the matter?"

"Wild music," said Harry. "Dark magic isn't just singing, this time, it's *screaming*. Something is going to happen on Walpurgis that I don't think Voldemort is controlling, just planning for." He squashed the yearning he could feel in his heart to give himself over entirely to the music. That was not a strong temptation for him any more, not since Christmas night and the last time it had been, but still... The vision of what it must be like to dance along to this kind of music was imperative, tugging at him.

"But you plan to attend the celebration anyway," Draco finished in a resigned tone.

Harry nodded at him. "I do. I'm sorry. I know that you don't like it, and that you won't go with me—"

Draco snorted at him. "I *am* coming with you."

Harry frowned. "Why?" And then he felt stupid at the look that Draco gave him.

"To protect you, of course." Draco linked his hands together behind Harry's head and briefly drew his face to his, so that they rested forehead to forehead, in a gesture he'd been using lately. Harry almost thought Draco was trying to take some of the pain away from his scar. "I am never letting you walk alone into danger again if I can help it. And this time, since you've done me the courtesy of letting me know about it in advance, I can help it."

"You're an empath," Harry whispered in concern, "and this night is wild. Are you sure that you can stand it?"

Draco gave a half-bitter, half-wry smile. "I'm a better-trained empath now, thanks to you," he said. "And yes, I'll stand it. I trust *you* to protect *me* if something goes that badly wrong." He gave Harry's head a little shake. "We protect each other, Harry, remember? The shielding doesn't just go all one way. I *know* that you learned that in the Maze, and I'm not about to let you forget it."

Harry nodded, and they stood there like that for a moment more before the hallway filled with hurrying students. Harry slipped away from Draco before murmuring, "Come on, let's see what Pansy's found."

Draco held his left arm lightly as they sped back to the Slytherin common room. Harry didn't have the heart to tell him that he was holding it in the exact place where the Dark Mark would be put on, if Harry was ever to be branded like that.

On the other hand, he thought, as Draco's thumb ran over the skin, *his father wears one. Perhaps he does know.*

"He says it's bad, Harry."

Pansy kept her voice low. They were sitting in a corner of the Slytherin common room, not far from the fire that Pansy had used to speak to her father. She'd been done before Harry and Draco arrived, but even though the conversation hadn't been long, it had obviously shaken her. She clasped her hands together, and her gaze couldn't seem to rest on one spot for long, darting around in dizzy, butterfly-like circles.

“Voldemort could try to take some of the magic that naturally runs free on Walpurgis Night,” Pansy whispered, “the magic of dead witches and wizards which comes back to us. There are—boxes—that will let him do that. My father hates them. He speaks to the dead and moves freely among them, and he hates the thought of anyone caging them. He says it’s a slim chance that Voldemort could actually *use* that magic, but even his trying to capture it will be like breaking a dam and causing a flood. And the magic is already wild.”

“Did he say why that is?” Harry asked, wondering if he could calm down the magic in any way when Walpurgis happened.

Pansy gave him a level glance. “There are two Lord-level Dark wizards in Britain right now, Harry,” she said. “The magic is *excited* about that. It’s going to dance around you and—the Dark Lord both, and be attracted to you, and try to be friends with you, as my father put it. But this is Walpurgis, and that means the magic is strong not in the sense of compulsion or deception or solitude, but in the sense of wildness, like it was with the dragons in the First Task. So an attempt to control it is going to distort that naturalness, and anger the magic. And this on a night when it’s *already* wilder than normal because it’s so excited.” She took a deep breath and clasped her hands until her knuckles whitened. “My mother doesn’t think you ought to go to Walpurgis, Harry.”

“And your father?” Harry asked.

“He says you should go,” Pansy murmured, bowing her head. “He says that you have to be there as a counterweight, to keep the magic from hurting other people. But he also says that the distortion is so great that this isn’t going to be a normal Walpurgis. He doesn’t know *what* the hell is going to happen when we start trying to travel to the silver fire. The rituals that normally happen won’t, because the magic is shaking itself out of all those old ordered patterns. They’ll probably come back next year, when the Dark’s had a chance to get used to both of you, but for this one...there’s no telling.” Pansy spread her hands. “So, the choice is yours, I suppose.”

Harry closed his eyes. “Your father didn’t know what exactly I could do to counter these boxes, other than being there?”

Pansy said nothing, but when he looked at her again, he saw she was shaking her head. “He had no idea. He thinks your going is necessary, but—well, even if he knew more than that, he might be forbidden to tell me.”

Harry nodded. Necromancers were full of secrets, one of the sacrifices they made in order to be able to speak to the dead and know so much. They saw the death of every wizard and witch they met, but were forbidden to tell them about it. Dragonsbane might well have seen something which the dead would reveal to him but no one else.

“I’m going,” he said.

Pansy nodded slowly. “I thought you would,” she said. “Even Mum thought you would, and she’s planning to be there, too.”

Harry made a mental note to ask Hawthorn if she’d heard anything of Fenrir Greyback’s building a werewolf pack—always assuming he had the chance in the midst of the wildness.

“How are you going to get Professor Snape to let you go?” Draco asked, into the silence.

Harry let out a slow breath. “I don’t know.”

“Absolutely not,” said Snape, not even looking up from the potion he was stirring.

“But, sir—“

“No.”

Harry controlled his temper, and stepped forward with a deliberate pace that forced Snape to look at him. One hand kept up the stirring, though, and Harry wondered how long it had taken Snape to acquire instincts like that.

“Sir,” he said quietly, “even if I stay here, there’s no guaranteeing that I’ll be safe. The Dark magic might reach me anyway, and the backlash from the spell that Voldemort intends to perform could, too. That’s one thing Millicent thinks will happen.” Millicent had been in contact with her parents, and though they didn’t plan to attend the celebration because of Marian, they’d given her what information they could. “Once Voldemort gets the magic angry, it’ll race away from him and to the

next strongest target.” He took a deep breath. “Me.”

Snape remained silent for a long time. Then he ceased to stir the potion, and leaned forward. Harry braced himself for a lecture or some sort of lament about how often he got in trouble.

“Then I shall have to come with you,” said Snape, without changing expression, and picked up a vial of delicate flower petals to scatter into the liquid.

Harry blinked. “Sir?” He found it impossible to imagine Snape at Walpurgis Night. His guardian was too strict, too stern, too controlled. The mere expression of emotions was still incredibly difficult for him. To attend a celebration where he would be expected to dance, to whirl around with partners of many different kinds, to lie on the grass and laugh...

Snape glanced up, and Harry froze. In the face of that direct dark glance, he felt his protests turn into ice, and shatter, and fall away. Snape looked fiercer than he had ever seen him, even when he was facing Neville Longbottom’s potions in their classroom. He looked as if he had been gazing into a mirror full of horrors, in fact, and Harry wondered what the hell he’d seen.

“I am going,” said Snape quietly, every word loud as a knock on the door of death. “I will make sure that you are safe, Harry. By blood and bone and breath I have sworn it, and I shall keep that vow.”

Harry swallowed. “Sir,” he said. “I—thank you, but why?”

“Because I know more about what you have suffered now,” said Snape. “It is *enough*, as you yourself are fond of saying.”

Harry bristled, wondering if he was about to start talking of Lily again. Since the Maze, Harry had been more reluctant to discuss her than ever, because he didn’t see the point. He knew the truth now, all the truths that Snape and Draco had been pushing so hard to teach him. What more did it have to do with him? He’d made his peace with his past. Let it go and die in the grass like a beheaded worm.

But Snape said only, “I would not see you suffer again,” and then stirred his potion sharply three times counterclockwise. The potion gave a puff of purple smoke, turned blue, and then lay calmly in the cauldron.

Harry nodded, a bit mystified, but willing to comply. He had thought this conversation would end with his having to lie to his guardian and sneak away again. “Thank you, sir.”

Snape nodded at him, and watched him out the door. Harry couldn’t help looking back at him before he left.

By blood and bone and breath. Honestly.

That vow was the older one, the one that the vow by Merlin and magic had replaced. Breaking the vow to Merlin would imply intense dishonor, but not consequences in the way the old one would. If harm happened to Harry that Snape could have prevented, Snape’s blood would boil, his bones would snap, and he would stop breathing.

If one believed in the vow, at least. Plenty of wizards did not.

He’s just a bit paranoid. Harry shook his head. I need protection, Merlin knows, but not that much.

Snape closed his eyes and leaned back against the wall when Harry had gone. It had taken all his effort to keep brewing the potion as usual when Harry had explained what he meant to do, and requested his permission to go. Of course, the only reasonable thing to do under the circumstances was to go with Harry, but Snape knew it would be hard.

Even harder, though, was seeing the things that he did in the Pensieve Potion day after day. He faced them, and he transcribed them, just in case something ever happened to that vial of the potion.

He had not known, though, just how many memories of Harry’s training would be dragged forth from Dumbledore’s head, and he had not know how they would enrage and sicken him, or convince him that Harry had already suffered enough without suffering more in the future that Snape could prevent.

Enough, he commanded himself, opening his eyes. Harry does not know that you are seeing these memories of the past, and

he will not understand your behavior in that light. You have to present him a calm mask.

Snape composed himself, and went back to his potion, tamping down, as usual, the horror he felt when he looked at those memories...

And the howling desire for vengeance that they inspired. Harry did not want him to take revenge right now, so he would not.

Right now.

If that ever changed, if he was ever allowed to share his horror and make sure that everyone knew the pain Harry had suffered...

Snape snarled softly to himself. Dumbledore, James, and Lily Potter would never know what had struck them.

Harry shivered slightly and stamped a foot on the floor. He stood in the Slytherin common room with the others going to Walpurgis Night. This time, he was able to see that a few Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff students had joined them, and even one Gryffindor. He noticed more than he had last year, especially because he was over the newness of what had happened then, and because his eyes were running nervously in every direction, trying to guess what would happen next.

Snape stood at his right shoulder, arms folded, waiting in silence. Draco stood next to him, one hand around his. Harry squeezed back when Draco's grip tightened, seeking reassurance. Draco had received permission from his mother to go. Harry didn't know what Lucius's letter had said, but it had turned Draco white around the lips. Harry suspected that the man didn't approve of a Malfoy, and in particular his son, attending a celebration as wild and against supposed pureblood dignity as this one.

Wilder than ever, tonight, Harry thought, and squeezed back one more time. *And yet, Draco agreed to come with me. He loves me. I may trust in that, in him.*

Millicent was holding the dark green stone that had transported them last year. Harry noticed that her face was pale, and she kept looking at him even as she extended her hand, palm flat, before her. He raised his brows, and Millicent flushed and looked away. She obviously hated being caught out in a weakness.

Harry knew exactly how she felt.

He watched as the green stone began to glow with silver light. He felt a faint touch of coldness on his skin, as if the silver light were frostfire—

And then the magic seized them, and everything changed.

Harry felt the hair on his arms stand on end as the silver light grew dazzlingly bright, instead of falling into a cage around them like last year. They were caught in the middle of a sunburst, if any sunburst had ever been this pale and this cold. Harry saw his breath plume in front of him, and then that vanished. He could see nothing but eye-watering silver light which he could not even blink against. The stone had frozen them all entirely.

Nevertheless, he had the sensation of being borne along at a great rate, whirled through space, tossed from point to point.

Then they sagged as the light released them, and Harry felt Draco's grip on his hand, tight enough to numb him even when the cold was gone. Snape's hand clamped down on his shoulder.

"Is that supposed to happen?" he demanded.

"No," Harry gasped, and looked up, wondering where they were. Last year, the magic had brought them to a clearing where a silver fire blazed in the dark green grass, and he had been filled with a dizzy, giddy laughter.

This time, things had changed. Harry saw that they stood in a field of silver flowers, so thick that they obscured all sight of any grass below. The flowers brushed against his arms, insistent, and left a faint, tingling chill in their wake. Harry glanced at them, and realized each blossom was shaped vaguely like a snowflake, though no more like the others than one snowflake was like another.

He turned, searching, trying to ignore the murmurs of rising panic around him, and finally saw a dark green fire blazing in the distance. It didn't look as though anyone else was there yet. Harry took a deep breath, about to suggest they should move nearer the fire and wait there as the best plan.

The magic swept him up.

Harry gasped. His own magic, so carefully tamed to his body, abruptly escaped its confines and bounced up and down around him the way it used to do. Harry reached out a hand, hardly knowing what he did, and felt a brush of alien power. The Dark magic, gone mad on Walpurgis Night, rubbed against him, and then shot away and formed itself into a dark horse galloping across the silver flowers.

Harry stared, thinking that this was another manifestation of the power of the dead that had showed itself forth last year. This time, though, the shape didn't remain a silhouette, but gained definition, and it didn't turn around and fill him with the memory of some miraculous long-dead wizard's work. It really *was* a dark horse, without wings but nevertheless skimming the silver flowers with only the tips of its hooves, and it had a rider. The rider wheeled around and came charging back towards Harry, tall and clad in pale silver clothing. His skin was dark green, though, and his face, though changed to something far more elegant than it had been, still familiar.

"I welcome you, Harry Potter," said the elf who had been Dobby, pulling up so that he hovered above the flowers and nodding to him. "And the others who have come with you." His gaze darted between the motionless Slytherin students who had gathered behind Harry, Snape, and then back to Harry. "It is wild tonight," said Dobby, "and once, this would have been a holiday of my people just as much as yours."

"Do you know where we are?" Harry asked, looking around again, just in case something else known to him revealed itself. It was getting harder and harder to speak in English, though, or look through ordinary human eyes. The magic was calling him, tugging him, urging and coaxing him to fly.

"Within the magic," said Dobby simply. He tilted his head and fixed Harry with one eye. "And you can feel it."

Harry swallowed. "You could say that." The magic filled his head with images of dark wings, and how he could fly with them if he wanted to.

"May we all be unbound," Dobby murmured. "Your wizards say that this night, though they think they are referring merely to the night. They are not. You were right, Harry Potter. There may be a *vates* for witches and wizards as well, though you will be liberating them from the webs of their misconceptions and not from slavery inflicted on them by others." His eyes sparked violently for a moment, but he seemed to regain control of himself in the next. "Do you accept that responsibility? Will you allow yourself to be bound so that others can be unbound?"

"I always have," said Harry, ignoring the way that Snape and Draco both pressed down disapprovingly. "I accepted that fate long ago."

Dobby tilted his head further to the side. "Then this night will be more temptation than gift to you," he said, and reared his horse. Harry saw that its hooves shone moon-pale, just like its eyes and mane and Dobby's clothing, and then he followed the way it pointed, like an arching blade, into the sky.

Harry looked up.

There was a maelstrom moving there, a deep pool of blackness, upside-down, so that its surface was closer to the ground and its depths extended back into the sky. Or perhaps they were the ones in the pool, and the maelstrom was only normal land, Harry thought, dizzied by the perspective. He clenched his hands together and tried to breathe normally, but it was hard.

"The Dark One is drawing on all the magic," whispered Dobby, though Harry couldn't take his eyes from the pool. "He can destroy this place, and send the dead witches and wizards into violent anger. He can make you suffer, Harry Potter. But there are two things he does not know."

Harry managed to yank his gaze away from the pool and return it to Dobby. "And what are those things?"

"That I am free," said Dobby, and stroked his hands across his horse's neck. It tossed its head, and the moon-pale mane blew behind it. "That will make a difference. As you helped me with freedom, I will help you."

Harry inclined his head, accepting the information. "And the other?"

“You do not want to bind the magic,” said Dobby softly. “You must ride it, Harry Potter, and not attempt to hinder it in any way. It will be angry when the Dark One reaches out and begins to bind it. It will recoil in its anger, and you must show it that, to you, its freedom matters.”

Harry was not entirely sure that he understood what Dobby was saying, but he nodded. “And everyone with me?” he asked, squeezing Draco’s hand and leaning back against Snape.

“They will—they must—let it remain unbound as well,” said Dobby. “It will be a great temptation, the magic passing through them, but if they attempt to grab it and understand its secrets, they will be torn apart. They are used to being the children of the wild this night. May they remember it.” He eyed the other witches and wizards sternly. Harry glanced back, and saw a chorus of nods racing through the students like wind through the flowers.

“Harry!”

Harry blinked and looked around. Hastening through the blooms came Hawthorn Parkinson, clad in a gown similar to the one that she had worn last year. Behind her were Arabella Zabini and others Harry recognized from last year. He bowed to them, and then Hawthorn was at his side, kneeling down to take Pansy in her arms.

“My husband has felt the call of his magic,” she whispered. “He and every other necromancer in Britain. He told me they must let the dead run through their fingers, so that they do not damage other people.”

Harry nodded. He had expected something like that. His fear was falling away, and what was left was only anticipation. He looked up at the maelstrom, and felt it stretch its claws, prancing, not yet touched by anger against Voldemort.

Wild does not always mean the same thing as free, he thought. But it does this night.

“All of you,” he said, and his voice was louder than it would have been normally. “*Listen* to me. You must let the magic pour through you, and not attempt to restrain it. For tonight, you must be purely Dark, in the sense of wildness, in the sense that dragons are. Do not fight it. Do you hear me?”

“That could destroy us,” one of the adults complained.

“The other option surely *will* destroy you,” said Harry. “At least, this way, we have a chance of surviving.”

Dobby nodded at him, and then hit his horse with a silver whip. The horse reared, and carried him into the sky, towards the dark maelstrom. Harry saw him rising up a silvery spiral, as though his steed’s hooves froze the air behind him. The spirals traced straight into the heart of the dark maelstrom, and then vanished within it. Though Harry could no longer see Dobby, he trusted him to keep his word.

He could hear Hawthorn speaking to Pansy, Arabella speaking to Blaise, and a few other adults murmuring comfort or questions to their children. Snape and Draco were still with him, but neither tried to talk. Harry wondered if they, like him, were lost in the wonder of it all, if they could feel the magic pressing around them like newly-hatched dragons, or if they were afraid, and sought merely to remain close.

There came a breathless pause.

And then Harry felt someone, far away, reach out and try to snare some of the maelstrom circling above him.

The magic screamed in rage, stirred, like the dragons, to pride and fury the moment someone contradicted their will. Harry took a deep breath, and spread his arms, inviting, accepting, welcoming what would happen next.

The magic boiled, and then lashed down and towards him, tracing the silver spiral that Dobby had made. Just before it struck him, Harry had time to see that it was not really black, as he had assumed, but dark green, like a reflection of the fire that blazed in the distance.

“Ride it!” he remembered to shout.

And then the magic hit him.

Harry felt his feet leave the ground, though he had no idea if they really did or if that was just the impression he received.

Then he was aloft, borne and ripped about by the wind. That wind reached into him, anxiously seeking, trying to find out if he wanted to cage it like Voldemort did.

Harry shook his head and let his fingers fan apart, presenting no obstruction to any power that wanted to pass that way. He tilted back his head, and looked into the heart of the storm with eyes open.

The magic *sang* to him, a fierce and frenzied symphony, demanding some sign that he was like the Dark Lord.

Harry did not give it what it wanted. Instead, he gave it what it needed, unbound channels to sweep through and around him, the assurance of freedom, his sweetest memories—of breaking webs and waking from his own phoenix web—the steady repetition, over and over, of what he was.

Vates, vates, vates.

The magic reared and coursed around him, and Harry caught a brief glimpse of Dobby, wielding his whip. That seemed to call the winds to him instead of keep them away, and his horse's mane was a cocoon around its head. Dobby met his eyes and nodded to him briefly, and then he was gone, racing into the dark as steadily as if there were a stone road in the sky.

Harry felt the magic lift him and cast him out over the sea. He looked down and watched the waves leaping—dark green, of course, capped with silver foam—and the magic offered him the power to control it. He could make great waves rise and inundate his enemies. Didn't he want that? Didn't he want to destroy things? So many wizards believed that Dark magic was purely evil, and used it for evil purposes. Didn't he want to?

Harry only bowed his head, in awe of the force as he would be before a storm, and replied that its will was its own.

In the distance, he felt Voldemort try to trap more of it.

The magic shuddered in repulsion, and then drove into him, ripping up memories and scattering them in front of his eyes as it tried to dig out a home for itself in the midst of his heart.

Harry watched the memories, and made no attempt to subdue the magic or tell it to back away. He only hoped the others were remembering to do the same, but he thought everyone was caught in the midst of his or her own isolated trial now, and it was all he could do to stand his own.

Draco eyeing him speculatively on the Hogwarts Express that first year, seeming to know more about him than Harry did about himself...

Harry casting a wandless charm successfully for the first time, and dropping to the grass outside Godric's Hollow exhausted, but also with a definite sense of accomplishment...

Harry swallowing a jolt of envy that he could not be like Connor and relax more often...

Lily holding him and stroking his hair, teaching him to repeat his vows for the first time when he was three...

A flash of green light and a raging scream that he had not known he remembered...

The magic paused, and then it dug at that memory, grabbed it in its teeth and hauled it around like a dog with a rat. Harry gave the image up to its hold, catching only distorted flickers as it swung in circles. The magic looked at it, and then turned and plunged into his head and came up with his memory of Voldemort's Pensieve, what had happened when he came to Godric's Hollow on that Halloween night when Harry and Connor were a year and a half old.

The magic uttered a triumphant scream, and then it boiled away from Harry, dragging him with it into a new perspective. Harry didn't think he was in his body anymore, but flying as though held in the teeth of a gigantic beast, more furious and swifter than any dragon.

The air around him roiled and churned, and then the magic dived out of it and into a place that looked halfway normal—part of the Britain Harry knew, he thought. It spread enormous dark wings, and the two wizards beneath looked up at it and let their mouths gape in witless surprise. They both held small black boxes, Harry saw, each with its lid open, each ornamented with silver filigree. The top of each box appeared to contain a miniature lightning storm, though when Harry looked closely, he could see that the clouds of those storms held the shapes of the creatures he had seen last year, the memories of dead witches and wizards. The Death Eaters had snared some of the magic of the dead, then.

Not for long, Harry surmised as the magic rolled straight down and raked over the Death Eaters' heads, bearing towards something just beyond them.

There was a small, throne-like chair, and in the chair sat something swaddled in blankets, something that made Harry shiver in disgust. It lifted its head, and cold pain ran through him, and he knew this was Voldemort.

The magic dived at him, and then Harry began to whirl round and round, as though he were a pendant on a chain. Then he was flying, and Voldemort was growing closer and closer, his pale eyes filling all the world.

Harry, or the thing that had been part of Harry, struck Voldemort, and the memory blazed in his head, reminding him of the person he hated the most in the world, the night he hated the most in the world, the night he had been defeated by a baby.

Voldemort screamed, and tried to snatch at Harry, or whatever part of him the magic had brought here, and Harry found himself abruptly back in his body, letting Voldemort's grip slide through him even as the magic had. Laughter like thunder cracked in his head. He knew it was the magic itself, as it resolved into the music of the Dark, laughing to see the Dark Lord so disconcerted.

Perhaps there was Dark magic that Voldemort had made purely his own, but Walpurgis Night was not full of it. There were different kinds of Light, Harry thought, as he felt the power gathering itself in him, using him as a launching point. The Maze was the definition of honesty, while the webs were the definition of tameness. And there were different definitions of Dark magic, and Voldemort wielded the gift of at least one of them, compulsion, very well.

This was wildness, though, and it did not take kindly to being restrained. It snarled at Harry, and a question formed quickly in his mind.

Help us?

Harry nodded, and put his own magic behind the blow.

The Dark leaped, striking at Voldemort, rending him apart with its claws. Voldemort screamed, and his pain flowed out and through the Dark Marks on his Death Eaters' arms. The magic boiled along that pathway, too, and the dark boxes in their hands shattered. The power of the dead flooded free and back into the sky, where it belonged.

Harry rode with it.

His head filled with churning memories, the discovery of spells and the creation of half-thestrals and the miracles of necromancy, but all of them whirled away as soon as they came. He had no care to hold them, so they would not remain.

The Dark magic hovered over them, still in the shape of an enormous beast with wings and talons, and asked Harry if he would not join it. Its voice was crooning music now, soft, far more compelling than the song he had heard from Grimmauld Place's wards or on the night he had freed Dobby, because it asked him, rather than demanded that he come along.

Harry slowly shook his head. He still had a will of his own, for all that he had let the magic have its way with him, and he wanted to return to his body and the mortal world. Nor did he have a desire, like Voldemort, to wield the magic for any particular purpose, or to ride the storm and see people cowering in terror of him.

The magic nudged at him, and sang one more time, but, when it saw that he was firm, it bowed its head and flung him down a long, whirling silver tunnel. Harry saw dark green and silver flash past him, and caught a glimpse of Dobby with his whip raised in salute. He nodded back. He knew that without the elf, this night would have been far worse.

The Dark spoke one more time, in an enormous voice, before Harry dropped back into his body.

Perhaps one day, when your task is done, you will come with us.

Perhaps, Harry answered, and then fell down, and down, and down.

He opened his eyes to find himself lying on thick, dark green grass, not far from a silver fire. He jerked his head up and breathed, deeply, trying to get used to both the familiar sensations of having a body once more, and the inevitable sense of

loss and disappointment that the fading of the magic had given him.

I can't believe you did that.

Harry snorted when he felt Regulus whisper into his head. He'd been gone the last several days, trying to figure out any more clues that he could about where his body was hidden. Harry drove his hands into the grass and forced himself to his feet, which was easier than he would have thought, as the usual joy of Walpurgis Night was bubbling up in him. "You can't believe I do lots of things," he said. "The Maze, and now this. Why would I go into the heart of the Light and refuse to go into the heart of the Dark?"

Usually people choose one or the other, said Regulus, voice tipped with acid.

"Don't want to," Harry murmured, and rubbed his face, looking around for Draco. He found him lying on the grass, and went to him. Draco sat up at once, blinking, his eyes fixed on Harry's.

"That was—that was incredible," he whispered.

Harry smiled slightly. "You weren't overwhelmed by the emotions involved?" He leaned forward and peered into Draco's face, but saw none of the tight lines of tension around his eyes that would have indicated a headache from the empathy.

Draco shook his head. "Harry... this is going to sound strange, but I don't think anyone was overwhelmed, and no one died," he murmured. "We were all riding with you, part of the magic that burned through you. I could see and feel what you did, and so could the others. I spoke with Snape at least a few times about it, as odd as that sounds. I don't know if he'll remember all the conversations. I'm already starting to lose the memory of them," he added. "But we were there. You protected us by going in front of us."

Harry froze, and glanced around the clearing. The other witches and wizards who had been lying motionless were waking up, Snape included. He, of course, said nothing, only sat up and fixed Harry with an inscrutable gaze.

The others were *looking* at him.

Harry forced himself to hold his head high. It wasn't as though he could have planned this, either to gain or avoid attention. This was an experience so vast and strange that he didn't think many of those here would quickly find it a way to turn it to political advantage, either. He would not worry about what they had seen, whether many people now knew he was the one who had deflected Voldemort's Killing Curse or not, until someone actually approached him about it.

Besides, there was the joy waiting, the magic once again settled back into its predictable wild patterns.

"Come on," he said, extending a hand to Draco and pulling him from the grass. "The night isn't done yet." He felt a smile breaking across his face in spite of himself, as the magic went to work on making him happy. "Let's dance."

~*~*~*~*

Intermission: After the Dancing

Draco did find himself enjoying Walpurgis, though the first memory to enter his head was of a Parselmouth raising basilisks, and it startled him badly to realize that the damn snakes were *bred* that way, rather than springing out of some pit of hidden foulness and evil.

No, he thought a short time later, when the wild dance had calmed a bit. Not quite the first memory.

The first memory had been of himself on the Hogwarts Express, turning and facing Harry with cool speculation in his eyes. He had not realized Harry had seen him quite that way then, had not realized how well he played the perfect Malfoy.

The Malfoy who should not have been there tonight, his father's letter snarled in his mind.

Draco bit his lip, and quite determinedly went back to thinking of the wild progress of the night. He was in bed now, lying with his hands folded behind his head and his eyes fixed on the ceiling of the four-poster. He couldn't believe Blaise and Harry were already asleep. True, they were probably exhausted, but the memories attacked Draco so furiously that he would have thought they would keep them awake, too.

He'd seen the memory of himself on the Hogwarts Express, and a few others too soft and blurred for him to make out, and then the explosion of green light that he already knew about, killing Voldemort and marking both Harry and his brother. And he'd seen some of the wizards' memories that passed through Harry when he managed to release them from the Death Eaters' confinement, too.

The frustrating thing was how quickly the wildness fell away from him, how quickly he started thinking *about* it instead of thinking *of* it, and telling himself what it had been like instead of feeling it. He almost felt as though he should have been changed more, though he had been awed by the wild music and dancing of the night, and the Hades-black doorway that appeared in front of them (which, Harry had revealed in a casual way, he'd gone through last year).

But what impressed him the most was that he'd flown in Harry's protection, felt Harry's soul rushing all around him, had actually spoken with Snape once or twice—or were there more conversations, fading away from him now?—and had still come back safely to earth. Harry had defended him without even realizing what he was doing, focused on riding out the storm and freeing the Dark magic from whatever Voldemort was trying to do to it.

Draco wondered if he would always defend Draco, and everyone else, so unconsciously.

It didn't seem fair, somehow, or right. Draco knew he was often a brat; he could admit that. But lying in bed at night, with no one else to see and comment on his behavior, it wasn't something that mattered. He could think as seriously as anyone, if he wanted to.

It probably helped that Harry's emotions were quiet, too, and that Draco was sure he had fallen asleep; he'd been reassured by a trill from Fawkes when he went to check earlier.

Harry *deserved* more recognition for what he'd done, damn it. He'd pretended not to notice the glances he got after his wild flight, and done his best to slide gracefully out of any conversations that might bring them, and the reason for them, up. Draco, knowing how much he disliked attention, didn't blame him for that part.

But how could he not see what he'd done? How could he be content to protect people and just not—just not receive *anything* in return? He didn't want the adulation, he didn't want the mindless obedience that someone like Voldemort would have used this night to inspire, so what could be given him?

Draco sighed and rolled onto his side. That was the question that occupied him, and would occupy him, more than the dancing and the consequences that had come out of it. He could give Harry his love, but that was hardly just because of his protectiveness. It was for his overall magnificence.

I wish there was some way of showing him how much good he's doing, how much he means to people.

Draco passed into a restless and troubled sleep, filled with dreams of him trying to explain to a wide-eyed and disbelieving Harry just what his accomplishments meant, until he finally gave up and kissed him silly instead.

The fifth wooden figure went down into flames and ash, and Snape hissed. His magic flared around him, called out by the wildness of the festivities and not yet settled by the paltry destruction he'd given it.

He had not meant to be—affected.

But you were, he reminded himself, and again conjured a line of wooden figures. Normally, he needed his wand for at least that much. Tonight, he did not. His wandless magic danced and lashed around him, eager to sting as a scorpion, not wearing on him at all. Snape flung out a hand, and a line of fire sprang precisely from one finger and chewed through the figure's head.

He did not think, that often, of his own raw power. His art and his obsession lay with potions, which needed cleverness, intelligence, a keen memory, a good understanding of theory, and magic that came with the occasional wave of a wand or conscious, directed effort. When he was in the midst of creating an experimental potion, his mind fixed far more on ingredients than it did on how he worked his magic into the mixture.

Walpurgis Night had changed that. Snape had expected his main focus to be on protecting Harry. But he'd had no choice but to think of other things once the music began and he found himself dancing.

His magic had responded to the savagery around it, and manifested itself.

Snape had stood, panting, on the grass when the dancing was done, and received more than one strange glance from his neighbors. Snape had glared them into submission, but he couldn't blame them. He was stronger than any wizard in the gathering but Harry. That had come as a nasty shock to him, too. He was used to thinking of himself as the third most powerful wizard in Hogwarts alone, under Dumbledore and Harry, always remembering that beyond the walls of the school dwelt many, many war wizards and trained duelers who were more than his match. Such self-knowledge had been a matter of survival during his year of spying on Voldemort. The Dark Lord tolerated no rivals.

He spun, and thought *Diffindo*, wandless and nonverbal. The figure he'd indicated parted and tumbled to the floor, neatly sliced through the neck.

He thought *Sectumsempra*, and the wooden figure next in line all but exploded. Not as satisfying, using that one on a wooden opponent, Snape thought, his gaze gone blurry and his heartbeat a distant roar in his ears. The blood pouring out of the cuts it created was by far the aspect most likely to intimidate an opponent.

He had created that one. He'd created others, too, simple spells that nevertheless spoke of a talent most people had preferred to forget he had. It was not every wizard who invented his own spells.

When had he forgotten that?

He could not say that he had focused on Harry too much. He hadn't experimented with spells in the ten years he'd taught before Harry came to Hogwarts, either. He'd slid into a routine of making potions, teaching them, marking essays, sneering at the other professors, brooding on his past, and sniping at students who all thought they had the makings of Potions geniuses until they took his classes.

Tonight had reminded him of what he was: a powerful, capable, talented Dark wizard.

He didn't like that this had been pulled out of him, that he'd forgotten it was ever there.

Snape took a deep breath, and halted, and at last managed to force his magic to lie down again and accept his chains. It snarled at him, wanting to fly and sting, but Snape had created his shields for this very reason. While a Death Eater, he had allowed his power far more leeway. He'd been forced to subdue it when he began teaching, and the shields had let him subdue the side of his personality that had delighted in torture and murder, too.

"*Let us all be unbound*," Hawthorn Parkinson, who had tortured and murdered beside Snape, had said tonight.

She has no idea what she is asking for, Snape thought bitterly.

He Vanished the rest of the wooden figures, only realizing after he'd done it that that, too, had been wandless, the magic finding release any way it could. Snape cast himself into one of his chairs and stared at the fire, his eyes narrow and crowded with new thoughts.

He had thought to find in Harry someone to protect, and, of course, if the boy changed the world, then he would live happily in that new world. Even there, though, he'd been unable to see himself in anything but the capacities he'd always had: reformed Death Eater, Potions Master, and, recently, guardian.

Now he was realizing that he, as well as the world, could change when Harry started quietly, inoffensively, turning everything upside down.

It was a discomfoting realization.

Hawthorn shook her head and let her long, pale hair flood down around her shoulders. She had been wearing it bound for Walpurgis, though it hadn't looked as though it were bound. That was part of the secret, though. She would use it as a silent, private pleasure, and also as a test. Those who noticed that she had her hair bound, those who looked but didn't notice, and those who never even looked were all different classes of people, each useful in their own ways.

Harry had been one of those who hadn't even looked.

Hawthorn paused for a long moment, standing with her head bowed and one hand clutched on the corner of the table where she'd set the hairpins down.

She was already losing her grip on most of what she'd seen in the storm. That was one of the consequences of riding it out and letting go of the magic as it passed her, she supposed. Memories, dreams of unimaginable power, whispers of glory, the songs of the dead, had run past her more fiercely than even the usual dream-like experiences of Walpurgis did.

But she had seen two things that had stayed with her, mostly because she'd gripped them in a choke hold and repeated them over and over to herself until she could at least conjure images to the words, even if they weren't exact replicas of the images she'd seen first.

Harry performing a wandless charm for the first time, and falling exhausted on the grass. What had shocked Hawthorn was not that he'd done it, but the nature of the pride he'd felt. He'd known that he did something great, something good, for the sake of other people. Even that young, it seemed, he had become determined to give himself over to others, rather than leaping up and yelling to his parents to look what he could do, which Hawthorn knew Pansy would have done if she'd achieved the same thing at Harry's age, or even now.

She had wondered who he could be feeling that pride for, and then she'd seen the memory of a red-haired, green-eyed woman—who must surely be Harry's mother, from the resemblance of their eyes—stroking Harry's hair and telling him the words of vows that horrified Hawthorn, and disturbed her profoundly. That the young boy in the memory had not understood them was no matter; he had memorized them faithfully, and his adult listeners could get at the sense of them.

"What are your vows, Harry?"

"To keep Connor safe. To always protect him. To insure that he lives as untroubled a life as he can, until he has to face Lord Voldemort again. To be his brother and his friend and his guardian. To love him. To never compete with him, never show him up, and never let anyone else know that I'm so close to him. To be ordinary, so that he can be extraordinary."

Hawthorn could not name all the emotions that those words had inspired in her, and she found that she did not want to try. Two of them were quite prominent and would do.

The first was incredulity. That Harry could be *ordinary* was a laughable thing, and his mother must have known it when he was as young as that, because she had been making him promise to be ordinary, instead of just assuming he would be so.

The second was sickened outrage. Why should a child guard another child?

Hawthorn did not think she could see everything yet. Even those glimpses had been small and scattered. She thought she saw the shape of something emerging, especially since it had been Harry's mother who angered him on Christmas night, but she was not sure, and chasing down blind trails in the dark was a very Gryffindor thing to do. She would wait. She would be patient. She would sniff after clues, and drag them into the light when she found them.

A movement in the mirror caught her attention. Hawthorn looked up, and realized she could see a pair of hands over her shoulders, floating in dark sleeves and speaking in the sign language she had learned to cherish.

You look troubled, my love.

Hawthorn studied her own face for a moment as she leaned back against her husband and Dragonsbane put his arms around her. Yes, she did look troubled. Or, as Hawthorn preferred to think of it, fierce. Her eyes were shining, and her teeth bared. Her wolf was close to the surface, called by the wildness of the night, and at present it was not thinking how much it hated her and wanted flesh to rend and tear. It was thinking, instead, how very good a meal traitors made.

"Hawthorn," Dragonsbane whispered. This was one of the two nights of the year when he was permitted to speak aloud. "A spirit came and spoke with me. I cannot reveal his name. But he spoke of grave danger to this young unbinder we have bound ourselves to follow. He died in the cause of holding back that danger."

Hawthorn nodded once.

Dragonsbane studied her from within the folds of his hood for a moment. Hawthorn soaked up the scent of rotting flesh that hung around him while she waited for him to speak. Once an offensive stink, it had become a comfort to her, and that comfort had only increased after she was a werewolf. She always knew him, even in a darkened room, were he ever so silent.

“Then we must do what we can to help him,” said Dragonsbane. “All of us, in our places and at our times.” And, because it had always been their way on Walpurgis, he guided her to their bed.

“Are you *crying*? Really, Pansy.”

Pansy hastily blotted at her tears, and then lay back in her bed and pulled her covers up over her chest. “I am not crying,” she said, though it was useless. Millicent had already seen, and her choked voice would have given her away anyway.

She heard Millicent snort, and then she climbed into her own bed. She had no *Lumos* or other charm to provide light; Millicent disdained them, preferring to undress in darkness. In her more unkind moments, Pansy thought it came from a desire to avoid looking at her own clumsy, ungainly body. Millicent was taller than any boy in their year, even Blaise, and square-jawed. Pansy pitied her intensely, when she wasn’t envying her her observation skills or fearing what she’d noticed.

Right now, Millicent had obviously noticed something that she wasn’t about to let go.

“There’s no reason to cry,” she said, sniffing now and then as though to make sure Pansy understood *she* was only snorting in irritation, not sniffing from tears at all. “Yes, we could have died, but we didn’t. And yes, the storm was intense at its height, but it’s over now. Really.”

“It’s not that,” said Pansy, surprised that Millicent could think she’d shed tears over either of those. Intense joy was to be appreciated for what it was; one laughed, and not wept, on Walpurgis Night. And of course Pansy wasn’t so silly as to cry over danger that was past. “It was Harry’s memories.”

There was silence from the other bed. Then Millicent said, “I thought I was the only one who saw them. I thought it was a dream. I thought that—no one mentioned them—“ She fell silent.

Pansy made haste to speak. It was so rarely that she had an advantage over Millicent! “I think most people thought the same way you did, and that was why no one mentioned them. No one wanted to run the risk of sounding mad or foolish, and of course Harry was right there. But in silence, I think a lot of people are brooding. I—I don’t remember all of them, but I remember the one about Harry’s envy for his brother.”

And what was there to cry about in that? her own conscience demanded of her. *You’ve seen Pensieve memories like that before, and not wept at them.*

It wasn’t that, Pansy thought, as she reclined on her pillows and waited for Millicent to answer her. It was the sheer *wrongness* of what she’d seen. Oh, she could see how Harry’s brother was attractive in a certain light and with a strong squint, and she supposed that Gryffindor heroism appealed to some people, and she knew he had endured the trials of being a Triwizard champion thus far.

But he was nothing compared to Harry in power, in cleverness, in strength of soul—in all the ways that most mattered, all the ways that let you survive in the real world. Harry envying his brother indicated something was deeply wrong.

Millicent whispered, “I remember the one about the vows.”

Pansy shivered, jolted, as though the memory really had been hiding just under the surface of her thoughts and Millicent’s words had called it back for her. The words echoed in her ears, unpleasant, hateful, unsustainable.

“No one could keep a set of vows like that,” she whispered. “And Harry especially couldn’t. Look at him drawing attention even when he tries not to. What was happening? Why was that memory there?”

“I don’t know,” Millicent said. “And I think we should know. Both because we’re his friends, and because—“ Pansy heard the sound of her rolling over, and then she whispered, “*Lumos*,” and Pansy knew it was serious. She rolled over herself, to see Millicent staring at her with a pale face.

“If something’s badly wrong with a person who does things like Harry does,” said Millicent, “then we are *fucked*.”

Arabella Zabini stood in silence for a long moment, surveying the wreckage of her home.

She'd thought, somehow, that she'd escaped the Dark Lord's notice when she sent off the letter declining service in his ranks. She was a Dark witch, true, but only a moderately powerful one; her reputation came more from the deaths of her seven husbands and her beauty than from the strength of her magic. Voldemort might feel honored to have a Songstress in his service, but even that was a talent he could mimic with his own compulsion. He had no reason to call on her again, every reason to let her stay neutral. Arabella could court Harry Potter's notice, but she'd toyed with the notion of lending only indirect help, not actually fighting beside him in battle. That had been an honored tradition of pureblood families on either side of the Light-Dark divide. Why should they participate in wars where they might have relatives fighting on either side, wars that only destroyed and depleted the wizarding world? The magic must be passed on. That was more important than the blood, always. Let the magic survive, and if that included some of its less powerful practitioners fading quietly into the background, so be it. It was only the fanatics who truly cared about the wars.

But Voldemort was a fanatic, it seemed.

Arabella moved at last, carefully stepping over the shattered glass of her enormous window and into her study. A glance showed her portraits slashed, the subjects mute forever now. She looked at her desk, and found it blasted nearly in two. Then her gaze settled on her bookshelf.

Her Parseltongue books were gone.

Arabella nodded slowly. Of course Voldemort would have sent his minions to seek those, if he knew that she had them, and that information would have been only a little difficult to get a hold of. Arabella had spread the word discreetly over the years, in case a collector wanted them.

She wondered, for a moment, what the Death Eaters thought would happen as a result of this raid. Two answers came immediately to mind: that she would be intimidated into joining them, seeing how easily they'd penetrated her wards, or that she would fade even more into the background and hope that both sides passed her over.

Arabella smiled. It was a smile that was the last thing her fifth husband had ever seen.

She glided quickly and delicately across her library to a panel in the wall, and touched it with her wand. It moved aside, and she reached down and drew out a comb, and a hand mirror, and two small, leather-bound books. Of course she would never leave her true treasures out in the open, only those made for display and little else.

She was not intimidated, and she was not fearful.

She was *angry*. And now she had chosen her side. Circumstances had conspired to make it so that she could fight against this so-called Dark Lord and yet not turn to the hypocritical, puling, shrieking Light.

She clapped her hands to call her house elves to clean up the mess, and hummed a little tune under her breath. One of the house elves went blind and another deaf as a consequence of her song, but really, that couldn't be helped, and they would heal in time. At least they had left by the time she finished writing her letter, sent it to Lucius, and sat down to watch her face in the mirror and comb her hair.

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Fifty-Six: Laying the Ground

Harry laid down his quill and blew across the ink of his notes to dry them. Then he sat back and looked carefully at the scroll.

That should work.

It should, Regulus agreed from the corner of his head, *if it were possible to tell what you were talking about.*

Harry snorted, but had to concede that the complicated diagram and abbreviations he'd used would be beyond anyone who hadn't already read *Light Rituals and Ways to Adapt Them*. "That's why I'm going to send a letter to Madam Marchbanks asking for a meeting, instead of trying to explain in a letter," he murmured, and then chucked Fawkes under the chin as the phoenix appeared on his shoulder.

I'm still not sure why this should work, Regulus whined in his head. *You're relying an awful lot on technicalities.*

“So do a lot of rituals,” Harry whispered. He had the library almost to himself, since it was early Saturday morning, but he didn’t want to test Madam Prince’s patience, and someone coming up and listening to him now was cause for concern, as always. “This ritual calls for twelve people, perfectly balanced in three ways. I’ve got twelve people, and two of the balances pertain throughout them. For the third one, I don’t think it’ll matter, and it’s not like I have much choice—unless you could somehow change your gender.”

Regulus snarled at him wordlessly, and withdrew to sulk, which he’d been doing a lot of throughout this procedure. Fawkes remained in place, though, letting out a subdued song. Harry stroked his neck, grinning.

He *would* have to arrange several meetings, and probably spend a lot of time explaining. But still, he thought this would work.

He was sure he knew how to free the southern goblins now.

Harry received Griselda Marchbanks’s response not long after the beginning of breakfast the following day. He leaned back and read it by the rich fall of May sunlight through the Great Hall’s windows, scratching the owl gently on the head and offering it a bite of toast from his plate. It was surprisingly polite for a Ministry owl, eating only what he gave it and not trying to snatch any extra treats.

Dear Mr. Potter:

I must admit, I find myself so intrigued at your proposal that I would arrange the meeting from sheer curiosity alone! I have included a Portkey in the letter, a small bottle cap. This will bring you to the meeting place with myself and the two other people you requested. Both of them have agreed to come without protest, which makes me even more curious. I trust that you shall have a good explanation when all of this is over.

*Griselda Marchbanks,
Elder of the Wizengamot.*

Harry chuckled under his breath, and picked up the Portkey, writing out a short response and handing it over to the owl, along with another bit of toast for a job well done. The owl launched itself into the air, and Harry slid the Portkey into his pocket and returned to eating his breakfast. He couldn’t seem to stop smiling. Things were going the way he wanted them to, and though he fully suspected it would take the full month of May before the goblins were free, because of all the meetings, he was sure it would be worth it.

“What are you smirking about?” Draco demanded.

Harry raised an eyebrow at him. “That thing I tried to explain to you the other day, and which you said was too complicated for you to follow. I’m getting the cooperation of other people first, before I ask you again. Maybe they can explain it better than I can.”

Draco blinked, his face oddly vulnerable for a moment. “You—you would get other people involved, just to explain this to me?”

Harry rolled his eyes and shoved his shoulder. “Of course not, you prat. These are the other people who are going to be involved in the ritual.” He started on his sausages with a will and an appetite he hadn’t felt in a long time. Things were moving forward now. He could *do* this. It was true that he’d managed to break other webs with less bother and fuss, but those webs hadn’t been this complicated, either, or so tied into the functioning of a major wizarding institution.

“A cooperative ritual, Harry?” Millicent whispered from her seat on the other side of him. “Light magic? Whatever will you think of next?”

Harry laughed at her. “It’s nothing that’s going to damage my standing with your family,” he said. “It’s about the goblins, and I promise that it won’t cause a goblin rebellion, either.” He hummed as he swallowed the last of his sausages. He loved mornings like this, full of sunlight and possibilities, even though he *was* going to Karkaroff’s Defense Against the Dark Arts class today and there would probably be a quiz that would bore him.

“Hm. I’ll trust to your promise, then.” Millicent hesitated, as though wondering whether she should say the thing obviously poised on the tip of her tongue, and murmured, “Your vow. You keep your vows, don’t you, Harry?”

Harry lowered his fork to the table with a bang and turned to stare at her. He was not sure what was worse: the way she was looking at him, or the way that Pansy was staring at him, too, her eyes full of sorrow and awful knowledge. They didn't know everything, he thought, but they knew enough.

How did they know?

And then he remembered the memory that had flown along with him on Walpurgis Night, and cursed to himself. Of course that was it. Neither Draco nor Snape would betray him like that, and Dumbledore and his parents would have no reason to do so. They had never wanted anyone to know that he had made the vows to protect Connor. That was the whole point of making the one to hide what he was.

"I can't prevent you from knowing, Millicent," he said at last, when he'd had a chance to get his breathing under control. He was *not* going to let this ruin his whole mood for the day. He'd done enough brooding and worrying. He had a plan now, a good one. If Millicent and Pansy were part of the group of people who knew something about his training, then he would just deal with it, and move on. "But I can tell you the conditions for knowing. You don't talk about this with me, ever, and you mention it to no one else. You're right. I was very good at keeping my vows, until I came to Hogwarts. I'm better at promises now." He gave her a slit-eyed glance that made her blink and sit back from him, and Pansy blanche. "And I promise that you will not like what happens if you try to act on this knowledge."

"But it's—" Millicent started.

"It doesn't matter," said Harry. "It happened. That's all. It doesn't matter any more than a flood ten years ago matters now." He stood and stretched his arms above his head. Draco rose beside him, looking concerned. Harry nodded to him, showing he was all right. He *was*. He would not let fear of his past control him. It wasn't fear he had for his past; it was *contempt*. The Maze had shown him the truth of that. There was no point in paying attention to it, not next to the future. There were so many more important things that needed his attention now.

"Not a good comparison, Potter." Millicent's voice was far more subdued than it usually was when she called him by his surname. "A flood ten years ago can leave plenty of damage. Uprooted trees, for example. If you're carrying around as much damage as it seems that those vows should have caused, then—"

"Shut up."

Millicent went still. Harry wasn't sure if it was the quietly-spoken words that had done that, or the fact that the porridge left near his plate had iced over.

"This conversation is ended," said Harry, and strode out of the Great Hall, one hand clutching the bottle cap in his pocket. Regulus murmured soothingly in his head, and Draco hurried beside him. They, along with the Portkey, reminded Harry of what was important. He shook his head and blew both his anger and scorn away in a great, heaving breath.

It doesn't matter. Let it go. It's ended. And it's not as if there's anything they can do about it, even if they tried. They're bound from attacking my parents through the ritual of the formal alliance.

Think about the meeting on Saturday instead. Harry felt his face smooth out again, into a small smile. I wonder what their faces looked like when they received Madam Marchbanks's message?

Thinking of which, I need to send messages to Lucius and Hawthorn.

Harry staggered a bit, and then looked around the office where the Portkey had brought him. It was a much smaller and neater place than he'd expected an Elder of the Wizengamot to have. The walls were bright with only a single portrait, one of an exquisite young pureblood woman with pale hair and odd lightning-blue eyes. She was holding a cup of some sort in her hand and staring off to the right side of the portrait. She turned and nodded a little at Harry when she saw him.

Harry turned around when someone coughed behind him, and found Madam Marchbanks sitting behind an equally small and neat desk. A chair stood in front of it, for him, and a chair off to each side, where sat the Light wizards he'd asked Madam Marchbanks to summon.

"Thank you for coming," he said simply, and sat down. "I suppose this must have taken you by surprise."

Moody, seated in the chair on the right, grunted and shifted his wooden leg so that it came down with a decisive tap on the floor. "Surprise isn't the word, Potter," he said. "I didn't expect to see you again at all. Didn't think your *guardian* would like you coming near me." He looked around suspiciously, as though he expected Snape to pop out of the woodwork in a moment.

Harry shrugged. "He agreed to let me come alone." He'd had a shouting match with Snape before obtaining that "agreement," but in the end it had come down to honesty. He'd asked Snape if he thought he could get through a half hour, or even ten minutes, without hexing Moody, with his temper as foul as it had been lately. Snape had admitted that he could not, and added that he would have to trust Harry sometime, and then spent the next ten minutes describing the mayhem he would inflict on the Ministry if something happened to Harry.

Moody grunted again, but said nothing coherent, which Tybalt Starrise seemed to take as his cue to speak. He was leaning forward now, grinning in a way that reminded Harry oddly of Evan Rosier. *Wild, Scrimgeour said about him.*

"I'm not surprised at all," Tybalt declared. "I knew that you would summon me sometime, and I'm eager to help with whatever you want me to help with." He arched his brows. "I'm only surprised that you didn't contact me directly."

"Because I didn't know if that might be seen as interfering in the Ministry, which the Minister has already chastised me for," said Harry, and shrugged a bit. "I know that the Elders of the Wizengamot have a bit more, ah, freedom in that direction. And though Scrimgeour is in support of me, I don't know if he would back me as far as I want to go on this." He faced Madam Marchbanks and raised his brows in challenge.

The tiny old witch gave him a faint smile. "The Minister has known me most of the decades he's worked for the Ministry," she said. "He knows better than to interfere with me. So, talk, please, Mr. Potter. I have the feeling that this is far more complicated than you managed to explain in your letter." She leaned forward, folded her hands patiently, and fixed him with a stern gaze.

"Yes, madam," said Harry, and prepared to recite the simple form of the explanation.

That's not simple, it's bloody complicated, Regulus whined at him.

It's as simple as I can make it. If you don't like it, go find some other head to inhabit, Harry thought at him in irritation. Regulus was becoming more and more sulky without a body, but, on the other hand, he couldn't come up with any helpful clues either, and he refused to discuss the journal, and Harry had other things to do. If Regulus wouldn't bloody help, then he could shut up.

Regulus shut up.

"What I want to do to help the southern goblins is an adaptation of a Light ritual," Harry began. "It requires twelve participants, just under thirteen." He saw Moody nod, as though only by that sign could the old Auror know the ritual for Light magic. "The participants have three balances between them: Light and Dark, male and female, and their degree of connection to the person initiating the ritual. I have twelve participants who are divided equally between Light and Dark, or I will if all of you agree." He nodded to Moody and Tybalt. Tybalt smiled at him; Moody didn't. Harry wasn't worried. The crusty old Auror owed him a debt, but he wasn't as fond of Harry as Tybalt was. It was one of the reasons that Harry had asked Madam Marchbanks to contact him. "You also all have a different connection to me. The gender balance isn't exactly equal. It will be among the eight major participants, but with the others, I just have to work with what chance has handed me."

I'm not just chance, Regulus sulked in his head.

You're in my head, I have to include you, and it's very inconvenient for the ritual's sake that you're male, Harry responded. He thought he was learning how to handle Regulus. *So stop whining.*

Regulus went off to whine in silence. Harry faced the Light wizards and witch again, and waited for the questions.

"What is this ritual going to do, exactly?" Madam Marchbanks's voice was calm and clear. "That was the part I did not quite understand, Mr. Potter."

Harry let out a sharp breath. "The web on the southern goblins is bound to Gringotts itself," he said. "The daily business of the bank reinforces and renews it. That means that I can't just destroy it, not without bringing the exchange of money to a

grinding halt and irritating a lot of people. But the web can be transferred, via the ritual, to another thing—a construct or copy of Gringotts. That was what the ritual was initially intended to do. It would remove deadly curses and place them on a volunteer who had agreed to suffer the curse in place of the original victim.”

Moody uttered a sound somewhere between a grunt and a growl. Harry was glad to find that he was a little more expressive than he had seemed at first. “A ritual of sacrifice.”

“A lot of things I do are,” Harry agreed calmly. “This time, though, it doesn’t have to attach to a person. It has to attach to inanimate objects charmed to act in the same way as the transfer of coins in Gringotts, which is the basis of the goblins’ web. I’ll fool the web into thinking it’s still holding on to the real thing, and then the ritual will transfer it.” He sat back and looked at them. “Of course, it will help immensely if you would all agree to be part of the plan.”

“I will,” said Tybalt at once, a wide grin on his face. Harry wondered how he could have missed seeing this man that day in the Forbidden Forest. He took a wild, fierce delight in life. Of course, Tybalt had probably thought it best to play it sneaky when facing a Slytherin. “Not least because it will annoy my uncle like anything.” He cocked his head at Harry. “What role do you intend me to play in the ritual?”

“Contracted ally,” said Harry. “We’ve pledged faith to each other, but not gone through any particular ritual. Some of the other people participating in the ritual are ones who have.”

Tybalt nodded, as though satisfied. “And them?” he added, lounging back in his chair as he pointed at Moody and Marchbanks.

Harry looked at them carefully. “Auror Moody owes me a debt,” he said. “One I’ll consider fully paid if he helps me in this,” he added, seeing Moody’s skeptical stare. “And Madam Marchbanks will be the representative of the southern goblins. They trust her more than they do me, don’t they, madam?”

Madam Marchbanks inclined her head. “That is true, Mr. Potter,” she said. “You must understand. While they look forward to freedom and have been longing for a *vates* as impatiently as any of the other magical creatures, they have been betrayed again and again in their long struggle with wizardkind—far more than most of the magical creatures have, because they have been in closer contact with us.” Her eyes shone with passion. Harry was sure, then, that she would agree to participate in the ritual. “They trust only proven friends, and then only after a long and hard proving. I have been known to them more time than you have. The webs you have shattered so far speak immensely for your record, of course, but they would still want me there.”

Harry smiled at her. “Thank you.” He turned and waited on Moody’s answer.

Moody’s magical eye was fixed on him, while his normal eye stared off to the side in contemplation. At last he said, “I want to know who the other participants in the ritual will be.”

Harry let out his breath. *He won’t be pleased, but better he know now than when the ritual’s been set up and we couldn’t find someone else.* “Minerva McGonagall will be the other Light witch involved,” he said. “If she agrees, and I think she will. She and I have a bond of affection, through free choice on either side, and I helped her move into her present position, with more responsibility for the wards of Hogwarts.”

“The Dark ones, Potter,” Moody said softly. “I want to know about them.”

Harry sat ramrod straight in his chair. *I am not ashamed of any of them. I will defend them to Moody as I would defend Moody to them. This is part of the price for balancing between them.* “Professor Snape,” he said, and watched Moody grimace. “My guardian, Narcissa Malfoy. She’s risked her life for me on more than one occasion, and she also owed me debts through her family.” Tybalt peered at him, but Harry ignored that. *If Narcissa wants to tell him about her dancing, that’s her business.* “Lucius Malfoy—“

“*What!*” Moody all but exploded to his feet.

Harry made sure to keep a bored expression on his face. “He’s my formal ally through a truce-dance.”

“Potter, he was a *Death Eater*,” said Moody, stressing both words separately, as though there were somehow a way that Harry wouldn’t have known that already.

“Yes, I know,” said Harry. “So was Hawthorn Parkinson, for that matter, the other Dark witch I’m going to ask to stand with

us. She's an ally of my family."

He didn't quite understand the look that came over Moody's face at that. He wondered if Moody had hunted Lucius and Snape, but not Hawthorn. Perhaps his antipathy for her was not as great as it had been for the others.

"Only you, Potter," said Moody, whatever that was supposed to mean, and sat down again. "Who are the other four?"

"The ones who screw up the gender balance," said Harry, and Regulus whined at him. Harry ignored that, too. "Myself, of course, as initiator of the ritual. Draco Malfoy, the—my best friend." He still didn't think he had another word for Draco, at least not one he was comfortable telling people. "He's from a Dark family, and I'm from a Light one, and he has to be part of the ritual, anyway. I trust him too much for him not to be. And then Fawkes, the phoenix bonded to me, for Light, and Regulus Black, for Dark. Once again, not much I can do about it. Fawkes's bond and Regulus's bond make it imperative that they be included somehow." He held up his hands in a helpless gesture.

Madam Marchbanks was nodding, as though that explained everything to *her* satisfaction. Tybalt was grinning and bouncing one foot off the floor. Moody was frowning, and obviously looking through a list of names in his head.

"Potter," he said slowly. "Regulus Black was also a Death Eater, and he's dead. I understand that you consider the one no obstacle, but that other should give even you pause."

Harry sighed. If they thought the ritual explanation had been complicated, they were not going to like this.

"Regulus didn't die," he said quietly. "He betrayed Voldemort, and was taken and tortured. Then his body was confined somewhere, with preservation spells on it, and his voice was bound to his brother Sirius's mind, though most people thought he was dead and Sirius was just having bad dreams. When Sirius died last year—" no need to go into all the details of what had happened there—"—Regulus's voice was bound to me, because I share a connection to Voldemort through my brother." *No need to tell them the nature of that connection, either.* "He's here, and he's not leaving. He has to be part of the ritual."

They were *all* staring at him, now. Harry leaned back and waited.

"I'm still in," said Tybalt. "It will vex my uncle even more when he hears that you have a phoenix bonded to you, Harry. He considers them creatures of highest Light."

"You're going to tell him, aren't you?" Harry asked, still reluctant to cause family quarrels, but resigned to the fact that Tybalt was going to do whatever the hell he wanted.

Tybalt smiled slightly at him. "Of course."

"I am still in, as well," said Madam Marchbanks, with a slight nod. "As long as you think that your allies are likely to agree."

"I still have to speak with Mr. Malfoy, Mrs. Malfoy, and Mrs. Parkinson," Harry admitted, rubbing one hand over his face. That meeting was one that he was not looking forward to, for a variety of reasons. Hawthorn had also been at the Walpurgis gathering. If she had seen something of what Millicent and Pansy had seen...

He pushed the thought away. He would deal with that if and when it came up, in the same way he had when it had come up with his yearmates.

"I am fairly sure that Professor McGonagall will agree," he said, yanking his mind back to the proper path. "As I said, we share a bond of affection. The others already have." Snape had merely stared darkly at him for even proposing to venture into a dangerous situation by himself. Draco had murmured sleepily into his shoulder that of course he would be part of this ritual, and then repeated his vow more fully when he'd woken up. Harry knew he had Fawkes's and Regulus's agreement.

Only because I can't prevent you from doing this damn fool thing, Regulus said.

True.

"Then I stand with you."

Harry stared hard at Moody. He'd expected a much more difficult agreement before the old Auror gave in, and had even thought he might need to ask another Light wizard—perhaps Scrimgeour, as much as he hated compromising the Minister. "Why?" he asked. "My allies' allegiances haven't suddenly changed."

Moody gave him a wintry smile. "I know that. But I also know that this is an opportunity for me to see exactly what you're made of, Potter, and what your allies are made of. You're going to take on the Light role, you said. If you do it well, that will prove something to me. If you don't do it well, that will prove something, too. That you're a sham, for example."

Harry eyed him thoughtfully as Regulus called Moody a rude name. Well, he was blunt, but it also sounded as though he were evaluating Harry as another ally. Far be it from Harry to discourage someone from doing that.

"Very well," he said. "Thank you for agreeing with me, sir." He stood up and looked at Madam Marchbanks. "I'll need to meet with the goblins soon, to discuss where we should establish the copy of Gringotts."

"The *hanarz* will be glad to speak with you whenever you are available," said Madam Marchbanks, with a slight inclination of her head.

Harry caught Tybalt's eye while Madam Marchbanks enchanted another Portkey for him to return to Hogwarts with, and Tybalt nodded. Harry relaxed. That meant that Delilah Gloryflower, Claudia Griffinsnest, and Fergus Opalline had indeed received the Wolfsbane Potion he'd brewed during his detentions with Snape.

With luck, we can at least make their transformations not a horror to them.

Minerva was glad to invite Harry in for a cup of tea when the boy asked, gladder to listen to something other than the two subjects that occupied her mind all day: the wards and marking. What Harry proposed was something that stirred her interest. She found herself smiling as she considered it.

A switching spell. An adapted switching spell, at that. Tricky. She looked at the boy sitting calmly and proudly in the chair in front of her, and made up her mind. *All the more reason for someone experienced to help him with it, and to be available to contribute strength if something goes wrong.*

"Of course, Mr. Potter," she said. "I shall be honored to stand opposite you. Or Severus, or wherever you wish to put me."

"Opposite Professor Snape, I think," said Harry, relaxing with a little sigh. Minerva was pleased to see that he didn't have as far to relax as he once would have. Young Draco Malfoy had been good for him, no matter that Minerva cordially detested the boy. "You're the strongest of the four participants in the Light side, and he's the strongest of the Dark ones. Besides, Draco has to stand opposite me." Harry grinned and sipped at his tea.

Minerva nodded, her mind trying to envision how this would work. "What is the pattern that you're using?"

Harry extended a hand casually, and several pins and other small objects on Minerva's desk fountained up and danced into position. Minerva raised her eyebrows. Harry was choosing the pattern called three-lace: four participants on either side of an aisle, facing each other; two at either end of the aisle, also facing each other; and two linked in a circle in the same space as the initiator of the ritual.

"You'll be on one side with the other Light witch and wizards," Harry explained. "The Dark ones will face you. I'll be at the initiator's end, with Draco facing me. Fawkes and, um, Regulus Black will be with me in the circle." He paused and looked nervously at Minerva.

She accepted the information with a shake of her head. *Nothing is ever normal with him. Why should this be?* And after what she had learned about Albus, his phoenix bonding to Harry was no great surprise. "I'll want the full tale of that someday, Mr. Potter," she said. "But for now, yes, that is acceptable."

Harry nodded to her once, and then said, "Excuse me, Professor McGonagall, but I have another meeting to attend." He paused, studying her face. "And you look as if you should get some rest."

Minerva bit her tongue to keep from taking points from Slytherin for impertinence. It was only true. "I shall, Mr. Potter. Attend your meeting."

Harry smiled at her, and slipped out the door. Minerva allowed herself to lean back in the chair and close her eyes then. Her mind returned to the wards again, and the absolute *mess* she'd found when she started digging into the older ones that guarded the original parts of the school.

Albus, Albus, what have you done?

The wards that should have recognized her did not. The ones that should have transferred easily fought and snarled like Minerva would if someone tried to confine her to a traveling cage in her Animagus form. The ones that were simple accumulations of defensive spells had had an extra twist and fillip added to them, one that marked them as Albus's, not anyone else's, and made them of a piece, almost, with the Headmaster's own magic.

Minerva was deeply angry, and not only because she was trying to take part of the burden of the wards on herself. If Albus had died suddenly, the school might well have refused to recognize her as Headmistress. Albus had bound himself to Hogwarts as if he expected the school to remain his forever, and Minerva hated the idea of that.

The man I loved and followed is gone.

She was untangling the mess, but slowly, so slowly, and it gave her headaches and invaded her dreams. Minerva gave a little shudder and sat upright in her chair. She would go on because she had to, and her fury gave her strength, but the weight of her rage made her breathless sometimes, too, as did the weight of weary, grinding, endless sorrow.

"You are doing well."

Minerva did pick up her wand. The woman who had called herself Acies stood in a corner of the room again, and this time Minerva could catch a glimpse of long, pale hands. Acies continued before she could speak a spell, or indeed anything else.

"You will be needed. Needed so badly. And when the storm comes, you are one of the reasons we will give battle well."

"Will we win the battle?" Minerva asked, because she had to discount the rest as superstitious nonsense, as usual. But battles were great events, ones that distorted the weight of history and sometimes inspired more correct Divination than the flow of ordinary, everyday life. Sometimes, of course. When Divinations were not superstitious nonsense altogether.

"I did not say that," Acies whispered. "When the *storm* comes. That is the important thing, Minerva. Already the wind is blowing. It will come to a head in two great storms. One, you will be powerless to affect. The other is a storm of Light, and that is your element, and it will be your day. Oh, not this one, but the next."

"You make no sense, at all," said Minerva.

"You will learn to know me better when the time comes," said Acies, and flickered like a shadow caught by a lifting lamp, and vanished.

Minerva lowered her wand, and reflected whether her life was better or not for the intrusion of mysterious babbling figures. On the one hand, she could not hex Acies as she could Trelawney, and that made it unsatisfying.

On the other hand, this had inspired her with enough irritation to push her fatigue away and go to work on the wards again.

Minerva smiled grimly, and began.

Harry tilted his head back and absorbed the gentle warmth of the deep spring night into his skin. He stood near the edge of the Forbidden Forest, where he'd agreed to meet Lucius, Narcissa, and Hawthorn, and the darkness around him sprang and sang with deep green rustlings that hadn't been there a month before.

It's almost a year since Sirius died.

Harry swallowed, a little, and pushed the thought away. Sirius had died beautifully, died in reckless abandon, died like a Gryffindor. He would not want Harry to let the thought of his grief distort something this important.

"Harry."

Harry turned and smiled as Narcissa emerged from the trees, holding out a hand to him. He took it, and bent to kiss it. "I trust that the trees gave you no trouble this time?" he asked.

Narcissa laughed softly, but it was Lucius who answered, stepping out and putting one hand on his wife's shoulder. "Not this time," he said, as he gave a cool nod to Harry. "It would seem the old fool has learned his lesson."

"I hope so," said Harry, turning to Hawthorn as she came out to Lucius's right side. He studied her eyes, but saw only the same concern that she always had for him, not anything new. He relaxed a bit. *She didn't see anything, or Pansy didn't tell her, and she won't push. That's good.*

"What did you want to speak with us about?" Lucius asked, direct and calm. "I was reading a rather interesting book, and while what you describe sounds equally interesting, the explanation was rather confused."

Harry explained as he had with everyone else, and had the satisfaction of seeing their faces tighten in thought before they gave their answers. Narcissa and Hawthorn agreed before Lucius did. He tilted his head, fixing his eyes on the Slytherin badge on Harry's robes, and hissed his answer in Parseltongue, presumably to keep it private.

"You understand that this goes beyond the obligations of being your formal ally?"

"Of course it does," said Harry, blinking a bit, and then surging into amusement. *Does Lucius want me to feel his independence?* "I wouldn't expect you to participate if you don't want to, Mr. Malfoy." He was not as worried about finding replacements for reluctant Dark participants as he was for Light ones. Adalrico Bulstrode would do as well, if Lucius refused.

Lucius considered that, then nodded and moved his eyes away so that he spoke in English. "I accept."

Harry let out a little sigh. "Thank you," he said, and felt a shining burst of happiness that he could count on people like this, that he didn't have to search for a way to end the bonds that tied them the moment their obligations were made. And these were Dark wizards, two of them former Death Eaters, to boot.

With the feeling that the world was a strange and wonderful place, Harry bowed to them and then turned to walk back to Hogwarts. Draco and Snape would be missing him, for all that they'd agreed to let him go to this meeting alone; Snape's presence, in particular, would have been an insult, an implication that Harry did not trust his allies. This dance was still delicate, for all that Harry felt he understood most of the moves better than any other circumstance of his life.

"A moment, Harry."

Harry blinked and looked over his shoulder at Hawthorn. And this time there was extraordinary concern on her face, and he felt himself flush and fall back a few steps into a defensive posture.

"What?" His voice was close to a snap. All the while, he told himself that it might not be what he thought it was, that she could have other things to talk to him about, that—

"I feel that we must speak of your past now," said Hawthorn, slowly, but with determination. "There have been clues that all is not right, but now I have images." She took a deep breath and pushed forward. "Harry, I would like to know what those images meant."

She did see the memories at Walpurgis. Harry straightened his shoulders, aware of Lucius's and Narcissa's devouring, inquiring gazes, his mind collecting and ordering the information they knew. There was what he had confessed to the night of Rosier's attack on Lucius, and there were the memories of his training that Lucius had seen that first Christmas at Malfoy Manor, and there was Narcissa's knowledge of his emotional condition after last Christmas.

"They meant things that are over and done with," he said, keeping his own voice calm and polite, as blank as possible. "I thank you for your concern. It shows that you honor me beyond the obligations of formal family alliance. But we need not speak of them."

"I think we must." Hawthorn's eyes shone, but Harry could detect nothing save concern in them, even now. Even still. *Why can't she leave me alone?* Harry wondered, with a flash of desperation. "Harry, what I saw—it was not right." A growl slipped out of her throat, and Harry realized that she was getting angry.

At his parents, who had been punished enough. At his parents, who were the pitiable things that the Maze had shown him they were. At his parents, who did not deserve to have their lives ruined like this—not to mention the consequences that it would bring down on Connor's life, and on Harry's own. He was not a victim, and he would not allow his allies to make him into one.

And what would it do to my reconciliation with James, to push him like this? Nothing good. If they intend to bring this up in the first place, they won't understand the subtle distinctions I want to make.

"Leave it," he said softly.

Hawthorn growled again, and Harry saw her as she had been the one time he ever met her in werewolf form, a gleaming fawn bitch, her amber eyes wild and resolute. "It is wrong. I cannot."

"I would like to know, as well," said Lucius, all cool, balanced eagerness, and Narcissa's gaze was open and gentle.

"No," said Harry. "I will not tell you this again. Nearly any other sacrifice, you may ask of me. But those that involve harm to other people, I will guard against with all my life and will. That is a promise." He let his magic rise just enough to add a tinge of danger and wonder to the night.

Lucius bowed his head slightly. Narcissa sighed at him. Hawthorn remained studying him, eyes narrowed.

"Doesn't it matter to you?" she asked. "What they did? I never thought you one to oppose justice, Harry."

"I prefer mercy," said Harry, and let his voice take on the snap of breaking ice. "And this is merciful. I thank you for your concern, but this is the end of it." He waited calmly, holding her eyes, letting her think things over. He was sure of what she would choose, even before she dropped her eyes and nodded. They had the future to think of, and the formal alliance, and the affection that she and Harry shared outside the alliance. That trumped the past.

"Thank you," said Harry, and bowed to them a second time, and made his way back to Hogwarts.

Hawthorn followed Harry's departure with troubled eyes. She had given in for right now because she had seen it was no use in going against Harry's will, but that was not going to last for long. Harry had spoken like ice, but already the cracks were racing away from him, breaking apart whatever frozen place he'd tried to store his past in. Merlin knew how many witches and wizards had seen or guessed at the truth on Walpurgis Night. Not all of them would rest in silence. They would all move cautiously, Hawthorn thought, not sure at first what to do with the knowledge, and wary of incurring Harry's wrath, but in the end, they would move.

He is better off trying to control this information than backing away from it.

And so long as he ignores it, she thought, the memory of the vows returning to her, he is still doing what his mother desired him to swear to. He is still hiding a great deal of who and what he is, the strength which it must have taken to survive that.

"It will come out," said Lucius, softly.

Hawthorn glanced at him, and caught his eyes along with Narcissa's. They were united in their purpose of easing the truth into the light, and making sure that Harry suffered as little as possible from it.

Hawthorn saw an extra motive in Lucius's eyes, too, one that she could not enact herself. Lucius had been one of the Dark Lord's best and most inventive torturers. He did not use the pain curses with relish, like Bellatrix, but he was adept at twisting common spells into purposes never meant for them to serve, and his coolness meant he was capable of remaining at an emotional distance from his victims that Bellatrix never could. That made him all the more frightening, and all the more merciless when he did choose to torture someone.

When he found out what had actually happened with Harry, and what measure of responsibility his parents bore for it, Hawthorn thought, he would move. And then—then she pitied the Potters, the more because Lucius would not kill them.

She happened to look at Narcissa, though, and paused. Perhaps Narcissa would get to them first, and while Hawthorn did not know Lucius's wife as well, she thought Lily and James Potter might be more deserving of pity under Narcissa's hands than if her husband made the catch.

As for Hawthorn...

I cannot hurt any of Harry's family, but there is no alliance binding me from going after Dumbledore, she thought, and bared her teeth to the moonlight.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Fifty-Seven: Blood of the Basilisk

“It will do?”

Harry blinked several times, and then glanced over his shoulder, where the *hanarz* and ten goblins, all armed with silver arrows, waited. “It will more than do,” he said. “It might have been made for this purpose.” Then, because no one else was trying to speak to him right now, he returned his admiring gaze to the room in front of them.

It was made of stone, of course, as was the case with all the rooms in the tunnels around Gringotts, and large enough to make Harry feel like an ant moving across a sandwich. The walls that held it up curved slightly, like the ribs of an enormous beast, but contained no distracting pillars that might get in the way of the three-lace pattern Harry planned to use. There were no decorations, either, which might also interfere with the ritual once they became intricate enough. Harry would have to mark out an aisle for the Light and Dark wizards to stand on either side of and for him and Draco to stand at either end of, but that was no trouble, not compared to what he would have had to do in a less suitable place.

“When do you believe that you can free us?” the *hanarz* asked, jolting Harry out of his contemplation of the room once again.

“This weekend.”

Silence from behind him, and it went on until Harry had to peer and see what they thought of that timeframe. He discovered the *hanarz* standing upright, as if moving would cause her to collapse, her hands clasped tightly in front of her.

“At last,” she whispered. The words moved only a short distance in the high-ceilinged room before dying. “At last.”

Harry smiled.

Harry considered the diagram in front of him one more time, and then nodded. He knew it by heart now, but a final study was never out of place, he thought, tracing one hand over the sketched lines.

He and the other wizards would form the three-lace pattern. The goblins would be underground with them, save for the few who would have to remain in Gringotts to make sure that the business of the bank went ahead as usual. By the time the weekend came around, Harry knew they would also have forged the metal ingots that were meant to act like coins in his replacement model of Gringotts. Goblins worked metal all the time, for their own pleasure as much as because the web compelled them to attend to wizards’ money. The *hanarz* had assured him that many of their products, from the roughest to the most beautiful, would serve in the model the web would transfer to.

That left vaults, of course, but Harry knew his magic could carve them without trouble. The replacement vaults did not have to be as large as the originals. What mattered was that they *felt* like them, were cloaked in illusions of belief, to fuel the deception he would practice on the web.

It is going to be complicated, then.

I told you that, Regulus brooded in his head. I told you. But you never seem to listen to me any more.

Harry shrugged at him. *Maybe if you told me something worth listening to, rather than just making complaints about a ritual that has to go ahead anyway, then I would.* He gently shoved the sketch under a piece of homework from his Charms class and closed his eyes. The diagram was still perfect behind his eyes.

A soft trill announced the presence of Fawkes. Harry scratched the phoenix’s head as he landed on his shoulder, and glanced at him with a faint grin. “Are you going to complain about the complication of this, too?” he asked.

Fawkes leaned against him and stayed there. His only music was a low, trilling hum, by which Harry understood that the phoenix was pleased and excited about the ritual. Of course he would be, Harry thought, as he stood to get ready for bed. He was a creature of Light, and he supported Harry’s *vates* cause, and had from the beginning. If he could play an active part in the freeing of another kind and not just carry the message that Harry wanted to try it, then he would be happy.

Harry felt little tingles racing through his body that seemed to make even the brushing of his teeth and the washing of his face into important secrets. He wondered, when he came out of the loo, that Draco could already be asleep in his bed, blond hair thrown over his face and his breathing calm. His heart galloped like a thestral. If it hadn't been for Fawkes, he might not have found any rest when he closed his eyes.

Tomorrow, we do something grand.

Harry swallowed another piece of toast, then pushed away the rest of his breakfast, even though Fawkes gave a reprimanding croon on his shoulder. Millicent dared to stroke the phoenix's tail feathers. Fawkes warbled at her, and then cast a dark eye on Harry. *See?* said the eye. *I think she would eat breakfast if I told her that she had to.*

Harry gave an irritable shrug, nearly unseating Fawkes. He had done what he was told to. He had slept well. He'd eaten well. What he had to do today was more important than either of them, however. What did one missed meal and a few hours' missed sleep matter next to the ability to set another species free?

"You're irritated at yourself again," said Draco, without looking away from his plate. "I wish you'd stop it. It feels like sand crunching in my teeth."

Harry shook his head and tried to calm down. A glance at the head table showed that Snape was still eating at a sedate pace, and wouldn't be ready to take him and Draco anywhere by Portkey in the next ten minutes. Harry clenched his hands behind his back and breathed as normally as he could. "Sorry," he whispered. "But it just annoys me at times like these that I've got a body to be fed and rested. Wouldn't it be easier if I was just a creature of pure magic, able to help whenever I wanted, without worrying about silly things like that?"

Draco gave him a full-on glance of pure incredulity for a moment. Then he shook his head and said, "I don't know about you, Harry, but I rather like the fact that you have a body."

Harry felt his cheeks heat up, and then was further irritated at himself for feeling that way. *You've heard people say things like that plenty of times without caring.*

But this time, it's about me.

Draco *deserved* feeling like he had a mouthful of sand for that, Harry decided, and cut his toast into small, elaborate pieces until he saw Snape stand up and proceed towards the doors, for all the world as if this were a normal Saturday. Harry rose to his feet, and Fawkes spread his wings for balance, crooning all the way. Draco stood up beside him, and laid a hand on Harry's arm.

"Relax," he murmured. "It's just a ritual, and I know that you'll do fine, creature of pure magic or not."

Harry fought the urge to pull away from the touch. Draco had made him too conscious of himself again. But the last thing he wanted to do was unsettle Draco's mind so much that the ritual didn't work, so he gave him a sickly smile instead and walked towards the door of the Great Hall. Gazes burned after him. They no longer hurt as much as they had, but Harry always knew when someone else was paying attention to him.

One person in particular, he thought, as he reached the doors and briefly glanced back in Dumbledore's direction. The Headmaster drank his goblet of pumpkin juice, but his stare above that was grave and thoughtful.

He's been so quiet. I wonder if he really does want to make peace with me, or if he does think that he deserved to lose some power and prestige?

It was probably neither of those, Harry knew, and that meant he would have to guard his back against the Headmaster at some point in the future.

For now, though, Harry forced himself to shake his head and think of other things. This was a great thing, what they were going to do, and the impatience bucked and jogged and kicked in him as McGonagall followed Snape.

It makes me feel the way I did when I came out of the Maze, he thought. *I know that what I'm going to do is right, and no one can intrude and question that, and my own conscience can't sting me, either.*

The six of them—well, six counting Regulus’s voice in Harry’s head and the phoenix on Harry’s shoulder, who had to be counted because they would be part of the ritual, like it or not—arrived in the enormous room at the same time as Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy. Snape exchanged a guarded nod with Lucius, and Harry was simultaneously puzzled and amused to see a similar gesture pass between Narcissa and McGonagall. It was just as well that neither pair would be standing across from each other, he thought, where the balances were the most delicate.

“Harry,” said Narcissa, glancing away from McGonagall in the next instant and seemingly trying to pretend that she’d never looked. “How are you? You look much better than you have done in the past.”

Harry winced. *Did she have to draw attention to that?* “I’ve been trying to keep my strength up, Mrs. Malfoy,” he said, as politely as he could at this time, with the restlessness and his magic both bouncing up and down in him. “I know this is important, and I wouldn’t like to let the reins slip from my control because of lack of food and sleep.”

Lucius whispered something in his wife’s ear. Narcissa listened with a slight frown and a nod, but didn’t bother to let Harry in on what had been said. Harry felt a spike of irritation.

Draco placed a hand on the back of his neck and squeezed gently. “Calm down,” he whispered. “We’re going to do this, and then I’m going to make Mother take us to Florean Fortescue’s. We’re near Diagon Alley anyway, and that slop the house elves fix at Hogwarts can’t compare to *real* ice cream.”

Harry chuckled in spite of himself, and in spite of the reminder of house elves, and then looked up sharply. A door had opened on the far side of the chamber, and Griselda Marchbanks had entered with the *hanarz* of the southern goblins beside her.

“Mr. Potter,” she said, though she nodded at the others. “The ingots that you required are assembled.” She nodded over Harry’s shoulder, and he turned to look, catching his breath at the sight of the piled metal. Some of the pieces of it really were coins, though not in any denomination handled in the wizarding world, but much was simple worked metal, wrought to artistic patterns that goblins understood and humans did not.

“Thank you,” he said, and then looked up as another three Portkeys tugged in another three people. Hawthorn arrived first, at once standing and moving smoothly away from the wall where her coin had brought her, her eyes fastening on Harry’s as though she wondered whether he had managed to hurt himself since they had last met. Moody came in behind her, growling softly at the sight of Lucius and Hawthorn, who both proceeded to ignore him. Tybalt was bouncing his wand in his hand and grinning at everyone. He had a bell tied to his hair just above his ear, but Harry couldn’t tell if that meant something or was just to mock and imitate his uncle.

“Thank you for coming,” said Harry, inclining his head. The restlessness had soothed itself a bit when he came closer to his goal. It was replaced, now, with determination, which Harry thought could match the roar of blood in his ears for relentless movement. “There’s no reason to delay, I think, so we should move.” He looked at the *hanarz*, just to make sure the goblins did not need more time, and was met with a faint smile and a click of her nails.

“We have waited centuries,” she said. “You made a golden promise. We are ready.”

Harry nodded to her, and then raised a hand. Nearly everyone jumped as his magic boiled out of his body, following the movement of his palm, as he cut a rectangle into the floor. The goblins only watched, though, as if they had expected something like this. Harry concentrated on making sure that the rectangle’s sides were exactly equal. It was important to the ritual, and it was good practice for the cutting of the vaults he would have to undergo in a few moments.

“Does anyone have any questions?” he asked, as the final chip of stone soared out of the floor and his magic stopped cutting.

No one did, though Harry thought that Moody and Tybalt, at least, looked as if they were wondering what the hell else he could do, if he wanted to. Harry gestured, and the others moved into their places as he had discussed with them in further meetings after that first one: Draco on the far end of the rectangle, across from Harry; Snape next to him and across from McGonagall, as they were balanced by being the strongest each in power of their respective sides; Hawthorn next to Snape and across from Tybalt, balanced as they each were by the wildness of their personalities; Lucius next to Hawthorn and across from Griselda Marchbanks, as the odd ones out otherwise; and Narcissa next to her husband and across from Moody, made necessary by Moody’s intense dislike of all the other three declared to the Dark. Harry took his place at the far end of the rectangle, Fawkes on his shoulder and Regulus at the ready in his mind.

He felt the sharp hum as the three-lace pattern closed and called the ritual's attention. Magic was already pouring into him, or perhaps rising from within him; Harry had read so much about rituals in the last little while, the theoretical arguments as to whether they filled with power from the outside or simply gave a mental mold to the wizard's own strength, that he was not sure which he believed. The three-lace pattern, at least, was old enough that the ritual had required little work to adapt.

No, the complicated part would come with the conjoining of the other wizards' powers—which Harry had to guide, as the initiator of the ritual and the only one here that everyone else was bound to—and the creation of the replacement for Gringotts. Oh, and the actual transfer of the web, and convincing it that it still bound the goblins.

Harry extended his hands, aware of Fawkes's warmth behind his eyelids, Regulus waiting and not whining now, and the watching goblins, who had almost all crowded in at the door of the enormous room. The web blazed into being above them, the fierce white thing Harry had seen once before. He knew about it this time, so he could avoid being blinded by it.

He took a deep breath, and calmed himself, and then uncoiled his magic from out of the center of his body, rising like a whip, like a dragon.

Now.

Magic surged out of him and into Draco, on the other end of the rectangle. For a moment, it wavered. They were balanced by their bond and by their respective families' allegiances to Light and Dark, but the ritual was seeking, ideally, for a Dark witch, and not finding her.

Draco gasped a bit, but met Harry's eyes and held them with a faint smile. His trust was absolute, a bond too strong to be ignored. Harry saw it create the first basis of the pattern between them, a wavering link, tinged deep green on Draco's end and gold on his, fading to gray in the middle. The light flickered and danced before settling into those colors, though. Harry supposed it came from his use of so much Dark magic in the past.

He concentrated calmly on the fact of how much he wanted this ritual to work, and the tie firmed. He could do this, Harry thought. The unicorns had shown him his deep green soul tinged with gold—the color of sunlight, the color of Light. He was both. He could play host to one as easily as the other.

The bond firmed, and *sang*, a deep musical vibration that jolted the chamber and made the wizards and witches in the pattern flinch, again. Fawkes crooned. Harry smiled.

A faint chiming sound joined the music for a moment, making Harry turn his head curiously, but then it faded. He shrugged. *Maybe that's just a side effect of the ritual that I didn't read about.*

It had not destabilized the bond, at least, and Harry reached out to Fawkes and Regulus in turn, speaking with words this time. His and Draco's trust was too deep a thing to need them. *Phoenix, loyal creature of Light, unselfish giver to my vates work. Regulus Black, once Death Eater, brother of my godfather—sorrow shook in his mental voice, but Harry forced it steady—voice in my head, son of the Dark.*

They heard him, and they answered, Fawkes's answer audible and Regulus's a whisper at the corners of his brain. Harry felt the bond shoot from him, and this time there was an audible gasp—from McGonagall, he thought. Harry blinked and looked to the side.

This bond was orange and black, also fading to gray in the middle, and joined at one end to Fawkes's throat. The other end emerged from his temple. Harry swallowed, a bit. He could see how it would be startling.

That bond began singing, too, a clear, pure melody that turned sharply in the middle to a sobbing note. Another chime followed it, slightly louder this time, but no one else voiced concern, and Harry decided that must be normal for this ritual.

Wavering slightly from the sheer power of the magic currently channeled through him, he turned and looked at Moody and Narcissa, the nearest pair to him. Narcissa gave him the barest smile, a curve of her lips. Moody grunted at him—no surprise. His magical eye was fixed intently on Harry, as though he was trying to discover the way the bond going into his head worked.

“Alastor Moody,” Harry said aloud. “Light wizard, old Auror, hunter of Death Eaters, in debt to me. Narcissa Malfoy, daughter of the Black house, mother of Draco Malfoy, never a Death Eater, Dark witch, loyal dancer.”

The bond coalesced without music, but with an angry hum, which Harry thought came from the difference of two contrary souls beating against each other. On Narcissa's end, it was a dreamy gray, shot through with sparks of black. On Moody's, it was a harsh, clear yellow that reminded Harry of tinted Veritaserum. Like the others, it was gray in the middle. A thread snaked away from it, coalescing around Harry's right wrist.

The buzz faded, and a deep chime shook the chamber. Harry waited for it to trail off, and lifted his eyes to the next pair in line. Madam Marchbanks looked pleased and hopeful, though Harry thought she was trying to hide the expression. Lucius tilted his head and stared Harry down, revealing no emotion at all.

"Griselda Marchbanks," said Harry, "Light witch, Elder of the Wizengamot, older than Albus Dumbledore, friend of the *hanarz*. Lucius Malfoy, Dark wizard, Death Eater, truce-dance ally of mine—" He might have tried to stop what he said next, but the ritual compelled a litany of titles from him, and it slipped out before Harry could stop it. "Smug bastard."

Lucius raised his eyebrows, even as the bond between him and Madam Marchbanks sprang eagerly into being. On his side, it was gleaming black, with perhaps just a hint of purple, the color of a Hungarian Horntail's scales. Madam Marchbanks shone gold and silver, as like a unicorn as anyone human Harry had seen. This bond aimed for Harry's brow, and tied itself there.

This time, the accompanying chime made Hawthorn nearly falter from her place in the ritual. Harry frowned. *That really is not supposed to happen*. He turned cautiously to Hawthorn and Tybalt, keeping one eye on the walls as he spoke, wondering if perhaps this room had traps on it that he hadn't detected when he chose it. But why would the goblins not have known about them? And why would they have let him use this place if they had known?

"Tybalt Starrise," he said, and Tybalt all but preened. "Son of Alba Starrise, annoyer of Augustus, pledged ally of mine, wild Light wizard. Hawthorn Parkinson, Dark witch, Red Death, formal ally of my family, runner by the light of the moon." He felt the bond swelling into being, and the last words were abruptly hard to speak. Harry pushed himself through. He had known *this* would happen, at least, as the ritual went on and he handled more and more magic. This was nothing compared to what he would feel when he had to join the bonds all together and then use them to transfer the goblins' web. He shut his eyes for a moment, to let him endure.

This bond howled, like Hawthorn hunting on a full moon night, and was unexpectedly pale on her end, though Harry supposed it might be the sheen of light off a knife. Tybalt blazed both gold and black, like a bumblebee. Harry staggered a little as a secondary bond shot away from it and towards his heart, but managed to keep his feet.

This chime came into his bones, and Harry heard a hiss, deep and angry, that of a defensive guardian. He snapped his head up and searched the room anxiously with his eyes, but there was nothing save the waiting goblins—who weren't alarmed—and the waiting wizards and witches, peering at him curiously.

Harry nodded, and faced Snape and McGonagall, and began speaking. The hiss remained, growing louder, rushing at him. Well, he would deal with it when it got here.

"Minerva McGonagall, Light witch, descendant of Lady Calypso, Deputy Headmistress, chosen friend." The last words had to well out from between his tightly clenched teeth. Abrupt pressure had gripped his head, as though someone had fastened a crown of iron there. Harry could feel Regulus shouting something, but he had to go through the ritual, and couldn't attend to his words. "Severus Snape, Dark wizard, Death Eater, Potions Master, beloved guardian."

The bond between Snape and McGonagall exploded into being, a waterfall of deep, poisonous green racing away from Snape's side and meeting the deep red hue from McGonagall, twining and then snapping, a sound like teeth or claws on rock. The secondary bond from it coiled towards Harry's left wrist.

The chime hurt Harry's head this time, and the hiss grew louder, and when he opened his eyes, a phantom basilisk was slithering towards him along the bond, straight for his left hand.

Immediately, Harry felt stupid for not seeing it before. *Salazar Slytherin established this web. Of course he would have put some measures into place to insure no one could simply destroy it.*

The basilisk was growing more present every moment, a snake with dark purple scales and gleaming yellow eyes. Harry felt himself shake as the eyes locked on him. It was not yet real enough to destroy him, but it would be soon, and then it could easily turn on and kill the others.

There was one thing that Slytherin could not have possibly guessed about the destroyer of the web, though, and Harry used that advantage now, hissing at the basilisk in Parseltongue.

“What is the meaning of this? Will Slytherin’s pet harm one with Slytherin’s talent?”

The basilisk gave a vicious, whip-like motion of its neck, and then shut its eyes. Harry was vaguely aware of the shouts from the others, and of silver flashes next to them which were probably goblin arrows. The bonds weren’t disrupted, though. Harry and the others had passed too far into the ritual to move from their places now. The thread between Snape and McGonagall lashed around his left wrist and coiled there, hard enough to cut off his circulation. The basilisk lay in the rectangle between the Light and Dark sides—only about ten feet long, nowhere near as large as the one in the Chamber of Secrets—and hissed softly at him.

“Beg pardon. I did not know that you could speak to us. I was told that when someone disrupted my lair, that person was my rightful prey. My master told me so,” the snake added, as though attacking a Parselmouth were such a severe breach of etiquette that this was the only way to answer it.

Harry felt his lip curl in spite of himself. He could only imagine what Sylarana or the Many would have said about a snake so willing to crouch at someone else’s feet and accept a Parselmouth as a master rather than a partner.

“Your master is long dead,” he said. “And I want to change your residing place. You reside within the web, do you not?”

“Within the realm of the spider,” said the basilisk. *“Yes. And that realm cannot be shredded. My master told me so.”* It was swaying faintly faster now, and the false eyelids that dimmed its deadly gaze were pulsing with flickers of light. Harry suspected the impulse to open them and gaze was becoming hard for the snake to resist.

“I am changing that realm,” he said. “Not destroying it. If you help me, then I will leave you alive. If you do not, then you will die. Do you understand me? I bear you no ill will, but I will not allow you to harm or hurt anyone around me, either.”

“Why not?” the basilisk demanded. *“They are not all of the Dark, and only one of them can speak to me.”*

Harry did shoot a short glance at Lucius then, just visible over the basilisk’s intensely agitated coils. Lucius had a very odd expression on his face. He could understand the conversation, certainly, but he didn’t seem to know what to feel about it.

“Because I say so,” said Harry. “And I could kill you. Do you need any better reason? I am offering you a choice, which is more than your master gave you when he put you here.”

“I understand,” the basilisk hissed softly. *“I choose to help. And it feels so wonderful to be real again, to sense and hear. Let me stay. I will help.”*

Harry was unsure if the snake *could* help, since the addition of a thirteenth presence to the ritual would unbalance it in favor of the Dark. “As you will,” he said. “Be ready to assist me.”

The basilisk slithered smoothly out of the center of the rectangle—crossing the boundaries of the ritual without disrupting it, as it was part of the web and not part of this new formation of bonds—and around behind Harry. “Keep your eyes shut,” Harry added, remembering just in time that he wouldn’t be able to see the basilisk now if it decided to stare at the others, and then turned his attention to the bond around his left wrist.

With some persuasion, it loosened and became more like the others. Harry suspected at least part of the resistance had come from Snape, who was scowling ferociously at him and had probably wanted to destroy the basilisk. Harry gave him a reprimanding glance, and then jerked his attention back and focused carefully on the bonds on his wrists, around his brow, at his heart, at his temple, and the one that sprang from the center of his chest, just below his heart bond, and connected him to Draco.

This was too important, too delicate a task, for him to leave any bit of his focus dangling outside the middle.

Harry took a deep breath, and then threw his magic forward, and to the side, and upwards, and down, and to the left, and to the right. The six bonds shimmered and shone ferociously, and then Harry was seeing them all gathered in an equally fierce lump behind his eyes, their colors running together.

He gripped them and conjoined them, all of them at once, every way that the twelve presences in the ritual could possibly be bound, himself to Hawthorn and Fawkes to Draco and Moody to Lucius and McGonagall to Madam Marchbanks and Narcissa to Regulus and Tybalt to Snape and himself to Lucius and McGonagall to Hawthorn and Narcissa to Tybalt and...

He made himself a crossroads, forcing his thoughts to hold all the myriad, beautiful patterns in his mind's eye. His own magic rose to take up more and more of the burden, supporting the bonds, maintaining them, keeping the other ritual participants' minds from panicking at the sudden intimacy, helping him memorize the patterns instead of go crazy thinking about them. More and more rose, and he had only more to give. And the ritual itself helped, of course, hammering the molds into his mind and telling him what to do next and pulling on his magic.

Harry took a deep breath when he thought he had it. All those bonds, all the possible similarities between them and all the differences smoothed over into similarities, trembled and glowed before him. He could know the thoughts of any witch or wizard in the room at the moment, and, through Madam Marchbanks, the thoughts of any goblin.

This was part of the reason this was a Light ritual, of course, aside from the sense of cooperation inherent in it. It required a trust that many Dark wizards, proud and solitary, would never give to one another, and an initiator capable of resisting the temptation to stare into other minds.

Harry held the ball of all their thoughts for a moment, and wondered if this was what it was like to be a Light Lord, a *true* Light Lord, not the pitiful imitation that Dumbledore was, living from moment to moment with power and exquisitely aware of how one could affect others at all times.

Then he smiled. *No. Because even Light Lords use compulsion, if they think it's best. This is what it's like to be me, acting the Light part in the middle of this particular ritual.*

He knew the patterns. He took a moment more to breathe.

Then he called on his magic, called on it as he had not since his battle with Tom Riddle in his second year, drew more and more of it up from the middle of himself, and spread it out and to the pile of coins that lay waiting in the corner of the room, and the web on the goblins, and the stone walls of the chamber.

And the coins and the web and the stone answered.

He felt the coins lift, spinning around each other, hurrying into precise lanes. In moments, his magic expanding his thoughts so that he could conceive what would normally not have been possible, or possible only in isolated moments, he knew they had formed the patterns of exchange in Gringotts. They were moving in imitation of the way that they passed from wizard to goblin hands, in and out of the bank. This was a necessary component of the web's replacement, since it was bound to the way that the bank did business, every removal and every deposit of money reinforcing it.

Harry knew he could not hope to mimic all the millions of transactions down the centuries since Slytherin had tied the web. That did not matter. He had only to convince the web that this was the real thing.

The web trembled, and began to move. Harry slitted his eyes, and saw the white glow around the goblins mounting like a sunrise, soaring up and up, turning the air around the ritual participants clear. It was rising, loosing them of its own free will, drifting up and wafting towards the coins. The goblins themselves were almost all standing still, and doing nothing interesting right now. The illusion of busy money attracted the web instead.

Harry felt his mind, or, more properly, his magic, strain. There was no way that he could be holding all these patterns in his memory at once, naturally. But the magic could contain the ritual bonds, which provided the power for the lifting of the web, and the patterns of the coins, which provided a place for the web to go. Harry did not feel quite human right now. He suspected he wouldn't be able to remember exactly how he felt afterwards, either, as he hadn't been able to remember exactly the experience he'd gone through in the Maze.

He asked his magic for still more.

He felt his heart give a single hard beat, but the magic answered him, deep and welling, lifting and pouring through him from his reserves. Harry reached for the stone walls, and began to blast imitation vaults in them.

Chips of stone soared past his face, when he could see what was in front of his face. His vision pulsed in and out, sometimes showing him what was happening in the room, sometimes showing him what was actually *behind* his head—the web hovering over the zooming coins and watching them in fascination—and sometimes showing him that immense ball of gathered bonds and magic and trust. Harry could hear, though, his breathing lifting and becoming more and more labored. His magic might give out before the end, at the rate he was going.

What magic cannot do, will must.

Harry locked his will and pushed it forward. The last of the vaults were blasted now, and he remembered what the *hanarz* had told him. Every use of a key in a vault increased the web, too.

He reached out, confidently weaving a glamour, and his vision and the world were steady but beating, like a heart, repeating what he saw in ordered patterns, bonds and *coins* and *web* and *illusion*—

The illusion put what looked like metallic doors into place over the vault entrances, and then conjured keys. Harry tied off the glamour, and watched in amusement as the keys began to bustle about, “unlocking” the vault entrances and then “locking” them again, all a shadow-play to attract and hold the web’s attention. Harry was panting from the strain, but he did enjoy the irony of employing what was technically Dark magic, because it was deceptive, in the midst of a Light ritual.

The web turned to look at the vaults, and Harry felt it writhing, the white tendrils uncurling behind it. Its main object was not confinement of the goblins, but to reinforce itself through the business of the bank. Slytherin had made sure of it, and had, through that, made it seemingly impossible that anyone could free the southern goblins without shutting down Gringotts itself.

Now, though, that was working against his intentions. The web was a mindless thing, not sentient, a creature of fascinations and shallow emotions. It moved slowly, slowly, closer to the whizzing coins and the phantom doors.

Harry could feel his arms trembling. He told himself that was only an illusion, too. He was feeling the strain in his body, particularly his chest, but he wasn’t holding anything up. He spun more and more magic out of himself, and into the temptation for the web.

The web *sprang*.

Harry cried out as its tendrils uncurled from the goblins altogether, and wrapped greedily around the new illusion of the bank. He moved, timing things precisely, letting the web settle into place and hum happily before he held up the ball of all the conjoined bonds, all the conjoined magic, and flung it into the center of the illusion.

It landed, freely given magic, freely given sacrifice, which in the original ritual would have tied the curse into place on the new volunteer. Instead, here, it gave the illusion of the bank a heart, and made it permanent. Harry could feel the web’s “belief” in the illusion form fully and formidably, and knew the goblins’ freedom was complete.

He took a deep breath of relief.

“Thank you. That was a beautiful place of magic to see. I have missed magic. And now I shall guard the web, which is what my master asked me to do.”

Harry lifted his eyes, blinking, and saw the basilisk slithering rapidly towards the newly-placed web. It grew less real as it moved, tattering into purple-black strands of mist and one glimpse of yellow eyes that still made Harry shiver. Then it wrapped itself around the web and vanished.

Harry managed a tired grin. If anyone *did* try to tamper with the southern goblins’ web after this, perhaps move it back to them, they would find the basilisk hissing and probably staring or biting them to death before they could do anything about it. And it was extremely unlikely that Voldemort, the only other Parselmouth in Britain, would care enough to do anything about it.

And now he had to turn around and look at other things, because he was not done yet.

Harry reached out, carefully, and began unbraiding the bonds that still tied to him, going in reverse order. A hissing twist, and the bond around his left wrist parted, and McGonagall and Snape sagged. A howl, and Hawthorn and Tybalt were blinking at each other, as if they didn’t know what had happened. A roar, and Lucius and Madam Marchbanks were stepping away from each other with mutual expressions of distaste. A buzz, and Narcissa and Moody were free; Moody showed more relief than Narcissa at their parting.

Fawkes trilled, helping Harry ease the bond between Regulus and himself apart. Regulus sighed. *Thank goodness. That phoenix was singing at me all the damn time. I don’t know how you stand it, having him bonded to you.*

Harry shrugged, a motion that made him gasp in pain—he had not realized how tense his body was—and reached out to the bond between himself and Draco. Though he had not thought much on the other boy while they were bound together, this

ritual would have been impossible without him, he thought, meeting Draco's eyes across the rectangle. That steady, fundamental tie of trust had let him do everything else.

Draco laid his hand gently on the bond. Harry shivered. It felt as though the hand had reached into his chest and pressed upon his heart. It felt—not so much good as *sweet*.

“Can't this stay?” Draco whispered. Harry heard him clearly, despite the distance between them. “I wouldn't mind.”

Harry shook his head slightly, and smiled, and released the connection. He caught a look of disappointment on Draco's face before he turned away, but he was sure he had made the right decision. Both he and Draco would have sickened of each other before long, forced to live in such intimacy. It would have made Draco's empathy seem like nothing.

Harry used the moment when the ritual still buzzed and hummed through him to look at the *hanarz* near the doors. Her face was painted with an expression of joy that even he, inexperienced at reading goblins, could recognize. She bowed her head slightly to him. Earlier, she had confirmed to Harry that she and her people would not be hasty. They would keep up the business of Gringotts as usual at first. Slowly, they would begin changing the terms of their relationship with wizards. Now that they were free, they could afford to take their time. It had been the web, the lack of choices in dealing with wizards, which made them impatient.

Harry whispered the words that would end the ritual. “In the name of sunrise, this ritual is done, and the transfer complete.”

The buzz in his head ended as the power withdrew, slipping away from him like water, and the very last expanded boundaries of his mind contracted violently. Harry dropped to his knees, shaking. His body ached viciously. He could actually *feel* his lungs working to take in enough air, and his vision blurred and swam. Magical exhaustion, he knew, the kind he had experienced when he aided Connor on the Quidditch Pitch in first year.

He heard Snape snapping something out, and hoped, fuzzily, that his guardian was hurting no one's feelings as he scooped him off the floor.

He had done what he came here to do. The goblins were free, and he had exerted himself to the utmost in freeing them. That meant that he had no reason to stay awake. He really had done all he could, with no selfish holding back.

Harry slipped into sleep, fully aware that he would be smiling. There could be no better cause for tiring himself out than this.

~*~*~*~*~*

Interlude: And Soaring Ever Singest

June 1st, 1995

Dear Potter:

Hello! How are you? Have you had any dreams of blueberry pies lately? My lord continues to wake me up when I am about to reach mine, so I must confess that the taste of blueberries is something my mouth has sorely missed, almost as much as it misses the taste of blood.

But that is not what I was writing to talk to you about. I am quite sure that you do not care about Death Eaters who miss blueberries. You might care about the blood, and I hope someday to taste a Crucio from your wand and see whether the taste you put into my mouth is different from the one my lord and Our Lady of Pain create.

No, I am writing to tell you three things. They are all important, so perhaps you should pay close attention. On the other hand, perhaps I am crossing my eyes at you on the other side of the parchment. After all, you cannot be sure, can you? I often sit with the letters I receive and try to imagine the expressions on the faces of those who sent them to me. I am never sure if I am right.

First, what you have accomplished so far is quite impressive. Higher still and higher from the earth thou springest, like a cloud of fire; the blue deep thou wingest, and singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest. So sang the poet whose heart would not burn, the one who by the time he was nineteen had already begun to sing of revolution, and who died when he was not quite twice your age, drowned in roaring water. Impressive accomplishments for one so young, and your own heart is a soaring, singing thing by now, I imagine. It should be. The summer is so near, the summer of your soul.

Teach me half the gladness that thy brain must know. I wish you could. It would make my own madness more harmonious.

Second, you should still watch the sun, always. On the other hand, perhaps you should watch the moon. Or was it the stars? I am afraid I always mix these things up. Dire warnings are not my forte. On the other hand, I am quite good at causing pain, and playing games.

Everything is a game, Potter. Never forget that.

Third, I wish to extend an invitation to you. The time is not important; I will name the time in some future letter. But the place is dearly important to me. I wish to meet on that beach in Northumberland where we first danced together.

Tell me you will be there. Perhaps you will bring blueberries? Or blood? Either will be good.

In the game,
Evan Rosier.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Fifty-Eight: One Sacrifice Too Many

Draco leaned against the wall outside the classroom door and waited patiently. He could have gone into the room and been closer to Harry, but Harry was only telling a story that Draco already knew to another class of students from all Houses. Draco knew he would have felt less comforted by Harry's presence than annoyed with all the other people who were sharing it.

Besides, the fact that he'd stayed away from Harry all day would lend his request more weight when he made it.

The lesson shifted as he listened. Now Harry was teaching the other students simple dueling spells, allegedly because their Defense Against the Dark Arts curriculum was inadequate with two teachers in one year—and a third one having to take over next year, when Karkaroff would go back to Durmstrang. Draco knew the truth, of course, because Harry had confessed it to him when he asked. Connor had supposedly heard from Krum that for the Third Task, it would be useful if the champions knew plenty of dueling spells. To avoid letting on that he knew anything about it, Connor had asked Harry to tutor him in common with the others.

Draco couldn't quite forbear edging nearer the door and peering in at Harry, to see what he was teaching them now.

Harry's brother had just managed to deflect a simple cutting hex with a Shield Charm. He was laughing out loud, as if that simple accomplishment was worth startling a whole room full of other people. Harry stood across from him, smiling at him and shaking his head.

Draco smiled in turn and tilted his head so that more of the sunlight from Harry's emotions fell on his face. Simple things like this made Harry so happy. Draco thought, with one part of his mind, that Harry really should find some employment more fit for him—he couldn't strike with one tenth of his power, since the other students were so weak—but he'd been distant and preoccupied since a few days after the successful completion of the ritual to free the southern goblins. It was only right that he have some joy now.

Harry was dancing attendance on Loony Lovegood next, urging her to make a trial of the Shield Charm against his cutting hex. Loony only got halfway through the spell before she started talking dreamily to her scarf, and Harry had to pull up his hex. For a moment, his emotions shifted towards worry like snow blowing in Draco's face. Then they steadied, and he shook his head and moved towards Smith and Granger, who'd apparently patched up their little love affair when Draco wasn't looking.

Draco tensed his shoulders. *I do want to just drag him out of there. But wait. Be patient. Once he hears what I want, I know he'll need a few hours to think about it. Best if I just let him have this time now, and he doesn't get irritated at me for pushing too soon.*

Draco waited, immobile, and patient, really, even if he had to chew on his tongue to stay quiet more than once as Harry responded with deep calm to Smith's sniping comments. Draco was an expert at reading Harry in a way that none of the others in the classroom were, and he could see that the calm was as false as his own patience. Harry's shoulders kept tightening, and he smoothed out the cruel edges that tried to wrinkle his voice again and again.

I think he'll agree to this, Draco thought hopefully. *Merlin knows that he needs this as much as I do.*

Finally, the other students left the classroom for dinner, but not before asking Harry for more lessons the next day. Harry waved them off with talk about studying for exams in the library. Draco's eyes narrowed. *He's been doing that for the past week, and he always looks paler afterward.*

Not this time.

More than one person gave him an odd glance as they streamed past him, but Draco ignored them. The only other student whose opinion he cared about was waiting until everyone had left. He could see that, and that would just mean Draco would wait until everyone had left, too.

Harry peered around the door, finally, fully five minutes after his brother and the Weasel had gone to dinner, cracking immature Gryffindorish jokes. He stared around the corner, then jumped when he saw Draco. Draco straightened up and looked at him calmly.

"You could have come in, you know," said Harry, after a few moments of silence. "No one would have minded."

Draco sighed. "I have something to ask you," he said. "Something that needs to be said in private, but I don't know if I could have waited if I'd come into the classroom." He studied Harry's tight, pale face, and nodded, fully convinced that this would help Harry as much as him.

Harry grinned. "Is this about your birthday gift, Draco? Yes, I *know* it's your birthday tomorrow. I'm not going to tell you what I got you beforehand."

"It's about my birthday," said Draco, "but this time, I wanted to ask for a specific gift."

Harry arched his eyebrows. "You don't trust me to get you something you'll like?"

Draco had not actually counted on Harry having bought or made a gift already. Greed warred with stronger greed. Really, he wanted both presents, if he could be assured of a reasonable chance of getting them both...

But the stronger greed—which, Draco told himself, had its roots in concern for Harry as much as anything else—won. He shook his head. "It's not that. But I *really* want something that only you can make for me."

"Something magical, then," Harry summed up. "Not a nundu, Draco, or a way of casting multiple hexes at people who annoy you."

That would be useful. Draco squashed his longing. "No, not that."

Harry nodded at him. "All right. What do you want, then?"

Draco found that it wasn't as easy to ask for it, after all, confronted by those wide and utterly quizzical green eyes. But where courage might have failed him, love and desire stepped in. "I want you to create the same kind of magical bond that we shared in the ritual to free the goblins," he said, "just for one day. From midnight tonight to midnight tomorrow. That should do it."

Harry's face turned pale, and Draco saw a brief flash of green light, one of Harry's usual signs of wanting to back away. Draco nodded slowly. That clinched it, then. Harry hadn't ended that bond for a reason that had anything to do with Draco. It was his own fear he'd been thinking of, his own reluctance.

Draco held his gaze and waited. He knew exactly why Harry was frightened. The bond had connected them so nearly that they'd shared physical sensations along with emotions; Draco had even received a brief glimpse of what it must be like to hold as much magic as Harry had. It wasn't something that could be hidden or backed away from. Harry retained some secrets even now, looked away and sent people's gazes in the other direction. Draco thought he had good reason for some of it, but he didn't see why *he* should be shut out. *He* was the one who had made the promise never to hurt Harry's mother, and had since made it about Harry's father as well. *He* didn't go around betraying Harry's secrets to other people. *He* could feel Harry's trust in him during the ritual, rock-solid, so deep that it hadn't even required a description of him to cement the bond, the way it had with the others. He thought that this link was a perfectly fine birthday gift. It didn't press Harry too far, because it built on what Harry had already given him.

And it would give Draco back something, if only for a day, that he'd been longing for and missing since the ritual. Perhaps it

was un-Malfoyish to admit how deeply that hour of connection had affected him. He didn't really care. It wasn't as though Harry was about to run to Lucius and spill this secret, either.

Harry closed his eyes and let out a low, shuddering breath. "I—why do you want this, Draco?" he asked.

Draco scowled at him. "Now you're just acting stupid, Harry. You know why I want this. I understand that you're afraid, and —" his throat burned to say it, but only from reluctance, not from speaking the truth "—if you really want me to, I'll choose something else. But I'm not going to let you lie and play dumb and say that you don't know something you know perfectly well." He tapped the side of his head with his finger. "Exams are coming up, you know. You ought to practice retaining facts, not ignoring them, or else they'll slip out of your head in the middle of the test."

Harry laughed, though the sound was hollow. He looked up slowly, blinking. "I—let me think about it, Draco, all right?" he asked.

That was the period of a few hours Draco had expected. He nodded, and fell into step beside Harry as they walked down to dinner. He didn't make an attempt to touch him. Since Halloween, he'd become adept, again, at knowing when to back off, and he knew Harry would see a touch right now as pushing his case.

Harry shoved his dinner around on his plate. Normally, he was quite all right with shepherd's pie, but now he didn't feel like eating.

He darted a glance at Draco, and then looked away. Draco was steadily eating, pretending that nothing was wrong. He'd made his request, and Harry knew he wouldn't take it back unless Harry asked him to take it back. And Harry didn't want to.

But if I let him that close to me, then he'll probably find out about my plan, he thought.

Good, said Regulus, startling him. They'd had another argument a week ago, and he hadn't been around Harry's head much since then. *It's a stupid plan. I hope he has a go at you and makes you see reason.*

You know I can't think of any other way to accomplish it, Harry thought, and stabbed viciously at a piece of pie. Millicent glared at him as the bits splattered her. Harry ducked his head and remained like that until she looked away. *I've tried and tried. I don't like this way, either, but the northern goblins have to be free, and their web is unmanageable otherwise.*

You don't have to do this so quickly, Regulus urged him, reiterating the terms of their argument a week before. *The goblins will wait. Just because their cousins are free doesn't mean they'll demand you free them the next month. You can study some more and find out another way with time. It's your own sense of the fitness of things that's rushing you, Harry, not anyone else.*

Harry couldn't say anything to that, but he didn't see that it mattered. So his own sense of the fitness of things had made him study the web linked to the linchpins and decide to remove it in this way. It had also made him tutor Connor in dueling spells, and try to reconcile with their father, and befriend Draco. His sense of the fitness of things was usually correct.

And he feared that he was giving Draco's request such serious consideration because he wanted that sense of connection back, too, and that was weak and silly, to give in just because he wanted to.

He managed to force some of the pie down his throat, and wondered what he was going to say to Draco.

In particular details, at least. In general outlines, he already knew.

Draco sat on his bed, swinging his foot and waiting for Harry to come out of the loo, and wondered why everything in his life had to be so bloody complicated.

Well, not *everything*. But, right now, both his relationship with his father and his relationship with Harry were complicated, and those were bloody *enough*.

Lucius was still not pleased that Draco had gone to Walpurgis Night. Malfoys didn't do that. They didn't dance around like idiots, and they didn't expose themselves to wild magic that could make them behave like idiots, either. They stayed safely

inside their homes and ignored the wild Dark, Draco supposed. His father had not actually said what they did, only relayed several stern injunctions concerning what they would not do.

Draco had written him a rude letter back, and ignored his father the day of the ritual to free the goblins. Silence had settled between them since then. He knew one of them would have to break it eventually, but he was determined not to be the one. He was going to be fifteen tomorrow. That was old enough to have a say in his own actions. His father certainly demanded he be responsible when dealing with consequences, and had since he was seven years old. Draco didn't see why choosing to court a certain set of consequences was an exception to that rule.

And Harry...

Draco leaned back on his pillow, and folded his arms behind his head, and thought.

He might have pushed Harry too far, asking for this bond to be restored. Everything was so delicate, so on a middle path between too far—when Harry would back away from him—and not far enough—when Harry might be willing to give him more, but wouldn't unless Draco asked for it.

And all the way through, there was the undercurrent of fear that he was pushing for things Harry really wouldn't give him, but which his bloody sacrificial instincts demanded he hand over anyway. And of course Harry, the idiot, didn't have any ability to just say *no* where someone else would have when he felt unduly pressured.

And Draco did sometimes resent that he had to do so much work, and that he could feel Harry's emotions, but Harry still lied by omission or just refused to tell him certain things that were on his mind.

So complicated, Draco thought, even as the loo's door swung open and Harry walked out. *But I love him.*

And by the look on Harry's face and the wind pouring around his body, he'd nerved himself up to an answer, one way or the other. Draco sat up and tried to look as neutral as possible.

"Yes," Harry whispered. "All right."

Draco smiled. It would be dishonest not to, since Harry knew this would make him happy. And being honest with Harry was always better, except when he *did* push too far and put him in a situation that would be uncomfortable...

Bloody complicated thing, Draco thought, and nodded. "All right. Do you want to do it at midnight?"

"No," said Harry. "From now—" "it was nearly eleven'o'clock"—"until midnight tomorrow is fine."

He put out a hand, and gathered his magic around himself. Draco watched him in silent awe. He wondered if Harry even had a clue how *beautiful* he was when he did this. Since he'd confined his magic to his body, it no longer burned around him in an aura of roses, but it poured out of him more smoothly, and the bond that stretched a moment later from Harry's chest to Draco's, gold and green, curved like a leaping dolphin. Draco could not imagine anyone turning away from it in disgust, the way that Harry's mother had implied most people would.

Draco felt the bond settle into place, and the impatient longing that had gnawed at him, bad as a craving for a nap in History of Magic, washed abruptly away. He took a few deep breaths. The feeling was deeper than he'd thought it would be. Of course, with no ritual to take attention away from it or mask it this time, he could feel the full glory of it.

From the expression on Harry's face, so could he, and he was caught somewhere between wonder and terror. He did want this, Draco realized with a blink, and that was another reason he hadn't wanted to grant the request.

Bloody prat, Draco thought with affection. *He never does think he can have anything he wants.*

Harry swung his head sharply and met his eyes. Draco blinked. *Well, yes. He heard my thoughts, didn't he?* Draco didn't think it'd been all of them, but Harry nodded his head a moment later, and that confirmed that at least focused, directed thoughts could make it across to him.

I like this, Draco thought gleefully. *Too bad exams aren't tomorrow, or we could cheat, and no one could catch us.*

Harry rolled his eyes, and, to Draco's delight, responded comfortably in mental speech, without even trying to speak aloud. Perhaps it came from practice with Regulus Black and his phoenix, but it was still a good sign. *It'd be pretty obvious. The*

bond is visible, remember?

Can you hide it? Draco wasn't at all ashamed of the visible link being there, but he would rather be the only one who knew the degree of his connection with Harry tomorrow. He could feel Harry's mind opening gently, and the effort of speaking with each other this way was becoming less and less all the time. His emotions were stronger and clearer, and when Draco raised a hand and touched the bond, Harry started and shivered as though a hand had run across his hair.

I—yes. Harry peered at him. *You're sure?*

Draco sent a wordless answer of happiness this time, and watched Harry blink as he realized he'd just felt it, rather than read it. He shivered again, and murmured a glamour incantation aloud, as though trying to step out of the unusual intimacy the bond had given them. The bond shimmered and dimmed to a thin green and gold thread which could easily be mistaken for a sheen of drifting sunlight.

"There," said Harry, also aloud.

Pleasant dreams, Draco whispered, and discovered another side effect of the bond in that moment. He could shade his voice so that Harry could tell he was absolutely sincere, and the statement arrived in his mind without any sign of a lie. Draco smiled at Harry. He was delighted, and saw no reason to hide it. For once, Harry would have to stop driving himself into a frenzy about his secrets, whatever they were. Draco thought it would be good for him. He was sure that Harry's pallor and agitation this last week had something to do with a secret.

Harry swallowed. *Thank you,* he said, also sincere, and *Happy birthday,* and made his way to his own bed.

Draco touched the bond again. It gave a low hum, and he felt a shiver of sweetness in his own chest. He rolled under the covers, and knew when Harry settled into place in his bed, the physical sensations arriving a moment after his did, like an echo.

This is only for one day, he told himself sternly. *Don't get used to it.*

But even that was not enough to keep him from slipping into the deepest and most content sleep he'd had for two weeks.

Harry woke early the next morning, and lay there listening to the bond hum.

He didn't want to move, and not only because Draco's mind was curled in a purring, dreaming ball in his head, or because he could feel the extra warmth and comfort of blankets beyond those around his own limbs.

Merlin, the bond felt so *good*.

Harry shivered. He hadn't paid that much attention to Regulus when he'd spoken yesterday, occupied more with his own feelings about what would happen when the bond was reinstated, but now Regulus was quiet, and Fawkes had his head tucked beneath his wing, and Harry had memories and fragments of dreams scattered in his head, dreams in which Draco had participated. There was no one to argue with, and no one to make him deny what he really thought by bringing it up first and forcing him on the defensive.

He had wanted this back. He had wanted the bond to be with Draco, and not anyone else. For all that their presence and magic in his head had been fascinating, he hadn't missed Hawthorn or Tybalt or even Snape the way he'd missed Draco.

He could pretend this request was a sacrifice, but it wasn't, not really. He had done this *mostly* because he wanted to.

And that frightened him. If he chose one thing he wanted, not because someone forced him to it but in preference to other things, what might that not lead to?

Harry had the dim feeling that he'd had an answer to this before, that he'd seen in the Maze that it would lead to nothing bad, but it was hard to remember when the bond was actually *there*, and the prospect of spending a whole day with Draco opened up before him like the vision of sunrise from a mountaintop. The answers weren't simple, no matter how much he wanted just to say that this was right or it was wrong. He shook, despite the warmth, and closed his eyes tightly.

The ball of emotions in his mind expanded, and then Draco was awake. He took a moment to feel around for the bond, and

Harry jolted as that chord in his chest was touched. He lifted up his head and looked through the curtains of his bed, to find Draco grinning at him from his own.

Good morning, said Draco's voice cheerfully in his head. *You had sweet dreams, didn't you?*

Harry nodded unwillingly.

So now we'll have a good breakfast. Draco paused for a moment, then added, *And I promise at some point that I'll stop acting so much like a child, but let me enjoy it for the moment. I feel like a first-year. All I want to do is giggle and run around.* He winked at Harry and climbed out of bed.

Harry let out a careful breath. The thought that Draco had been acting like a child was one that he'd barely been conscious of himself, certainly not one he'd sent to Draco on purpose along the bond. This was leaving their minds more and more open to each other. By nightfall, Harry wondered if he'd have any secrets at all.

I don't see why you need to have any secrets from me, unless you really want to, Draco said. *Do you want to? I meant what I said, Harry. You can end the bond, if it makes you too uncomfortable.*

It made him uncomfortable, Harry thought, but also more comfortable than he'd been since the ritual, or at least since he awoke from his magical exhaustion and found himself missing Draco.

Good.

Draco padded in to use the shower, as Harry deduced from the ghostly feel of warm water on his skin a moment later. He decided to remain in bed for right now, even though he was very thoroughly awake. He needed some time to consider the situation, to prepare himself to get through the day, and to try and decide what the hell he wanted—for Draco to find out what he was hiding, or not. It was impossible that he should want two contradictory things at the same time, and yet it was happening.

Draco found himself quickly getting used to the doubled sensations at the breakfast table. Harry's taste buds were different from his, finding less blandness in the porridge and more taste in the sausages, but just enough to add a piquancy to the meal. Draco enjoyed it more than he had any breakfast in a long time.

He sneaked a glance at Harry, and caught him looking at him. Harry ducked his head. A blush spread over his cheeks. Draco blinked in amusement. He got both the faint sting from the echoed heat, and the sensation of sand in his teeth that always showed up whenever Harry was irritated with himself.

"Problems?" he asked mildly.

"I'm having a hard time adjusting, I guess." Harry stirred his spoon through his porridge. "I don't know how you live with the empathy all the time. I suppose I can't blame you for focusing your emotions on just me. Imagine feeling these sensations from everyone all at once." He looked revolted, and Draco could touch the underlying tenor of his thoughts. *I wouldn't be able to stand it.*

"I had no choice but to get used to the empathy," said Draco, with a shrug. "With this, though..." Because he couldn't help himself, and he'd always been more inclined to indulge his whims than suppress them like a good little boy, he touched the cord that extended from the center of his chest again.

Harry gave another one of those shivers, but this time, Draco knew it was a motion of pleasure. His thoughts murmured and twitched and collided. Harry seemed to have a constant running argument in his head, the thought of which wearied Draco far more than feeling someone else's emotions. It was fascinating as an outsider, though, and he watched Harry arguing that of course it was natural he should spend so much time thinking of the bond when it occupied so much of his attention, and then arguing that he should think about other things in case other people needed his help, and then arguing that he was helping Draco, and did it matter that he was also helping himself in the process?—

When do you get any rest? Draco asked, amazed and amused, and letting both the emotions flow into Harry. It wasn't as though he could hold them back. Unlike Harry, he saw no reason to try, either.

Harry jumped, but responded in the same way, evidently not willing to reveal the existence of the bond to their yearmates by

answering a question Draco hadn't asked. *At night, when most other people do.*

I meant during the day. That argument in your head would wear me out. Draco chewed thoughtfully on an unidentifiable bit from his porridge while he awaited an explanation. Actually, he could feel out the edges of that explanation, but he wanted to hear the words Harry would put it in.

Harry stared at his plate in silence for a moment, then shrugged. *I don't know. I suppose I'm always keeping an eye on myself.*

Why?

Harry turned his head sharply, and the answer, half-formed, slid straight into Draco's head. Harry was afraid of what he might do if he wasn't constantly weighing the consequences to every small action. His magic was too great, and he didn't know enough about acting like a normal wizard to avoid constant mistakes. He was afraid...

He was afraid of being selfish.

Draco blinked. *Oh. Well, now that I know that, that makes the argument in your head easier to settle.*

Does it? Harry was all but snapping at him now, drawing his head up and his shoulders back in offended pride. Draco found that adorable, and Harry picked up on that, and reacted strongly, and Draco reassured him, all without much more than glimmers of half-conscious thought flashing between them.

Of course. Your selfishness isn't something to be afraid of, Harry. You're a good person. You wouldn't suddenly start hurting everyone else because you decided to take one thing you wanted. Draco reached out and caught his hand, turning it over so that he could see the pulse in Harry's wrist. It was jumping erratically. He could feel it, somewhere in the roof of his mouth, if he really concentrated. Draco wondered what he would be feeling by the time that night came, if they would even be two distinct and separate people anymore. *And with me right here, I could tell you if you made a mistake or did hurt someone else and didn't notice.*

But why should you have to bear that burden? I lean on you for too much already.

Draco made an exasperated noise, though he wasn't sure if it was aloud or only in his head. *I'll tell you when it's too much, Harry. And the bargain goes both ways, you know. I intend for you to tell me when I'm making mistakes, like turning my empathy too much on you. I intend for you to give me things I want. You seem to think you'll swallow me alive. Not when I'm sticking in your throat and rather protesting all the way down, I think, and not when I'm trying to embrace you in the same way.*

Harry tried to pull his hand free. Draco asked why, and caught a jumble of frayed words. *Stupid...this sounds silly...doesn't make sense...*

And it did, Draco answered him, and if the words were stupid, oh well, it wasn't as though they had to say them all the time.

Harry swallowed, and lifted his eyes slowly to lock with Draco's.

Draco delighted in the surrender he saw there, in the acceptance of this bond for at least one day, and his own delight flooded back to him from Harry, accomplished and embraced and made manifold.

Harry *knew* he was supposed to be paying attention to History of Magic, but even he grew rather weary of all the recitations of goblin rebellions—other things had happened in wizarding history, too, and if Binns would address them, perhaps Harry wouldn't have had to in his evening lessons—and besides, this morning there was all the distraction of Draco's mind before him, rich and shining.

He caught a hint of *birthday, fifteenth birthday!* And that slid him, naturally, into a memory of Draco's sixth birthday, the one he always treasured as the day that meant the most for itself. He'd gone riding on a broom early in the morning, the first time he'd been trusted off the ground without a guardian—even if his father did hover below him and watch him soaring and looping, ready to fly to the rescue if he got in trouble. It was still an important sign of independence. The memory of the taste of the wind was in his mouth even nine years later. It became more real, for Harry, than the taste of sleepiness in his own mouth, or the murmur of drowsy students around him.

Then his mother had brought him into the house and given him a cake she'd baked with her own hands, instead of having the house elves do it. That was how Harry learned that Narcissa Malfoy, undoubtedly skilled in Dark magic and in politics, was not at all skilled in cookery. The cake was lopsided and half-burnt and fell sloppily all over the table, but Draco didn't care. He ate it all, and kissed his mother on the cheek with a mouth made pale by the excessive amount of sugar Narcissa had ended up putting in the cake, reasoning that more sweetness was always better.

Then Draco's father had taken charge of him again, and led him to an inner room in the Manor. There was the skeleton of the dragon that one of their distant ancestors had killed long ago, winning glory and a hefty portion of gold from grateful wizards. Lucius pointed out all the teeth and all the spines to his son, and told him stories of Malfoys in the past who had briefly claimed each part of the skeleton, ventured into the outer world with it, and made their fortune. Draco listened attentively to all the stories, eyes wide. Harry did, too. He supposed it was possible that these weren't the exact tales Lucius had told—Draco had replayed this memory so many times down the years that he'd altered little details of it to suit what he wanted it to be—but they were certainly more fascinating than yet another goblin rebellion.

Narcissa led Draco outside at sunset, and cast a spell that let him see, for just a moment, a beam of green light shooting up from the sun. It rose and shone at sunset, for two seconds only, and then vanished. Most people would miss it all the time, but the spell showed Draco exactly where to look, and made the beam glimmer in his eyes like fire. Draco squealed, and Narcissa hugged him and whispered that the beam must have been shining when he was born, because he'd been born at the exact moment of sunset. She kissed him on the forehead, and put him on the ground to run back inside.

He sat by the fire with his parents that night, and carefully opened his gifts: books, and a new Slytherin shirt that did not at all look like baby clothes, and a pair of silver serpents that would crawl around if he spoke one word and defend him if he spoke another, and a Kneazle kitten who proceeded to be the most spoiled cat in the world for the next year and a half, until he wandered away outside the wards and didn't come back.

Harry lingered in that last scene for a while, watching the fire and the calm expressions on the faces of Draco's parents. An emotion he managed to acknowledge was envy rose up in him. It felt wonderful just to be there. He didn't know what it would be like, to have a memory like this to fall back on every time one doubted a parent's love.

He opened his eyes, and blinked, and shook his head, and found Draco looking at him with an expression somewhere between sadness and awe.

"So that's why you love your brother so much," he whispered aloud, and touched the cord of the bond again.

Harry gasped aloud this time, since it felt like the purring Kneazle from Draco's memory had just wound around his lungs and smothered them in sweet warmth. When he'd recovered, he said, "What did you see?"

"Enough," said Draco, and the memories rushed through Harry's mind, all of Connor, all filled with the bright shades of the affection he'd conceived for his brother in the years they spent in Godric's Hollow.

Harry bowed his head, acknowledging the statement, and then the class ended and they stood to make their way to lunch.

Arithmancy was more torturous than Draco had thought it would be. He'd anticipated vanishing almost completely into Harry's memories, the way he had that morning, and known there would be trouble with Professor Vector over it. She was far more attentive than Binns, for one thing, and would want to know why in the world they weren't doing their calculations.

Instead, the bond began alternating his viewpoint. Sometimes he saw things through his eyes, sometimes from Harry's. It was a startling thing to find out just how fuzzy near-sightedness and glasses could make him. It was even odder to find out that Harry's hands, although larger than his were, *felt* lighter. Draco supposed that was one reason he was able to catch the Snitch so easily.

Harry shifted around in his head, distressed, from his mind, and intrigued, and worried that someone would notice something was odd with them. Draco concealed a smile as he bowed his head over his problems, which abruptly became Harry's (with the wrong answer to one of them, he noticed, no doubt caused by his distraction). His empathy was usually a clear illustration of Harry's emotions after spending seven months with it, but this was like having both music and words, to *know* for certain what he was feeling and why, and not just have to guess from the sensations that blew against his skin or flashed in front of his face.

Calm down, he whispered, into Harry's head, taking the opportunity to view a few more memories. They were of the Shrieking Shack, and the confrontation with Sirius Black last year. Draco was just as glad that Harry didn't know he was reliving them. Draco was determined to know just what it was like to have been there, so that Harry's brother couldn't have that part of Harry all to himself any longer. He repressed horror with amusement at how badly Harry was taking this. *No one else has noticed, not even Pansy when she walked right through the bond. I don't think it really exists for anyone but us.*

But our behavior...

Hush. It's all right.

Draco watched some more of those memories, alternating them with glimpses of his own problems when Professor Vector walked past and peered sternly at him, and of Harry's when the bond insisted on putting those in front of him. He was happier and more content than he had been in a long time, though he ached with Harry's remembered pain. He knew Harry was hiding something else, some secret that so far he'd been adept at moving out of the way, but he also knew that Harry was almost wholly consumed with him. It was a nice thing to *know* that.

Which memories are you looking at—Draco!

Draco raised an eyebrow. *You told me about it already.*

Yes, but—

There is nothing that can make me turn away from you in disgust, Harry. Draco thought it was time for another honest, outright statement like that. *Nothing at all. You don't have to worry about hiding from me.*

He felt Harry wavering. It wasn't that he didn't believe Draco, more that he didn't think he could afford the self-indulgence of such a belief, or the self-indulgence it might lead him into.

I love you, Draco said, softly.

Slowly, tentatively, while they went on working Arithmancy problems and Draco watched memories, Harry was working himself towards a trust so absolute that it surpassed anything he'd arrived at so far. Draco couldn't remember a more pleasant afternoon.

Harry knew the exact moment when Draco found his plan to free the northern goblins. They were eating dinner—well, they were supposedly eating dinner, while Harry got distracted by thoughts he hadn't known Draco had and Draco talked at, more than with, Regulus—when the reminder darted innocently through Harry's head.

Draco gasped, and his hand clenched down on Harry's wrist to the point of pain. Harry jumped. Pansy turned around and frowned at both of them. "What's wrong with you?" she demanded. "You've been acting off all day, Draco."

"Nothing," said Draco. "I just remembered that I forgot to write that Charms essay." He rose to his feet, and for a moment Harry hoped he would let this go, but then his hand tugged insistently on Harry's wrist, and Harry reluctantly stood up with him. "Harry's going to help me with it."

Pansy snorted and poured herself more pumpkin juice. "Whatever you say, Draco. Harry's going to help you half-write it, you mean."

"No, really," said Draco, his teeth shining in what would have seemed like a smile to anyone who didn't know him well as he drew Harry out of the Great Hall. "I just want to *talk* with Harry."

That word came out as a snap, and Harry ducked his head. He couldn't look up at Draco as they went towards the dungeons together. Of course, with the bond and thus Draco in his head, it didn't matter. He could feel rage and disappointment all the way down, and only part of it was rage and disappointment at himself for not being able to keep that plan hidden. He'd done his best by not thinking of it deliberately, and Draco had seemed so fascinated by everything else in his head that Harry had thought this day might pass and they'd be done with it.

And now he was feeling those stupid contradictory emotions again, anger that Draco had found it out—and relief that he had.

Draco didn't bother going back to the common room, maybe because they both knew it would be filled with other students. Instead, he drew Harry into a small side tunnel in the dungeons, and held his wrist with one hand and his chin with the other. Harry concentrated on ignoring the doubled physical sensations, and held Draco's eyes, and waited.

"Tell me about why you think you need to do this," said Draco.

Well, that's a better beginning than I could have hoped for.

Don't worry, Harry. Harry winced as Draco stepped fully into his head through the bond. I can do it this way if you want. In fact, I think it will. It makes it impossible for you to lie to me.

Instead of responding in words, Harry shared the image what he'd learned about the northern goblins' web from the southern goblins and Helcas, both of whom were happy to answer his question. The web couldn't be torn without destroying the linchpins, the ancient family homes, mostly of Light pureblood families, that held it together. Nor could it be transferred to something else as easily as Harry had shifted the southern web to an imitation of Gringotts. Instead, something would have to take the linchpins' place, moving into the embrace of the web itself, holding the net down like stakes and allowing the goblins to slip free in the moment of replacement.

Harry could think of only one thing that would be strong enough and large enough to take the linchpins' place: torn bits of magic, set free forever from the wizard that had held them, and freely given up without grudging or resentment, which would add to the power of the sacrifice. He was the only wizard with Lord-level power who might make a willing sacrifice of his magic like that.

It could kill you, said Draco. It would certainly deprive you of magic, and the ability to help other magical creatures get free. You know that, don't you?

He knows that, said Regulus. I told him that. But he isn't listening to me. He thinks he has to do it right now, and he won't wait to find some better solution.

Why not?

The answer flooded up and out of Harry before he could stop it, called from him by the deep stare of Draco's eyes.

He could not rest. He could not relax. He distrusted everything he was doing, unless he was sure that he was doing it to help someone else. The success he'd had lately with the webs meant that he wanted to keep up the same pace, freeing the other species as rapidly as he'd managed in the last few months. He had to do that, or he would start feeling contemptible, as if he were wasting his life.

Draco let out a sharp breath. "No wonder it was hard for you to agree to this bond," he whispered aloud. "You knew that you were doing it for yourself as well as for me, and you knew that you'd spend a full day not thinking about being vates."

Harry nodded. Perhaps Draco would drop his anger now—

"I will not," said Draco. "What you're thinking of doing is *stupid*, Harry, and it's all right to be a little selfish. The goblins encouraged this, didn't they?"

"I proposed it to them," Harry murmured.

"And they probably thought you would stop yourself if you were making an irreparable sacrifice," said Draco. "They don't know *anything* about how much it would cost you, do they? Because you keep hiding how much it would cost you. Merlin, Harry, that has to *stop*. I said it would, once, last year, when I made you start sleeping more. And this is going to stop, too."

Harry twisted, trying to withdraw, not wanting to, but absolutely sure that he had to. How could he ask this much from Draco? And how could he stay this close, let someone know him this well, delay doing something to help someone else when it was in his power—

Draco surged forward along the bond, and showed him how.

Sight dropped away entirely, this time. There was only the bond between them, pulsing with mingled gold and green, and that deep trust that had permitted the link to form in the first place, both times.

If we make a mistake, Harry, it's not forever. We're stronger than to be shattered by one accusation of selfishness or one argument. Guilt passes over us and goes away just as much as happiness like this does. We're part of the future, not only the present, and not only the past.

Harry felt dizzying waves of gold and green crash around him, and for a moment, it was as if he were back in the Maze, and seeing the truths written there in letters too bright for him to deny.

Thinking of Draco and himself was—thinking of Draco and himself. It didn't mean that he was taking time and attention away from other people who deserved it more. He didn't have to keep a constant guard on his thoughts to avoid slipping into evil. There was good to be found outside self-denial.

Why does selflessness equal goodness?

I—I don't know.

Draco promptly pounced on the illogic and swatted it away, just as he had other pieces in the past. It was all right to be a little selfish, he repeated firmly, and poured light and warmth and happiness down the bond until Harry was shaking in pleasure, gasping and sure that he was only going to want more of this.

He opened his eyes, slowly, when the tide receded a bit, and found Draco standing in front of him, arms around his waist and smile smug.

“Convinced, now?” Draco asked.

Harry nodded. Already he was finding it hard to remember why he'd wanted so much to sacrifice his magic, perhaps his life, to freeing the northern goblins. He could find some other, better way. He could wait. And the goblins could live with their disappointment if he had to send them a letter telling them so, and so could he.

That's why you should always bring problems like that to me, Draco said, more smug than ever. *I can point out the obvious.*

Harry moved forward and quietly embraced him. The bond was not so bad after all.

He still could not live like this, with his mind sliding so completely into Draco's, and he would end the bond at midnight, as they'd planned. But he would not be so terrified again, and he could feel possibilities expanding ahead of him, as if he were a dragon new-hatched from the egg and drying its wings in preparation for flight. He would find cold wind currents and falls aplenty, he knew that, but that didn't diminish the value of the warm skies, and the happiness and hope of the first leap into the air.

“Thank you,” he whispered. “Happy birthday. I love you.”

Draco held him tighter, and said not a word, though his smugness had expanded to batter at the inside of Harry's skull.

I rather like Draco self-satisfied, Harry thought, as they walked back to the dungeons together.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Fifty-Nine: First Guardian and Last Line of Defense

Snape sat down slowly. He had become very good at putting off this moment, this necessary but horrible part of his day. He would mark essays, cast cleaning spells on his quarters—unnecessary, as he continued to permit house elves into them—number his potions ingredients, brew complicated experimental mixtures that usually came to nothing, read books on history from the Hogwarts library. He would count the minutes remaining until another class began or he could go to the Great Hall and eat. His free hours, once a precious, jealousy guarded time that always ran away from him, now dragged.

Until he approached the desk, of course, and pulled out the glass bottle filled with flowing, silvery liquid and the parchment and quill he was using to write down the memories he had seen.

He had not realized, when he created the Pensieve Potion, how well it would work. Not only were the memories as sharp and clear as they were in an ordinary Pensieve, but they responded to the touch of Snape's mind. If he cast his thoughts into the liquid while concentrating on something Harry had done in Potions class, they would fetch the memory in which Harry had most probably learned that behavior, or one like it. If he thought about Draco Malfoy, the Headmaster might appear reading a

letter from Lily in which she mentioned Draco. He could also tell in an instant whether he had seen one of the memories before, and slide into another.

It was useful in that it let him create a record of the Headmaster's memories of Harry's childhood, without repeating incident after incident.

It was terrible in that it drove him closer and closer to the edge of rage, and he could not tell anyone of it. McGonagall or Narcissa Malfoy might have been willing to help, but Harry would never forgive him for betraying his trust like that. Dumbledore was obviously not an option. Draco, who would have understood best, had refused to give Snape his own memories.

Alone, Snape sometimes wondered if he should stop recording the memories. The scrolls and scrolls he had so far would have been more than enough evidence for any plan of revenge he cared to enact. And it would release him from the dread of sitting down to do it again each night.

But still a compulsion, strong as any magical one that Dumbledore or Voldemort might have fashioned, drew him on, made him take up the quill, and lower his face, and open the bottle, and enter into a world he had never known existed quietly beside him during the ten years he'd taught at Hogwarts before Harry came there, lying like a coiled basilisk in Dumbledore's head.

Lily Potter came striding across the lawn of Godric's Hollow, her eyes anxious and her hand already held out to clasp Dumbledore's. The older wizard took her wrist and peered keenly into her eyes. The memory did not show Snape whatever he saw, since he was standing on the grass and observing them both from the outside, but he saw Dumbledore's face grow weary.

"I thought you might have exaggerated in your letter, my dear," he said, gently patting her hand. "I came here intending to soothe your fears. I see that I was wrong. Of course you would know your own son best."

Lily nodded. "I wouldn't have contacted you if it were just the once, Albus," she whispered, turning and looking at the house. Snape followed her gaze. He had learned to hate the sight of that place, Harry's prison, even though right now it was doing nothing but slumber quietly in the sun. "Or even just for a week. But it's been two weeks now, and he's *still* doing it."

"I understand, my dear," the Headmaster said. "Can you describe again, for me, exactly what happens when young Harry gets angry?"

Lily shivered. "The air around him boils," she said. "I can feel the web bucking, as if his magic's trying to force its way out. And, of course, I smell dog vomit. I always do, when he's exercising his strength."

"That is a concern," Dumbledore murmured, his brow wrinkled. "The web should hold at all costs. And you are certain that it happens only when he gets angry, and at no other time?"

Lily nodded.

"Why has he had so much occasion to get angry in the past two weeks?" Dumbledore asked, and Lily immediately turned her head and stared intently at a spot on the ground. Snape did the same thing, not because he expected to see any explanation for her fixed gaze, but because it kept him from trying to draw his wand and curse either one of them, which always interrupted the memory.

"Lily?" Dumbledore prompted, after a few minutes' silence.

"I was trying to teach him that, even in front of people whom he trusts, he needs to keep his guard up at all times," Lily replied in soft tones. "I was making little threatening motions towards Connor—oh, not anything that other people would interpret as a threat, but gestures as if I were going to draw my wand, gestures linked to specific hexes. Harry, though, has to hold still and not respond, because I was doing it in front of James and Sirius, and he's been told not to show what he is to them. Afterwards, he's always very angry. The instincts I placed in him are being thwarted, I know. But I thought he had better control than this, or I would never have tried it." Lily crossed her arms and shivered. "He is *foul*, Headmaster. I smell that all the time. I don't want to have that magic turned on me."

Snape wanted to scream. No, wait, he thought, as his anger acquired a cold and dangerous edge that he hadn't felt in years.

He wanted to make *them* scream. He had once seen Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix LeStrange, trading off in smooth coordinated movements, keep a Muggleborn witch alive for seventeen days. He would better their record, if he could have had his way with Lily Potter.

“I don’t think anyone would,” said Dumbledore. “And you are bearing a burden greater than anything he has, Lily. Living alone with your sons, raising one to be a hero and trying to train the other out of being a Dark Lord, deprived of the support of your husband and your friends... I know no one who would envy you.”

Lily slowly raised her head, her green eyes acquiring a tinge of determination and stubbornness that Snape had seen far more often on her son’s face. “Thank you, Headmaster. What should I do about Harry’s anger, though?”

“Let me talk to him.”

They went into the house, and found Connor asleep, taking a nap on one of two beds in a bedroom that Snape had also learned to hate and detest. Harry was sitting on the other, crouched above a book. He looked up when the two adults—not including Snape, whom he couldn’t see—entered the room. His face was blank, emotionless, until he caught sight of Lily. Then Snape saw a wind make the pages of his book tremble. He went on staring at Lily, and his eyes held very nearly the same feral gaze that Snape had seen on Christmas night.

“Harry. Harry, look at me.”

Carefully, Harry looked away from Lily and at the Headmaster. Dumbledore shook his head, and spoke in a chiding tone.

“Harry, you are old enough to know that getting angry with your mother will do no good. Why should it? She’s the one who has to raise both you and Connor, and she’s the only one who can tell you everything that you need to know. And she loves you. Don’t let the anger get the better of you.”

Harry cocked his head to the side, in silent question as to what he should do instead. Snape thought he was about six in this memory. They had already turned Harry into someone who went quiet and watched the world. Snape wondered whether that mask would have shattered so easily if not for the near-complete destruction of Harry’s mind at the end of his second year.

“Learn to put your anger away,” Dumbledore told him quietly. “Imagine a box into which you put your rage. Your mother told me that you have one for bad thoughts about your brother. Can you put your rage into that box?”

Harry lowered his head and closed his eyes. The wind died in the next moment, and the pages of the book fell flat again. Then Harry murmured, still without opening his eyes, “It worked.”

“Of course it did,” said Dumbledore, and touched his arm, and smiled at Lily over his head. “You’re growing into a proper wizard, Harry. Getting angry at people isn’t productive, and you’ve learned that.”

Snape watched the boy the day after he saw that memory, and noticed that Harry simply slid aside, calmly, from most confrontations that might have provoked irritation in another boy that age. He did get angry with himself fairly often, but even that was soothed when Draco complained about the sensations it caused. His rage no longer went into a box, but Harry did send it away.

It was no wonder, Snape thought, that Harry lost control in situations where he was angry but had no immediate goal to take up the magic that that emotion raised. He could fight for others’ lives, he could attempt to subdue Voldemort if he faced him, he could use the strength of his own convictions to cow Dumbledore into backing down, but outside that—

His fury simply went wild.

Snape was sorry, now, that he had taught Harry to resist the *De Profundis* curse, and shut those emotions in a cage, another version of the box. Harry had put them there by his own choice, but that didn’t matter. He still had no idea how to handle them.

And if the cage was ever broken...

Snape shuddered to think.

That emotion pounded his hatred into iron-hard determination to take revenge, someday, when Harry should have seen the light and understood that his parents and Dumbledore would have to suffer for what they had done. But Snape was still a young wizard, having lived only thirty-five years compared to the lifespan of more than a hundred that he might see. He could wait. He *would* wait. He would take revenge the moment Harry gave him permission, and not before.

This was a memory that Harry would not have known included Dumbledore's presence, because Lily had sent him a proud letter informing him of Harry's progress, but not told Harry that he was coming. The Headmaster stood under a Disillusionment Charm near the corner of the house, and watched Lily come out of the door and move towards Harry, who stood on the lawn studying the stars. His mother had told him to be here at this hour, just after dinner, and not to bring a book, but he was never one to waste any time when he might get *some* studying done.

Lily crouched down behind Harry and called his name. Harry turned to face her. He was eight, Snape thought, his face pale and utterly calm. If his magic had escaped his control any time in the last two years, it was not evident. He still had an aura of power, but judging from the tender smile his mother cast at him, it was not one that disgusted her.

"It's been two months, Harry," said Lily. "You've passed this test."

Harry blinked a few times. Then he shuffled a foot as if he would walk towards his mother, but in the end kept still. Lily nodded at him.

"It's all right," she said, and held out one hand, at the height, Snape thought, in his storm of fury and contempt, that she would use to pet a dog.

Harry walked over to her and took her wrist in a firm grasp. Snape could see a fine shiver run over his frame. He bowed his head and stood still for a moment, while Lily stroked his hair.

Snape glanced at Dumbledore's face. The Headmaster was smiling, pleased, just like Lily was, that Harry had got through this particular test.

Lily had not touched Harry for two months, and had also charged him to resist anyone else's attempt to touch him, in such a way that neither Connor nor James nor Lupin or Black would realize that Harry was shrugging off their embraces, ducking away from friendly punches or rufflings of his hair, managing just not to be there when they reached towards him. He'd done it expertly. Perhaps Sirius had thought something was strange a time or two, Lily had said in her exultant letter to Dumbledore, but he'd dropped all suspicions after a few days when yet another of his numerous love affairs preoccupied his attention.

They were training Harry to stand by himself, and not show others that he was doing it. Both parts of the lesson were equally important.

Snape had come nearest to shattering the bottle of Pensieve Potion that night. He had thought Harry's inability to casually brush against other people was a consequence of his other training, not something that Lily had specifically drilled into him. And now, to learn it was not...

Lily and Dumbledore had had the justification that Harry couldn't let himself be distracted by other people, not when he needed to focus on his brother. Besides, a casual touch from a Death Eater could disguise the wand that would press against his side or the knife that would slip between his ribs. He had to avoid most contact out of simple common sense.

Snape did not care about their justifications. He did not care about the twisted, poisoned little world in which Harry had been raised beyond the isolation wards at Godric's Hollow. He needed to understand it, so that he might help heal Harry when the moment came, but he would never admit that what had happened there had been in any way excusable, in any way rational.

He raged, and he stared at the wall when it was done, and he let the fires die within him.

He still needed to wait for Harry's permission before he did anything, or, failing that, some sign that Harry was being abused again and would not rescue himself.

But sometimes it was hard, and he did not think he could be blamed a bloody fantasy or two of the Headmaster dying

throughout the day.

This memory was one that Lily had sent Dumbledore in a Pensieve of her own, and which had therefore become part of his mind concerning Harry's training even though he'd never witnessed it in person. Harry was seven. He sat beside the window of his bedroom on a summer evening, his eyes closed and his hands clasped in front of him. Lily sat across from him on his brother's bed, reading. Snape could hear a child's eager shouts from beyond the window. Probably Connor Potter was outside playing; he seemed to spend a great deal more time immersed in games and pranks than Harry did.

Harry had timed even his breathing to be quiet, and so the loudest sound in the room was Lily's voice.

"...held near Ottery St. Catchpole. The names of the Death Eaters who began it are unknown, but almost certainly they did so at You-Know-Who's suggestion. The Dark Lord did not take kindly to his servants claiming initiative that he himself would not have given them."

Lily paused to turn a page. A bird's piercing whirr came through the window. Harry nodded his head a little, as though he were falling asleep, though Snape doubted that; he would be memorizing everything he had heard, more than likely. Meanwhile, he himself stood in stupefied silence that a mother was reading this to her child. He knew what had happened at Ottery St. Catchpole when the Death Eaters still ran free. Everyone did. Harry could have waited until he was fourteen to know the details, and his life would not have been marred.

"The Death Eaters took dozens of Muggleborn children from their homes, and, most unusually, did not kill their families. It was believed they did this as part of their strategy, to encourage desperate hope and anticipation, and even to encourage their families to withdraw from the war. Of course, when the news of the Children's Massacre came a few days later, all thoughts of strategy vanished in a tide of overwhelming grief.

"The Death Eaters raised crosses from the ground near Ottery St. Catchpole, and crucified the Muggleborn children upon them. They used spells that heightened the pain of the nails being driven through their wrists and ankles, and other spells to make sure that they stayed alive throughout it and did not die from the shock. Finally, they set a ward around the crosses in one of the rare examples of Dark wizards cooperating during You-Know-Who's War. The ward took hours to knock down when the Light wizards and the Aurors finally reached it. When it finally fell, lines of lightning lashed from it and struck every child dead before they could be rescued. The emotional destruction of many families was complete, and far fewer Muggleborns remained in the war; instead, they applied for sanctuary from the Aurors and Headmaster Albus Dumbledore, and retreated into hiding."

Lily paused in her reading. Harry still sat before her with his eyes closed, but he blinked them open when she softly called his name. Snape's stomach was clenching, with revulsion and with memory. He hadn't participated in the Massacre—that had been Evan Rosier's brainchild—but he had seen the aftereffects of it. That was enough. It was one of the foulest, bitterest memories of Voldemort's War.

It was nothing a child Harry's age should have heard.

"What have you learned, Harry?" Lily whispered.

"That this is war," Harry said, in the same calm, neutral tone that Snape had heard many times during his first year. "That I can only trust former Death Eaters if they come to me on formal terms of alliance. That our enemies will stop at nothing to take down the Light." He paused a moment. "And since Connor's the heart and center of the Light, they'll stop at nothing to take him down."

"That's right," said Lily earnestly, and laid the book aside to lean over her son and clasp his cheeks in her hands. "That is why you have to be so carefully prepared all the time, Harry. You're the first guardian and the last line of defense. Most people won't think you're dangerous, since you're Connor's brother and just the same age as he is. And if you can keep up your façade, then they'll never know. But you can be right there, and you can shield him from Death Eater attacks."

Harry nodded. "When do you think Voldemort will come back, Mum?" he asked her, looking supremely contented as Lily kissed him on the forehead. If this was the most contact he had with his mother, Snape supposed, this might well be one of his happiest memories.

I am going to make myself sick if I keep on thinking like that, he realized, and twisted his thoughts as firmly as he could back onto the familiar track. Hating Lily Potter was far more refreshing than dwelling on all the piled scars Harry had

accumulated.

“He might return at any time,” said Lily softly, seriously. “He might wait years, or he might strike before you and Connor enter Hogwarts.” She paused a moment, and turned her head from side to side. “Speaking of that, do you know where your brother is right now?”

Harry’s eyes widened, and he leaped to his feet. A laugh came through the window, though, and made him spin around in relief. “There,” he said. “He’s outside, with Dad.”

“You should go and check,” said Lily. “Always check on him first, Harry, and you’ll be doing your duty. You don’t know what condition he’s in, wounded or fine. Or he might be dead, and one of the Death Eaters might be imitating his voice with a spell, and then you’ll have failed.”

Panic flashed in Harry’s eyes, and he charged out the door. Lily remained sitting where she was, head bowed and an expression on her face that made her old before her time. A litany of spells ran through Snape’s head, all of which would kill her, and he saw at least five places in the room to hide the body so that her disappearance would not lead to immediate conclusions of murder.

He controlled himself with an effort. This was a memory, only a memory, and what she had done to Harry was already done.

Harry came back into the room a few minutes later, looking relieved. “Thank you, Mum,” he said. “He was all right, but you’re right. I should never take it for granted. I should always check.”

He kissed her on the cheek, a gesture that Lily only tilted her head to passively accept, and then whispered, “I love you, Mum,” and ran back out of the room to watch his brother some more.

Lily bowed her head into her hands and wept.

Snape recorded that memory with a steady hand, unlike many of the others, where his fury made his quill shake and blot the parchment. He had gone out beyond anger into some place on the other side of it, and when he was done, he pushed his chair back from the table and left the school by a secret way he knew, walking on the grounds near the edge of the Forbidden Forest and looking up at the stars.

It was May now, season of life, season of spring. Snape had danced at Walpurgis Night two weeks ago. He could feel his own power rearing up in him at all hours now. It had never gone completely to sleep since the wild Dark magic summoned it. It remained patiently within call, and it eagerly took to any task that he might be able to find for it.

Snape stopped at the very edge of the Forest and breathed. The scents of thick, growing grass and turned earth filled his nostrils. Hagrid was making a garden of some kind, probably for the insanely dangerous creatures he would acquire for his Care of Magical Creatures class over the summer. Snape could hear the wind brushing through the leaves, restless and always in motion. It came close enough to him to stir his hair, though it did not ruffle his robes. There were certain sins even the wind knew better than to commit.

Snape looked up at the stars some more, and thought he could hear a twitch, a tingle, of frenzied music on the edge of hearing. He’d heard it a few times as a child, before his mother had given him a wand and taught him sternly to use that instead of giving in to his own accidental magic. It called to him now, and promised surrender, and wonder in the surrender. Riding that magic, he could do anything, be anything.

Snape knew it was a lie, of course. He would lose himself in that wildness, lose his self-control and his prepossession and all the other cold virtues he had spent a lifetime constructing. He had seen that much on Walpurgis. Any wizard attempting to master that sheer rush of power would die. It was not meant to be mastered.

Besides, he wanted to use his own magic to punish the Potters and Dumbledore, if it was allowed, or at least his own means of revenge, the Pensieve Potion and the scrolls he’d been carefully compiling and the knowledge of minutiae in the raising of a pureblood child that he’d painstakingly assembled from the books he read.

But he did wish, for just a moment, that the wild Dark had swooped down on Godric’s Hollow years ago, shattered the isolation wards, and borne Harry away, even if it meant that Snape would never have known him.

This was another occasion when Dumbledore had come to Godric's Hollow to witness the culmination of a test that Harry had carefully gone through for months. Like the one with not touching anyone, it was a conscious test. Snape knew the perimeters already, and stood behind Dumbledore in his Disillusionment Charm, faint and sick and attempting to deal with his own faintness and sickness before Harry appeared, so that he could remember everything properly.

Harry and Lily at last stepped out of the house. It was another nighttime scene, but rainy this time, sullen drops dripping from the clouds and plopping on Harry's cheeks. The boy didn't appear to notice. Of course, by this time, when he was almost ten years old, Snape knew, he had been through pain curses more debilitating than any rain, and had trained himself to ignore sensations like cold, wetness, and heat, long past the point when another child would have been whining. He had to keep going, as Dumbledore and Lily thought of it. He had to learn to be a soldier, and a soldier might have to fight in any and all sorts of conditions.

Lily faced him now, and waited. Harry copied her stance, his head tilted up towards her, and his hands loosely folded in front of his body, seemingly awaiting a direction or a command.

"Good," said Lily, and then cast a charm that Snape recognized as one that mediwizards used to ease patients who had suffered from the cold touch of a malicious, powerful ghost. It would warm the person, and usually the blankets around him, up, and make him fall asleep more easily.

Harry at once wriggled his shoulders uncomfortably, and then murmured, "*Finite Incantatem*," throwing it off with a wave of his practice wand.

Lily smiled, the smile that Harry lived for and drank in as if it were ambrosia, and then proceeded through a series of other charms and incantations. Some of them gave Harry a pleasant taste, as if his mouth were filled with chocolate. Some mimicked the effect of Calming Draughts. Others were used to create entertaining illusions, or to fill a wizard's ears with sweet music, or to cause dazzling lights and shadows that Snape remembered running after in mad busts when he was a child, some of the few moments of happiness he'd ever had.

Harry dismissed each of them with various signs of discomfort, none of them, so far as Snape could tell, feigned. Then he met his mother's eyes and waited for the final verdict that she would give him.

Lily walked forward and knelt in front of her son without trying to touch him. Harry lifted his head. Snape could see the pulse beating faster in his throat, but that was the only sign that he was at all agitated or worried about what his mother might say.

"You did it," Lily whispered. "You pass, Harry. The last two years are the best you have ever spent."

Harry bowed his head, making no sign of relief; the very small sigh he let out might have been mistaken for weariness or even disappointment. Lily stroked his hair, once, then stood and walked back inside the house.

Harry turned and walked thoughtfully away, sitting down at a distance from it. The position he took was one that Snape knew sentries practiced, to remain unmoving as long as possible. He gazed into the distance, and Merlin alone knew what he was thinking about. His eyes shone, but his face gave no clue.

The memory ended there, since Dumbledore was well-satisfied that he and Lily had accomplished their purpose, and he had no reason to stay longer.

Snape found himself back in his own office, the Pensieve Potion floating dangerously off to the side. His wandless magic had arisen and flared out around him, and was prepared to drop the bottle if he wanted it to. It would shatter all over the floor, and there would go the memories that tortured him so, the memories that weren't even his and which he could tell no one he had seen.

Snape sat down, though he let his magic hover the bottle over the floor to wear itself out, and calmly wrote his conclusions into place. They started with an exact account of the memory first, much aided by the year he'd spent as a spy, training his mind into recalling many details that no one else would have even noticed; on such small things did survival in the Dark Lord's service depend. Then Snape added a note at the end, in the place where he always put what that particular test or piece

of abuse had been meant to accomplish with Harry.

They trained him to be afraid of things that feel good.

Snape did snap the quill after that, and allowed his magic to set it on fire, because there was nothing else that he could have done to ease the crowding pressure. That made the bottle of the Pensieve Potion start to fall, though, and he had to put out a hand hastily to catch it before it hit the floor.

Snape sat at the head table on the morning of the twentieth of June, the day before the Third Task, and watched Harry sitting with Draco as if he hadn't a care, moving one hand in a gesture that made Draco pretend to cower and then burst out laughing. Harry joined him. It was a wonder that he could laugh, nearly a miracle, and it added the final hammer blow to the iron will Snape had been forging for himself throughout the last few months.

In silence he'd borne it, though he knew Harry had suspected something was wrong from the flashes of temper he'd displayed these last months. He'd been angry again and again that he couldn't simply go out and take revenge on the Potters and Dumbledore, but he'd promised. The iron will was as much to restrain himself as it was to bind him to his most crucial task.

It all only confirmed that vow he had made months ago, before he began thoroughly investigating the memories in the Pensieve Potion.

So long as he could best help by making sure that Harry was protected, then he would do that. Harry needed to trust him, and his trust would be broken if Snape even spoke to him about punishing the people who had abused him.

If the moment ever came when Harry was in danger from Lily and James and Dumbledore again, and could not protect himself, then Snape would move.

To hell with whether he hates me after that, he thought, each word a distinct, ringing strike on the surface of his mind. He has come through too much, survived too much. I will not let them take that away and reverse his progress, even if Harry wants me to.

Better he hate me and be able to laugh like that than to love me and be silent.

~*~*~*~*~*

Intermission: Five Months

February

It was disrespectful, of course. The boy had faced him in front of everyone and dreamed, for at least a moment, of revealing everything that he had been trained to keep secret. Albus was most astonished and dismayed at that, that Harry could think of betraying them, after all of this, after—everything.

Dismayed, and perhaps a bit frightened, if he were honest with himself. The web was gone, of course it was, and Harry was someone Albus would have to negotiate with, of course he was. But Harry's tendency to silence had saved his mother and Albus's reputation after Christmas. Albus had assumed, perhaps foolishly, that that silence would still hold. To see even the consideration of telling all the truth flash through Harry's eyes, for the scant moment that it had...

Albus needed to write a letter. His first one, summoning James to Hogwarts and telling him that his sons would like to see him there for the Second Task, had failed. James had come, but he'd let Harry pressure him into cringing compliance with his wishes. Albus needed someone who would see the danger Harry presented and have the strength to help.

There was only one person he could think of who might believe the one thing and possess the other, and he was someone Albus had not spoken to in so long that he had given up thought of ever writing to him again.

But this was an emergency. The boy was something worse than an incipient Dark Lord; he was someone who might undo all Albus's careful work by accusing him of child abuse and eating his magic. And then he would try to lead the wizarding world, a task no fourteen-year-old wizard could accomplish, and the last beautiful things in the world Albus had loved and fought for for so long would fall to wrack and ruin.

Albus sat down and wrote the letter. He did not try to conceal any of the truth. He confessed all his mistakes, and all the things that might make his old friend think badly of him, and then included a plea for help. He sealed the letter, and sent it off with a school owl, missing Fawkes sorely. Fawkes could have made the journey in seconds and returned to him with a reply as fast, always assuming that his old friend was in the mood to reply. Albus would have to wait for an answer.

And he feared that in this case, time was of the essence.

March

Albus laid the return letter gently on the table. It had taken his old friend weeks to respond, as Albus had thought it might. He would have had to think, and as old as he was, he no longer moved fast.

It was a good thing the letter had come today. Albus had seen the boy converse with snakes in the Great Hall, the Many, who were free from yet another shattered web. The boy was destroying the wizarding world as Albus watched. The Many could so easily have bitten any of the children in the Great Hall. Of course, Harry, with his misguided ideals, did not care about that, and it had not happened.

But it had nearly happened.

Unable to wait any longer, Albus tore open the letter and read what was printed there.

Old friend:

I am surprised that you have contacted me on a matter of this importance only now. I ought to have been by your side from the beginning, offering you advice and guiding you in your care of this young Lord.

I fear it may already be too late, as you warned me, but I will offer you two suggestions. One is to be subtle. Move as slowly as possible, for all that you fear young Harry will accuse you any day now. If it were truly going to be "any day now," I think he would have done it already. From what you told me of the way you raised him, his forgiving impulse runs deep. He will give you time, because you could still be of use to him in the war that is coming, and he can dismiss any crime against himself, as long as it is only against himself.

For the second suggestion, remember the discipline I once taught you. The bravest, boldest weapons are the ones that look best on a battlefield, but the careful ones are those that insure there need be no battlefield in the first place. You were too light-handed with Tom Riddle, and too heavy-handed with young Harry. Take the middle road now, and court the mist.

*With all due affection,
Your old teacher.*

Albus sighed and put the letter gently aside. The news was not *quite* as good as he'd hoped—if it were, his old friend would already be at his side—but he had received sensible advice. Now that he could step back and look at things rationally, he saw that someone else was far more likely than Harry to accuse him of wrongdoing. Harry had let matters go in their course for nearly a month.

Court the mist.

He always did have the best advice, Albus mused, and set about doing it, and being subtle for once in his life.

April

Tonight was a night to mourn old comrades.

Tonight was the night that he knew he had lost Minerva forever.

Albus sat meditatively in front of the hearth and looked at his glass of firewhisky. It shone when he turned it back and forth, and caught the colors of the flames. Albus swallowed a sip of it, and remembered old battlefields, old battles, and the fallen,

and those still alive.

Minerva McGonagall had come to Hogwarts a few years ahead of Tom Riddle, eyes bright and shining with the determination of the *fiercest* of the Light pureblood lines. Albus could remember the proverbs of his youth, and it was true, what they said: one wanted a Starrise for pretty words, a Gloryflower for cleverness, and a McGonagall for sheer bloody-minded stubbornness and refusal to give up.

She'd gone into Gryffindor. She'd belonged there. She'd had natural talent at Transfiguration. She deserved it. There was nothing hidden about her, nothing duplicitous, for all that her Animagus form was a cat, creature of shadows and secrets. She became one of the youngest Animagi ever, before the first echoes of Grindelwald's War were quite dead, and Albus had not been surprised. Minerva McGonagall had always distinguished herself. It was a combination of knowing where she belonged, admiration, and hope for her friendship that made him hire her for the Transfiguration position when that became open, and of course she had to be Head of Gryffindor; no one else would do.

She'd fought like her namesake on the battlefields in Voldemort's War: led charges, organized retreats, saved wounded comrades, and, in a rage, Transfigured more than one Death Eater into a fish far from water. She was the best kind of warrior, Albus thought. She was the kind who never forgot that what they fought for was ultimately peace, and she could gladly let the pomp and noise of war go and embrace that peace when it came around again.

She was the kind of person who would gaze on the tangled nests and knots of the wards that Albus had filled with his own power, so as to have certain areas of the school more firmly under his control, and raise accusing eyes to his, and make him feel, for a moment, small and cowering as a mouse under her paws.

"To absent friends," Albus said quietly. "To fallen ones. And to those whose paths have parted from mine."

He downed the rest of the firewhisky in one gulp, already putting the regrets away and moving to the unwilling position of considering Minerva his enemy.

May

Albus sat in his office, eyes closed, and, carefully, courted the mist.

Most compulsion was a straight-out, forceful blow. That was the way Tom often used it. Or one could wield it like a whip, flaying an order into another mind and then springing out again. Or it could be used unconsciously, as Connor Potter had before he discovered he had the gift, but that usually made the other people around the compeller suspect something.

There were far more subtle practices of it. Albus had usually put his own into his voice. He had felt bad, the first time he made a speech and seen other people fall into line with his own beliefs, but his old friend had taught him better than that. Many so-called Dark gifts were not that Dark, at bottom. Nor were they Light, precisely. What mattered were the motives of the user. Dark might seem all compulsion, at first, but then one became aware of the definitions of wildness, and deception, and solitude. And the world was always more complicated than people had realized.

Thus Albus spread his compulsion like a thin, gentle mist throughout the castle, drifting, mingling with the air, no more noticeable than a brief smell of food from the kitchens would be. People would turn their heads, find their desires inclined in the direction of one particular thought for a few moments, and then shake themselves and hurry on.

Most of the time. When the compulsion had penetrated far enough into the air, became one with it, then each student and staff member would breathe it in all the time. Their hurrying away would only carry them into the midst of it once more. Like the windy sensation of normal compulsion, it would twine with their thoughts, ride in undetectably, and sway them in the direction of Albus's opinion.

It was a risky thing, because it was not true compulsion; it only made people suggestible, not controlled them. That was why Tom had never used his compulsion this way that Albus knew of, for all that he was perfectly capable of it. It took too long, and it wasn't impressive enough for him. He preferred intimidating people with one messy and drastic raid to waiting years for a fragile ascendancy that he might never gain at all.

Albus, though, thought it his best course. He had the time, now that he no longer believed Harry would denounce him any moment. And the compulsion was so soft and thin as to go undetected by someone who wasn't a very watchful compeller himself. And it would not affect those minds strongly set against him—Harry, Severus, Minerva—for a very long time if

ever. That made them unlikely to suspect what he was doing.

Albus might have disdained serving the wizarding world by subterfuge, once. But the last fourteen years had accustomed him to sacrifices of all kinds.

June

Albus shaded his eyes with one hand and watched the rising sun. He stood on the Astronomy Tower, and it was the day before the Third Task. Exams had ended a few days ago, but the students remained, eager to see the outcome of the Tournament.

So much else had happened in the past few months that Albus found it hard to believe that he'd once found the Tournament an overriding concern.

He heard a footstep behind him, and turned to see Sybill Trelawney approaching him. She shivered, though it wasn't cold this late in the season, and clutched her shawl around her.

"I'm here as you asked, Headmaster," she said, with the cringing half-defiance that she offered him alone of the staff, and which Albus thought was the truest reflection of her inner self.

He surveyed her kindly. He could afford to be kind to the victims of the world, and Sybill Trelawney was most assuredly among them. He'd thought so ever since he hired her after her first successful prophecy, and he felt even sorrier for her now. It could not be pleasant to have one's gift of Seeing change on one so suddenly.

"The prophecy again, if you please, Sybill," he said, quietly.

The Seer sighed and stared off into the direction of the sunrise, not blinking, though the light must have been stinging her eyes. She had made a prophecy the other day that she was actually able to remember, and she recited it now, her voice going flat and monotonous.

*"Three on three the old one coils,
Three in its times, three in its choices,
It bears his rivals to silence and stillness,
And the wild Darkness laughs, and the Light rejoices.*

*"Two on two the storms that are coming,
Two for the day, and two for the year,
The storm of darkness when no moon will shine,
And the storm of light that will blaze most fiercely here.*

*"One on one all the prophecies bear down,
One is their center, and one is their heart,
And from my mouth comes no Divination again
Except those prophecies in which he has a part."*

Trelawney finished with a pensive sigh. Albus stood in silence for a moment, his head half-bowed.

"Tell me, Sybill," he said at last, "have you ever heard of a storm appearing in a prophecy before?"

"Only as a harbinger of something else, Headmaster." Trelawney's voice had recovered its pomposity. "They are common metaphors for battle, of course. Mere weather events have no place in prophecy."

Albus nodded. He had thought the same thing before she spoke. "And you have no idea what the first stanza of that prophecy means?"

Trelawney shifted uneasily. "I have heard other prophecies in which 'the old one that coils' was mentioned, Headmaster."

"And?"

Trelawney swallowed. “It always refers to a snake in some way. A descendant of Slytherin, often, or the Founder himself; there was one that prophesied a daughter of his line finding his ring in the fifteenth century. Another predicted Lord Golddigger’s battle with dragons on the coast of Wales. Something serpentine, at least.”

Tom. Albus could not say he was surprised, though he would have to think for some time before he managed to tease out all the secrets of this riddle. He missed the clear prophecy that had told him so exactly what should be done with Connor’s and Harry’s childhood. The rhyming ones were always harder to figure out.

She may make more useful prophecies in the future, though, if she can see no visions again but those in which Tom has a part.

“Thank you, Sybill,” he said, and watched as Trelawney hurried away in relief. Once again, he studied the sunrise.

He would have to move more carefully than he had in the past. He had known that for months now.

But at least he would have the assurance that things were going his way again—in one case because he wielded a weapon too subtle for Harry to suspect, in the other because he had an advantage, in the knowledge of the prophecy, that no one else did.

He started to turn towards the staircase, and then paused, his eyes narrowing. He had seen a dark figure flicker beneath him for a moment, he thought. If he had not known better, he would have said it was a woman in a dark cloak, and that she smelled of smoke and fire.

And surely there was an echo in his ears, like a dragon’s wild roar?

But then he touched the wards, and relaxed. He still had his little spies in among the ones that Minerva had supposedly tamed, and those told him that there had been no figure, woman or otherwise, on the side of the Tower.

Albus went on to breakfast, his stride firm and sure. It had cost him some uncertainty and some standing in the eyes of the wizarding world, but he was back in the game.

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Sixty: Day of Longest Light

A full year ago today, Harry thought in wonder, as he, and James, and Connor, walked to the edge of the Northumberland beach with their boats in their hands. *A full year ago today was the last time we performed this ritual.*

He paused a moment to lift his head and take in the sights and smells of the world all around him. The gulls were riding high again, and there seemed to be more of them today, as though they felt the year gone by deserved a salute of their cries. The waves crashed and hissed on the shore with an intonation that had become familiar to Harry from the constant way his heartbeat seemed to resemble it. The foam sparkled blindingly in the sun, which almost sat on the waves, filling all the eastern sky with a dazzle-storm. It was Midsummer, longest day of the year, the day of longest light.

The day of the Third Task.

Harry turned around so that he could walk backward and look at Connor. His brother’s hands were steady, though his face was pale, and sometimes he got a distant, thoughtful look in his eyes, as though he were imagining the horrors that might come up and overtake him. Harry didn’t blame him. Neither the First nor the Second Task had been uneventful.

They reached the edge of the water without incident, though, and Harry was glad. Connor wasn’t a Champion at the moment, and he wasn’t a worried, anxious brother. They were both Potters, listening as James held up the little ship that he had created for this year’s ritual and began.

“This is the holiest time. This is the time of longest Light.”

Harry was pleased to hear that his father’s voice was calmer than it had been last year; then, he had been about to spend a summer with sons whom he knew very little about, who had just witnessed the death of a godfather and family friend. Now, though, they were stronger for the trials they had come through, and things had been going well lately. Harry knew that Connor had passed his exams and made up his latest argument with Parvati. If he could just get through the Third Task without disgracing Hogwarts, then he would consider his year complete.

Harry himself...

Harry shrugged as he followed his father into the water, which shoved and pulled at his ankles like the Dark magic, urging him to come deeper. *I've been better, but at least northern goblins don't send Howlers, and Draco's guardianship is not as irritating as it was.*

"This is Midsummer morning, the moment when the sun shines in all its power, and magic can happen with its rising." James almost whispered the words as he set the little ship on the water.

This time, a wave lifted the boat higher right away. Its mast was not a yew twig this time, but laurel, and Harry didn't know where James had found it; no laurels grew near Lux Aeterna. The sail was cloth torn from the back of a painting, soft and black, and the sides were still ordinary parchment.

The black sail curved and gave back a faint reflection of the sun, and then Harry realized the sides had caught the light so brightly that it looked as though it were on fire. One sunbeam swept around the boat, and under it, and lifted it so that it just barely skimmed the waves as it sailed east.

James's face broke into a smile. He whispered, "We sail our ships, to welcome in the sun, to salute it, as we once sailed out of the sun on a Midsummer morning."

Harry knelt down and made that boast true for not just one Potter, but two. Connor's boat followed theirs the next moment, almost leaping out of his grasp. Harry, though, wasn't sure if that came from his brother's eagerness to participate in the ritual so much as the tremor that appeared to have taken possession of his hands.

Harry edged towards him, and caught his left hand, and stood there, holding it, as they watched their boats take the same sunlit road as James's. Harry was certain he could see the black sail of his father's boat long after it vanished, but at last it was gone completely, and he couldn't pretend anymore.

"I'm frightened," Connor whispered.

Harry felt his heart soften with the thought of how much it must have cost Connor to admit that. He wouldn't have been able to in Gryffindor Tower, and most of the time, he wouldn't have wanted to, either. Harry turned towards him and hugged him, his arms locking around his brother's shoulders.

"Do you remember your dueling spells?" he asked.

"Yes. It's not that." Connor shivered. "If I forgot a spell, then I would deserve what happened to me, after you've drilled me so long and hard. But I'm afraid of something unexpected happening. Of embarrassing myself in front of the school. Of—“ He cut himself off with a little gasp.

Harry lifted his gaze quickly, to make sure that James still stood at a distance, but he was watching the sunrise with his hands in his pockets and didn't appear to notice his sons' preoccupation. Or maybe he knew and was courteously giving them space, Harry thought, as he touched Connor's heart-shaped scar. That would fit with the careful way that James was acting around them lately.

"Of your needing to rescue me again," Connor muttered.

"I didn't need to rescue you during the First Task," Harry pointed out. "The dragons would have hurt everyone, not just you."

Connor gave a sound somewhere between a snort, a sob, and a laugh. "The Second Task was bad enough in that respect, thanks." He hesitated for a long moment, then said, "I know that I can't make you promise not to interfere, but please don't do it just because you *think* I might be in danger, all right?"

"Of course," said Harry, and held him tighter again for a moment, before releasing him. "Now, come on. I think Dad wants to treat us to breakfast."

Connor scrambled out of the water, wiping one hand across his face. Harry knew it would take care of any tears that had gathered in his eyes. Connor was obsessed with being someone strong, and a strong boy would not cry. In fact, he smiled at James so brilliantly that James's smile faded a bit in return, as though he were trying to figure out what Connor wanted.

"You said we could eat breakfast on the beach," Connor reminded him. "Are we going to?"

James relaxed. “Of course,” he said, nodding to the picnic basket that stood further up the sand. Connor’s face brightened, and he went after it, drawing out a round of fresh apples wrapped in slices of cheese that the brownies had packed. He’d spent the last weekend with James, Harry remembered, and come back to Hogwarts gushing about the treat. Harry didn’t think cheese and apples tasted so good himself, but if they would make his brother happy and take his mind off the evening for some time, then he was welcome to all of them he liked.

“Harry.”

Harry turned and looked calmly up at James. Their father was chewing his lip, a gesture that made him resemble Connor much more than he normally did. He studied Harry as if wondering whether he would blow up or turn green, or perhaps inflict those things on him.

“What is it?” Harry asked, when the staring had gone on for some time. It must be important, for James to bring it up. Usually, when they were together, he let Harry guide their conversation.

James let out a sharp breath. Then he said, “Your brother asked me this last weekend, and made me promise that I would tell you my answer.”

Harry blinked. Connor hadn’t mentioned any important question to him. “All right,” he said.

“I still love your mother.”

Harry felt his shoulders try to hunch in defensive protection against his mother’s name, and then told himself he had to relax. James wasn’t intent on punishing Lily the way the rest of them were. He knew something about what Lily had done, and yet, obviously, it hadn’t killed his love. That meant that Harry might have another person he could feel safe with, like Draco—someone who knew the truth but was going to be reasonable about it.

“Why are you still living apart from her, then?” he did have to ask, since, as far as he knew, James hadn’t made any move to contact Lily or even visit her for nearly a year and a half.

“We’ve been writing,” said James. “We wanted to work everything out before we saw one another again. Or, at least, I did, and she finally agreed to it. There are still some attitudes of hers I’m finding it hard to get through.” His eyes fixed on Harry. “The ones about you, in particular.”

Harry nodded. He’d expected that. He plunged some of the emotions that were circling around in him at the mention of Lily into quicksilver pools. He could get through this. “And what point do you think you’ve reached?”

“I don’t know yet,” said James. “Maybe the point at which I can visit her by August or so.”

Harry nodded again. His own breathing was fast, and he felt light-headed. He didn’t know why. This was entirely James’s decision. It had nothing to do with him. And his father was going into this situation with his eyes open. He wouldn’t be fooled again. He was only desirous of making up with as many people as possible, and why shouldn’t he be? Harry knew that he himself would face his mother if he was a braver or a stronger person.

“I won’t ask you to visit her,” James said softly. “Not unless you asked me to take you with me. I promise. No forcing you into confined quarters with her. No trusting you alone with her. No bringing her here. You’ll never have to see her again, Harry. I wouldn’t expect that of you.”

Harry inclined his head. “Thank you. In truth, though I know I’ll be visiting Lux Aeterna for the summer, I don’t know if I’ll be living here yet, so you could bring her here as long as you warned me about it beforehand, in time to get away.” He turned and looked at the picnic basket. He knew there were corn beef sandwiches in there as well, but he wasn’t sure if he wanted anything to eat now. His stomach churned, and he had to swallow several times to convince what remained of last night’s dinner to stay down.

“Where else would you—” James cut himself off. “Oh. You’d be staying at Hogwarts with *him*, then?”

The sound of his voice brought Harry back to reality, and Harry was suddenly glad that he’d made James promise not to mention Snape in his letters. Anger and what sounded like jealousy still bubbled under the surface of his words. It might have ended the letters if they were talking about Snape any more openly, and Harry did want this relationship with James. He wanted all the cracked places in his life to be healed, if he could, and James was trying so *hard*. It was not fair to scold him

for this lapse now.

“I don’t know,” Harry said again. “Not for the whole summer, I don’t think. The Malfoys have also invited me to visit.” There had been a third invitation, too, but Harry had put it aside without reading it all the way through, and written a polite refusal. There was no way he was spending the summer at the Sanctuary, even if he would get to see Peter and Remus there. He didn’t need people peering at his soul and telling him all the means of fixing it. Besides, he’d be too distant from his allies and the rest of the world that might need his help.

“Oh.” James sighed. “Harry, I wouldn’t bring your mother into Lux Aeterna without warning you. I promise.”

“I know,” said Harry, giving him a small smile. “But I still don’t think I want to spend the whole summer here.”

“Why *not*?” Some of James’s frustration broke through this time. “Do you still not trust me?”

“No,” said Harry, and let James take that how he would as he went on. “The main problem is the wards. They’ll let Draco visit, but not Snape, and probably not most of my allies whom I might want to see.”

James glanced away with a frown.

“You won’t consider lowering them?” Harry asked.

“I can’t,” said James. “The wards aren’t entirely under my control. They’re part of the nature of Lux Aeterna as a linchpin. They can’t come down unless they’re obeying my true inclinations, and things like subconscious hatreds are a bitch when it comes to that.” Harry chuckled in spite of himself at his father’s language. James said things when he was pouting that he never would have otherwise. “I might tell you that I could like Snape now, but the wards would know whether I really did or not, and refuse to fall if I didn’t.”

Harry nodded. He had expected that, and he even found it difficult to blame his father for it. He himself didn’t do well with subconscious inclinations and tests based on them, or he would have found some way to free the northern goblins that didn’t involve that stupid plan he’d first come up with. And he would have stopped missing the bond with Draco desperately when he removed it at midnight on the sixth of June. He should be able to conquer the things he was so weak about, he thought, but he couldn’t.

And how could he scorn the weaknesses of other people that he found in himself?

“Dad,” Connor called through a mouth nearly glued shut. He’d obviously found the peanut butter, Harry thought in amusement. “Harry. Are you ‘ver coming to break’ast?”

James squeezed Harry’s shoulder. “I just wanted you to know that,” he whispered. “That I might see her again, speak to her.”

Harry forced out a breath. “I hope you do,” he said, and carefully controlled the emotions that wanted to pour into his words. “You both deserve to be happy.” And they did, he told himself. Revenge could only go on for so long. He wouldn’t willingly see Lily again, but he could rejoice, in an abstract way, that she lived somewhere away from him and was getting on with her life.

“Should we eat breakfast?”

Harry nodded, and in the end he did manage a corn beef sandwich and a few pieces of the cheese-and-apples that Connor liked so much, even though his appetite was entirely gone.

Harry shifted around anxiously, and tried not to resent it when Draco adjusted his position without a pause, so that he could keep his arms looped securely around Harry. They were sitting on the Slytherin Quidditch stands outside the hedge maze that would contain the Third Task, and Draco had deliberately taken a seat behind and above Harry, so that he could hold him. Harry shivered and shifted to the side again. He wanted to be free, ready to move, so that he could help Connor if he were hurt.

It didn’t help that they were outside the maze and could not see what was happening within, but then, Harry supposed, the people above the lake wouldn’t have been able to see what was happening under the water, either. Besides, he had a spell that would take care of that. Harry touched his wand, which he’d brought along in an attempt to get used to casting spells through

it again, and stood up as if that would let him see over the hedges.

“Connor isn’t even in the maze yet,” Draco said in his ear, and yanked him back down, so that Harry plopped onto the bench ungracefully. “And I think he’ll be fine. You’ve been training him hard enough.”

“I don’t know,” Harry whispered in misery.

It was nearly twilight, but Draco was right; none of the Champions were in the Maze yet, let alone Connor. The sky was just turning the rich, deep purple that Harry had associated with summer sunsets ever since he was little. The air was thick and warm, and filled with the excited chatter of those students from all three schools come to see the conclusion of the Tournament. Harry had already seen several people glancing at him and shaking their heads. They thought he was stupid to be so upset about what seemed like the simplest of the Tasks, he knew: enter the maze, get past the obstacles, and find the cup in the center of it. Or maybe they were just waiting to see what way he would manage to interfere this time.

The judges were seated at a table near the entrances into the maze: Dumbledore, Karkaroff, Madame Maxime, and a few other witches and wizards whom Harry didn’t know. They were perfectly calm, of course. They could afford to be, Harry thought petulantly. They didn’t have a brother about to enter a maze and compete in a dangerous Task.

“Hush, Harry,” Draco whispered in his ear, and then altered the position of his hands. Harry thought, for a moment, that he might be leaving him alone so he could move about more freely, but then Draco’s fingers positioned themselves near his spine and dug in, massaging at a knot there.

Harry wriggled and tried to get away, but the Beauxbatons girl settled on the bench next to him made a face and shoved him back. Harry had to sit back and try to enjoy the massage as he waited for the Champions to be led to the front of the maze.

Connor had the lowest number of points right now, since he hadn’t properly rescued his brother in the Second Task, so he waited at the back while Karkaroff announced the Third Task to all and sundry. Krum was edging towards the front, up to the very limit of the distance he was permitted to go right now, and scanning the Quidditch stands with his eyes all the while. Harry suspected, since he faced the Gryffindor stands, that he was looking for Hermione.

“Welcome, welcome, to the Third Task of the Triwizard Tournament!” Karkaroff was speaking in a clear, resonant voice that belied the cowardly whimpers he’d used in every conversation with Harry thus far. “As you know, our brave Champions have undergone confrontations with dragons and merfolk beneath the lake, to test their courage and their compassion. We now face a task that will challenge their cleverness. Who can make it through the maze first, and overcome the obstacles that they will find there? This is not a Task in which just one spell will avail them. They must rely on their cunning to adapt their repertoire to the requirements of...”

Harry lost the thread of the speech as he watched Connor. His brother was less pale than he had been that morning, and he had his wand gripped in one firm hand. As the Task came closer and closer, he’d seemed to accept that there was no way he could get out of it, and that he might as well be brave. Harry wondered if he was the only one who noticed the way his brother’s eyes kept going to the maze and then darting away again. Certainly the only one who cared that much, he thought, and wiped his hands on his robes, then groaned a bit as Draco managed to soothe one knot along his spine away. The Beauxbatons girl gave them an annoyed glance—presumably she was also missing the speech under the noise of Harry’s groans—and edged away from them officiously, craning her neck.

“—and that is the Third Task of the Tournament,” Karkaroff concluded. “Our Champions will enter the maze in order of points scored. First goes Viktor Krum, of Durmstrang.” Unmistakable pride blazed in his voice as he stepped out of the way and nodded to Krum.

Krum nodded significantly at someone in the Gryffindor stands, and then raced into the maze. Harry watched the green leaves of the hedges waving, and pulled his shoulders away from Draco. He had to cast the spell as undetectably as he could, so he had to lean as close to the maze as possible. Draco gave in with a resigned sigh, and leaned down to kiss the back of his head instead.

“In second place, Fleur Delacour, for Beauxbatons, will enter the maze,” Karkaroff announced.

Fleur drew her wand and walked into the maze with a flirt of her silver hair. Harry privately wished her luck. If Connor couldn’t win, then he would prefer her to Krum as Champion. She was doing it for other reasons than just to impress one person.

A few more minutes passed. Once Harry heard a scream, cut quickly off. The other students shifted and murmured at that,

but then went back to staring at the maze, as though they could really see through the hedges without the help of the spell Harry was going to use, or one like it.

The moment came, then, when Karkaroff cleared his throat, and said, "In last place, Connor Potter, for Hogwarts, will enter the maze."

The name made another wind of murmuring move through the spectators, as though hearing it without the customary title, "Boy-Who-Lived," made them think about Connor in a new light. Harry saw his brother's face flush with color, but he was ready, and all but plunged into the maze the moment that Karkaroff finished speaking.

"*Specularis fraterculi*," Harry whispered, and gestured with his wand.

To his pleasure, the spell worked, and made the hedges transparent in one particular area, the one where Connor was walking, and only to him. Harry settled back against Draco, who promptly wrapped his arms around him again. Harry felt far more relaxed now, able to move in a moment if Death Eaters showed up. Connor was all right so far, simply walking along a corridor thick with leaves and open to the sky, with nothing threatening in sight.

Harry did crouch down in his seat a little as Karkaroff shot a suspicious glance towards him; as the closest to the maze, he stood the most chance of feeling a spell slide through the wards. Harry hadn't cast a spell to help the Champion of his choice, though, and the wards had been erected mostly to prevent the audience from interfering in the competition. Thus they registered the passage of his magic, but didn't forbid it. Karkaroff wound up frowning and turning back to the entrance of the maze, craning his neck slightly, as though he could see over the walls and make out Krum that way.

With that suspicion dismissed, Harry could focus on Connor. His brother had reached a turning where a shimmering wall of solidified air barred his way. Harry held his breath. They had trained in no spells that were specific to this kind of barrier, and sometimes Connor could be very literal, probably from Hermione's influence; he would want to know the exact countercurse for a spell, when any that got rid of the obstacle would probably be just as good.

Connor only hesitated for a few moments, though, before lifting his wand and shouting, in a confident voice, "*Reducto!*"

The spell soared away from him, the barrier shattered, and Connor stepped through—

Straight into a mist that made him pant and drop to the ground, clutching at his throat.

Harry's fingers twitched on his wand, and he found himself wishing, oddly, for Regulus, who would know the source of his anxiety; Draco could only clench his hands on Harry's shoulder and hold tight. But Regulus was away, fastened to his body again, this time determined not to come back until he could reveal the location of his body beyond a doubt.

He has to be all right, Harry told himself, even though he hadn't tutored Connor in a spell that would get rid of obstructions like this at all. *If he isn't, if he stands some chance of dying, then I'll intervene. I'd rather have him disqualified from the Tournament than dead.*

But Connor proved to have a better memory than Harry anticipated. He called up a spell they hadn't practiced since last summer. "*Specularis!*" he exclaimed, waving his wand in front of him.

The word was half-choked by the gas, but it worked nonetheless, clearing a little window of air in front of him. Most wizards would use the window to see, but Connor used it to breathe, gathering his strength and flinging himself beyond the mist. Harry sat back again.

"Can you tell me anything about it?" Draco whispered into his ear.

Harry kept his own voice low, though he turned his head to the side instead of facing Draco directly, so that he could keep one eye on Connor even now. He was trotting down a broad aisle that appeared to lead directly to the center of the maze, though Harry knew that there was no way the obstacles would be over so soon. Krum or Fleur would have already grasped the cup by now if they were. "He was in the middle of a choking mist. He got himself free, and I thought he wouldn't."

"You really should trust him more," Draco said, and let one hand run through Harry's hair. Harry didn't understand the fixation with touching him, but Draco seemed to have done it more since the bond ended. "I think he's more competent than you give him credit for being."

Harry did face Draco then, staring at him. Draco *never* had a good word to say about Connor.

Draco frowned at him, flushed, and jerked his chin up haughtily. “I can see when he’s improving in dueling spells, Harry. He was so hopeless before that any improvement would be marked.”

Harry wound up shaking his head and turning back to the maze. Connor had reached the end of the broad aisle in a seeming wall of leaves. Harry, however, trained in searching out tiny details, saw the recent signs of someone else having passed that way, even through his small window. Connor brightened a moment later, having discovered it, and reached out to swat the leaves aside.

A clawed paw shot through the leaves and dragged at him, pulling him into another place.

Harry gasped and half-jolted to his feet, then saw people turning around to stare at him. He ended up sitting down again, since he didn’t want to reveal that he’d cast any spell at all towards the maze and Connor, but kept his gaze fixed straight ahead, as the window revealed a grassy corner covered with thick leaves and with a fountain in the center of it.

Connor was probably not in the position to notice much of it, though, because he was facing a wyvern.

Harry winced and leaned forward anxiously as Connor tumbled free from the creature’s hold and rolled to his feet. The wyvern faced him, snarling and scraping menacingly at the ground with the talon it had used to haul Connor in. It was dragon-like, but it had only two legs, huge bat-like wings in the place of forelimbs, and, most dangerous of all, a darting, scorpion-like tail tipped with deadly poison.

Harry saw his brother’s face pale at the sight of it. This was more dangerous than any creature he had faced before; at least he had not had to actually wound or destroy the dragon whose egg he took. He hesitated.

The wyvern leaped slightly in the air and came down at him, wings spread wide to prevent a dodge, claws grappling for him, tail whipping down and past its neck.

Connor flung himself into another roll, this one backwards and desperate, and came up on the wyvern’s left side. The creature would have had him even then, but its wing caught on the fountain. It screamed and reared back, its tail coiling like Nagini at the height of its throat.

His brother had had a chance to regain his feet, though, Harry saw, and with it his confidence. “*Speculum Ardoris!*” he called, using the spell offensively, and a shield of fire whirred into being from the end of his wand.

The wyvern, unlike the dragons, had no immunity to fire. It cried again as the spell burned the edge of one wing, and snapped at it with useless jaws. Then it was the one backing up, its wounded pinion held close to its side, its sulky yellow eyes fixed on the flames.

Connor moved towards it, instead of past the fountain and to the maze entrance on the other side of the garden.

“You idiot!” muttered Harry.

“What’s he doing now?” Draco whispered into his ear, massaging his shoulders.

“Attacking something he should be running from while it’s still baffled—“

Luckily, Connor seemed to get his common sense back at that moment, too. He shook his head, turned, and ran across the garden, ducking into the maze entrance. Harry relaxed for a moment, and then tensed up again when Connor made several hasty twists and turns, and brought another magical creature into view.

“Hello,” said the sphinx he’d met, carefully raising her long leonine body up and padding forward. Her face was human in general details, but with subtle differences, rather like the ones that had attended Dobby’s changed elven features. She had a literal mane of lovely red hair. She shook the hair out of her face and smiled at Connor. “I suppose that you want to pass me?”

Connor blinked, obviously nonplused by the creature’s politeness. “I—yes, that is. If you’ll let me.”

“Just answer the riddle,” said the sphinx. “Answer it correctly, and then I’ll let you pass.”

“What riddle would that be?” asked Connor. And then, just as Harry had known he would, he added, “And what happens if I

don't answer it correctly?"

"I eat you," said the sphinx, in the dreamy manner of a young girl who'd heard that she was to have chocolate biscuits later that day.

Connor's face went pale again, and he swallowed hard. To Harry's relief, though, he didn't try something stupid, like darting around the sphinx, all of whose four paws looked swift enough to catch him in seconds. He said, "What's the riddle?"

The sphinx arranged herself with a little cough, and began to speak in a voice both more piercingly lovely and more alien than the mostly human voice she'd been using so far:

*"We are always dancing, we are always there,
But you shut us away beyond the walls of the air."*

*"You adopt our name for the brightest lights among you,
But we are the originals, and we are always true."*

*"Glimpse us only half the time, it will not our beauty mar,
For we have always been more steadfast than all humans are."*

Connor frowned intently and considered it for some time. Harry could almost see the moments when he might have blurted an answer out, but each time he shut his mouth and frowned again.

The sphinx cleared her throat at last and said, "No offense, but if you don't come up with an answer in the next five minutes, then I get to eat you."

Connor jolted, and his head lifted as if he were going to stare right into her eyes and dare her to do her worst. But his eyes fixed on the sky above the walls of the hedge maze instead, and his face broke into a smile.

"Stars," he said. "The answer is stars?"

The sphinx cocked her head and said, "Is that a question?"

"It's an answer," said Connor, though his smile had wilted a bit.

The sphinx inclined her head and stepped gracefully aside, bending the hedge wall with her weight. "Pass."

Connor whooped and surged past her, turned a corner, turned another corner, and came into a wide, grassy plot, darker than the rest of the maze—but that, Harry thought, might have come from the fact that the sun was setting at last. In the center of the plot, on a block of gleaming ivory, stood the cup.

Fleur was there already, closer to the cup than Connor was, but she was staring, entranced, at something hovering in front of her. They were star-like lights, Harry saw, whirling around each other in constellation-like patterns to draw and hold the eye. They were physically harmless, but if they could enchant the Champions and prevent them from reaching the cup, then they would serve their purpose.

Connor slowed when he saw her, and stared when he saw her predicament. Then the lights split in one half, and one stream came straight for him, the rest still bobbing and dancing in front of Fleur.

Connor closed his eyes, and Harry saw him aim straight for the ivory block without opening them. The star-like lights accompanied him all the way, but since they seemed to work by sight alone, they served no purpose except to form an honor guard as Connor made his way to the cup.

Harry still didn't believe that this was happening until Connor's hand reached out and grasped the cup, and all the hedges turned transparent at once—revealing Krum only a few steps from the grassy plot—and the wards fell.

There was a moment of stunned silence, by which Harry conjectured that no one had expected Connor to actually win. Then the people in the stands surged to their feet, cheering. Even some of the die-hard Durmstrang and Beauxbatons students, who'd made sure to sneer at Connor in the past, were applauding.

Harry let out his breath, and used his window spell one more time to make sure that Connor was actually all right. His brother

looked winded, but he'd taken no wound from the wyvern—who he probably owed for getting to the cup so fast, since he'd skipped some of the more obviously twisty passage by going through its garden—and the star-like lights had dissipated.

Fleur shook her hair out, blinked, and grasped the situation with one glance. Harry saw her mouth twist, but she walked towards Connor and shook his hand, murmuring a few words too soft for Harry to make out. Connor smiled at her and squeezed her wrist for a moment, blushing as she smiled back.

Krum had to gather himself for a few moments, probably to master his disappointment, but he inclined his head shortly at Connor. Connor nodded at him and said something about “wonderful Seeker,” which made Krum grunt.

“The Champion of the Triwizard Tournament,” said Karkaroff, in that same deceptively resonant voice he'd used before, “is Connor Potter of Hogwarts. Will the Champions come out of the maze, please?”

Connor was content to follow Fleur's lead along the path she'd taken, Harry saw. He still looked dazed. He had come very far from making an embarrassment of himself, Harry thought, nearly ready to burst with pride. He'd *won*, and that was something that not even Harry had expected.

He felt Draco hug him exuberantly, and he gave him an absent hug back. His attention was fixed on his brother, and getting to the front of the maze in time to welcome him. A lot of people were crowding up behind the judges, but Harry was sure they would let him through, once they recognized his relationship to Connor.

They left the Slytherin stands and migrated across the Pitch, stepping around several groups of people who were chattering in low, sullen voices, and kept their backs turned to the maze. Harry snorted at them. They just couldn't be happy for someone who'd won against all the odds, could they?

Draco kept pace at his side almost all the way there, but at last shook his head and let Harry go in front of him with an amused smile. Harry nodded at him gratefully and then lengthened his stride. Magic helped him dodge between grass blades and over small holes that might have tripped him up, reaching Connor quickly.

Connor saw him and smiled like a lightning bolt. He grabbed Harry in a tight hug, which was uncomfortable, as he hadn't let go of the Tournament cup, but which Harry was more than willing to endure. “Thank you,” he whispered into Harry's ear. “I couldn't have done this without you.”

Harry couldn't deny that, since he'd taught so many of those spells to Connor, and hugged his brother fiercely back. Then he stepped out of the way, since the other judges were coming forward to congratulate Connor. Madame Maxime in particular had her hand out, seeming to decide that she should be the epitome of graciousness, no matter how much she might wish her own Champion had won.

“A shame Viktor did not get it,” said Karkaroff, from behind Harry. “Alas, that he was too slow.” He sounded more resigned than angry.

Harry grinned at Karkaroff, willing to forget their usual guarded conversation in the wake of his brother's triumph. “It was a good try, though. I'm sure he would have been a worthy winner.”

Karkaroff nodded. “I would have enjoyed congratulating him,” he sighed. “But I should not have thought he would win. I did not spend enough time instructing him in the spells he would need.”

“Why not, sir?” Harry asked, curious that Karkaroff would blame himself. He hadn't been able to see what was happening in the maze, after all, and he should fault Krum's slowness more than his own instruction.

“Because I was doing other things,” said Karkaroff, mistaking the intent of his question. He sighed again and lowered his voice. “Waking the sleeper, for example.”

Harry blinked, trying to remember where he had heard that phrase for a moment.

He was a moment too slow.

Karkaroff's right arm latched firmly around his waist. Harry tried to lunge away, but Karkaroff's left hand was already on one of the buttons on his robe, twisting it sharply.

Even as Harry tensed himself to resist Side-Along Apparition, the Portkey went into motion, snatching them both from

Hogwarts and bearing them towards an unknown destination.

Harry flew, and tasted bitterness on his tongue while he listened to the exultant laughter ringing in his ears. *I was wrong. Karkaroff hasn't forsaken his old allegiance after all. He was their sleeper.*

He did not doubt that he was going to the Death Eaters, and Voldemort. Grimly, Harry began preparing himself for what he would find there.

~*~*~*~*~*

REMINDER: "Warning: The last ten chapters of this book contain **severe gore** and **severe emotional upset and abuse**. Please do not read past Chapter 61 if you think that you cannot stand to read this. I'm not going to blame anyone who quits now."

Chapter Sixty-One: *Crucio*, and Worse Than *Crucio*

Harry was ready when the Portkey deposited him and Karkaroff into the middle of some cool, dark place, obviously far from Hogwarts. He reached out with his wandless magic, ready to snatch Karkaroff's feet from beneath him and roll him over, imprison him in a cage of blue light, and demand that he tell Harry where they were—

And his wandless magic slammed into a barrier a few feet from him and fell back into his body, leaving him stunned and gasping, panting in so much pain that he didn't even notice for a moment that Karkaroff had snatched his wand from him.

"No insolence out of you, now," the wizard said, as he grabbed Harry's arm and dragged him forward. "My lord said that you won't be any problem, and so you won't." He spoke with a gay cheerfulness that Harry now thought was much closer to his true self than the cowering mask he'd presented.

Harry looked wildly around, trying to figure out what was going on. He saw neat grass clipped close, and headstone after headstone. They were in a graveyard. Of course they were. What other stronghold would Voldemort choose?

But Harry was, at the moment, trying frantically to figure out what the fuck kind of barrier was confining his magic.

Perhaps it had only been in the place where they landed. Harry made another frantic bid for freedom, thinking that he wanted Karkaroff's left hand, which gripped his upper arm, to start burning—

And, once again, something threw his magic back into his body, harder this time. Harry doubled over, gasping, and stumbled. Karkaroff grunted at him in annoyance, and then picked him up and gripped him in a hold that Harry couldn't remember having learned, one that afforded him no chance to slip free.

"He's stubborn, my lord," Karkaroff called ahead into the darkness. "Keeps trying to use his magic even when he knows he can't."

Voldemort's voice responded, slick and cold, sharp, the first time that Harry had ever heard his voice in person since first year. "Potter would be like that. Bring him here, Igor."

Karkaroff bore forward. Harry used his eyes on the headstones and monuments they passed—rounded markers, angels, a few rearing blocks carved with words that blurred past too quickly for him to make out—looking in vain for some sign of wards that would explain his weakness.

Then they rounded a final corner, and Karkaroff carried Harry towards a gravestone marked with neatly cut words and half-overgrown with tangled weeds.

Tom Riddle.

Harry began to have a dim idea, then, of what kind of ritual Voldemort had brought him here to do. His stomach revolted, and he managed a few kicks before Karkaroff tightened his grasp so that even that was impossible.

On the ground next to the headstone was a large block of red-black stone that Harry didn't think was native to the graveyard. Beside it crouched a woman whom Harry recognized as Bellatrix Lestrange when she looked up. Her face was distorted with a creeping madness greater than she had ever worn, but she smiled at him gently.

“It won’t be long now, baby,” she said, and went back to wielding a silver knife awkwardly over something small and furry with her left hand.

Beside her was the chair that Harry knew contained the Dark Lord. Karkaroff dropped to a knee in front of it and held Harry close, twisting his neck so that he was forced to look closely at Voldemort.

Harry’s scar burst into fire, a pain so sudden and devastating that he couldn’t even cry out.

“Hello, Harry,” said Voldemort, and stirred a bit. Harry could see that his skin was red-black, the same color as the stone in front of the grave marker. His arms and legs were thin and wispy, like pieces of seaweed attached to a great fish. His eyes were hungry and staring, as red as the brighter parts of his skin. “So long I’ve waited,” Voldemort whispered. “So long I’ve waited for this.”

Harry managed to roll under the pain of his scar. Lily’s techniques for resisting torture ran through his head, in the calm voice his mother had always adopted when she recited them. *Don’t let the pain break you. Do whatever you can to get used to it and move to another level. Moments when they keep you at the same amount of pain are a blessing, because they allow you to adjust. Don’t be afraid to scream.*

He managed to say, forcing his jaw slowly open, “Didn’t know...that you wanted me...instead of my brother.”

Voldemort laughed, and Harry did scream this time as his scar lashed pain down from his forehead through his cheeks and his face, making him feel as though his teeth had turned to embers. Bellatrix laughed, too, rocking back and forth on her knees and clapping her left hand into her hidden right wrist, and Karkaroff gave a deep, rumbling belly chuckle that nearly made him drop Harry. Harry tensed, ready to seize the chance if it happened again, but he didn’t think it would.

“Oh, Harry,” said Voldemort, his laughter trailing off into squeals like a dying pig. “The time for such pretense is past. I know that you were the one who bounced my curse thirteen years ago and condemned me to a lifetime of suffering. *Your* lifetime, Harry. And that time is nearly over. The debt is nearly paid.” His voice surged with pride and deepened to something more like a hiss than a squeal. “As for why I can hold you so effortlessly...Bella, show him what you have with you.”

“Certainly, my lord,” said Bellatrix, and then turned and drew a silvery tray resting on the ground beside her forward.

Harry grunted when he saw the objects there, so much did they shock him. He recognized the ring made of ice enchanted not to melt, the triangular piece of ebony, the green stone, the red stone, the crystalline five-pointed stars...

Voldemort had performed a corrupted truce-dance. He was near the middle of it now, from the number of gifts, and that would mean—

Harry’s eyes rose and shot over the gravestones to the faint, going gleam of the sun in the distance.

Sunset, on Midsummer Day.

Watch the sun.

Harry could feel his breath rushing fiercely up his throat as he gagged. The pain of his scar was not greater than his fear now, which made his nose ache and his stomach heave with bile.

Voldemort had tied his power to the sun. He must have begun it with the last Midsummer Day, the very day that James took Harry and Connor to the beach to perform the Potter ritual for the first time. So long as it remained sunset, he would have the power to enforce his will, and obviously, he now wanted Harry’s magic bound.

Harry wanted to scream as his mind raced back along the line of the year, and certain coincidences that were not coincides at all came forward and hamstrung him.

Regulus had vanished from his mind on the autumnal equinox, at sunset on the autumnal equinox, the very moment when light and darkness ceased to be equal and the power went to the night.

He had come back on the vernal equinox, again at sunset, as the light returned to the world and lessened Voldemort’s power.

I am an idiot.

The only thing Harry could not account for was the lack of Voldemort's activity at Midwinter, the darkest part of the year and the one time when he would have even more power than Midsummer. But he suspected that Voldemort might have been lying low, or performing some ritual with effects that Harry wouldn't feel. It was perfectly possible, given how preoccupied he had been with certain other events at the same time.

"Now you understand," Voldemort said, and laughed aloud. Bellatrix joined him again, and Karkaroff, and another figure striding out from behind a tall stone angel. Harry lifted his head and saw Evan Rosier smiling at him, his fingers idly twirling his wand. "Corruption, indeed," said Voldemort, when he was done, "but I have had patience, and I have waited, honoring the cycle of the sun. In this moment, the day of longest light itself will serve my plans. For as long as it is sunset." His voice altered. "Igor, Evan. Tie him to the stone."

Karkaroff nodded and turned around. Rosier was already in front of him, whispering and performing an incantation that made straps sprout from the four corners of the makeshift altar. Karkaroff forced Harry flat, and though he kicked and squirmed and tried to get away, he and Rosier were able to bind him spread-eagle, held firmly enough that there was no chance he could get away.

Harry caught Rosier's eye as he adjusted the strap around his left wrist, and whispered, for the sake of trying to keep his mind off what was coming, "You told us that it was both the moon and the sun we should watch."

Rosier blinked a bit, then smiled and shrugged. "I lied," he said. "I do that, you know."

He turned in a swirl of robes and made his way over to the chair, stooping and lifting the child-Voldemort in his arms. Behind him, Bellatrix stood up, clutching a silvery bowl in front of her. Harry couldn't see what was in it from this angle. Karkaroff was hastening back from a corner of the graveyard, dragging a large cauldron with him

"Hurry," said Voldemort, hissing slightly as Rosier carried him over to the western corner of Harry's stone.

"Here, my lord?" Rosier gently set the childlike form on the ground.

"That will do, Evan. You must take the east," Voldemort snapped. "Hurry! Pass Igor Bella's bowl, and *hurry!*"

The moment of greatest power won't last long. Harry tensed his limbs and tried to buck his body to the side, but his head was the only part of himself he could move, so tightly did the straps hold him. Once again, his magic roared up within him, but this time, it couldn't even move beyond the outer limits of his skin. *They don't have long to bind me, and do—whatever they're going to do with Voldemort. I'll hurt them again as soon as I can.*

He used thoughts like that to calm himself as he watched Rosier take up a position to the east of him, Bellatrix to the north—behind his head—and Karkaroff to the south, at his feet.

Karkaroff began the ritual, his voice deep and urgent. "We bespeak the powers of the sun, the powers our lord has honored for the past year. By the power of the south and the summer, we offer the bone of the father." He scraped up a handful of white dust and poured it into the cauldron near him, which bubbled and smoked.

Harry stared. *Bone of the father...they opened Tom Riddle's grave and removed it?* Once again, he had to gag on his own bile.

Rosier spoke, sounding less urgent than Karkaroff, even a bit amused. "We bespeak the powers of the sun, the powers our lord has honored for the past year. By the power of the east and the spring, we offer the heritage of the enemy."

He lifted something he'd taken from his robe pocket and blew it forward. Harry's heart constricted when he saw that it was a small boat, its sides made of parchment and its sail constructed of what looked like Slytherin green cloth. The twig holding the sail would be yew, he guessed, symbol of resurrection. The boat drifted along as though carried by an invisible wave, and plunged into the cauldron. More smoke, more bubbles emerged, and then an invisible force like a steel bar lashed across the middle of Harry's chest. He could not have spoken now even if he tried.

He could feel the power rising around him, deep and primeval, twisted Light magic, powerful as the Dark magic at Walpurgis had been. He remembered his father telling him that sunrise and sunset at Midsummer were moments of great power. For a moment, he had to close his eyes.

Bellatrix spoke in an oddly pretty voice, more feminine than anything Harry had ever heard from her. "We bespeak the

powers of the sun, the powers our lord has honored for the past year. By the power of the north and the winter, we offer the flesh of the servant.”

Harry opened his eyes in time to see Karkaroff tip the silver bowl Bellatrix had given him. Slivers of skin, with muscle and flesh still attached, slid down and into the cauldron. Harry shivered as a deep, foul smell filled the graveyard. *Did Bellatrix cut those off her own arm? She must have.*

Voldemort’s voice spoke, filled with the feverish excitement of a child. “We bespeak the powers of the sun, the powers I have honored for the past year. By the power of the west and the autumn, I offer the blood of the enemy.”

Harry thought he was prepared for anything, but that ended up not including the slight scramble of hands on stone and Voldemort climbing onto his chest. Voldemort stared down at him with gleaming red eyes for a long moment, and then chose his target and opened his mouth. His teeth were jutting things, spikes, barbs.

He bit into Harry’s left shoulder, ripping down and hard to the side.

Harry screamed, forcing the sound around the two crushing weights on his lungs. He felt blood pour out of the wound, but what hurt most was the way those barbed teeth grabbed and caught and pinched at his flesh like hooks even as they worked their way out of it. He bucked and shuddered, and Voldemort slid towards the side of his chest, staring at him all the while. Harry’s scar began to burn again, and this was the most physical pain he’d ever been in in his life.

“Evan,” said Voldemort.

Rosier took a single stride forward, dipped a bowl into Harry’s blood, picked up Voldemort with the other hand, and then turned towards the cauldron. Harry lifted his head and forced his eyes to focus through the haze of tears, wanting to see what happened. It might be important later. Maybe there was some way to reverse the ritual.

Rosier ceremoniously poured the blood into the cauldron. Then, not so ceremoniously, he tossed Voldemort in.

Harry stared as the baby-shape vanished. The smoke that immediately boiled free from the cauldron engulfed them all, and Harry had to close his eyes as it stung at them. The pain of his wound immediately sprang back to his attention and throbbed fiercely at him. Almost worse than the agony was the sheer sense of *violation*. Voldemort had bitten him, torn part of him away, disrupted the integrity of his body. Harry felt faint and sick, and not sure that he could have summoned his wandless magic even if the moment of sunset had passed and he were free.

The smoke soaring from the cauldron rose higher and higher, and Harry stiffened in shock as he heard a thin call breaking from it. It sounded like the wail of a baby, coming closer and closer.

Then the sound was in the graveyard with them, and it was no longer the cry of a baby, but the laughter of a man who just happened to have a high voice.

Harry felt power erupt from the cauldron as though it were a cresting wave, and lap over the headstones. He was shaking, vibrating, under the onrush of it. It was Voldemort’s magic, and unless Harry was much mistaken, it was now *stronger* than it had been when he faced the bastard in first year. Voldemort’s laughter rose with it, slick and dark, high and cold, like glass over stone.

Then a shape moved in the smoke, and Voldemort climbed out of the cauldron.

Harry had seen him as he was in the Pensieve memory of that night in Godric’s Hollow. He looked much the same now: smooth, pale skin; a flat face without a projecting nose; thin lips; glaring red eyes. His hands patted at his body as Bellatrix rushed forward with a dark green robe to cloak him. Harry watched those spider-like fingers fluttering, and wished he could muster the breath or the strength for a scream of defiance.

“Yes, yes,” said Voldemort, softly, as though he were well-satisfied with his body. “This is what I should look like.”

He lifted his head, and his eyes locked on Harry’s.

Harry felt, helpless to stop it, the curling claws of Legilimency ripping into his mind. He was a practiced Occlumens, but nowhere near as strong as Snape, and his defenses were further lowered by his shock and his pain and his lack of any means to defend himself. Voldemort studied Harry’s memories, whatever he was looking at, in great interest. He moved too quickly through his mind for Harry to see more than a flashing glimpse of shapes and colors.

“Interesting, indeed,” said Voldemort a moment later, when he had withdrawn from Harry’s mind and left him shaking, violated once more. “There will be five Death Eaters not returning to us, then.”

“Five, my lord?” Bellatrix looked up at him from where she knelt at his feet, once again moving the silver knife up and down over the small animal. Harry had no heart to try and see what it was. He turned his head as much as he could to watch the sunset bleeding in from the west, cursing, now, the fact that sunset on the Solstice was long and slow.

“Severus,” said Voldemort, hissing on that name. “Lucius. Hawthorn. Adalrico. And Peter.” He cocked his head to the side, eyes locked on Harry’s for a moment. “And Mulciber was betraying me in the moments before he died. It seems that our Mr. Potter here has a talent for convincing my servants. That shall not matter, after this night.”

He turned. “Igor, your arm!”

“My lord.” Karkaroff stepped forward, baring the Dark Mark on his left forearm. He sank to one knee, bowing his head, as Voldemort touched it.

Harry felt a call whip out from the Mark in the direction of the wider world, passing through the power that sealed the graveyard against Harry’s use of his magic—and, he guessed, the appearance of any of his allies, or else they would have been here by now—as if it didn’t exist. Voldemort tilted his head back, and whisper-hissed words that Harry could hardly make out.

“My loyal Death Eaters. Loyal to me, to no other, hear and heed the call of your master, and *come to me!*”

Harry had no doubt that the Death Eaters would be here soon. Voldemort meant to kill him in front of an audience.

If he will only delay until the moment of sunset is past, then I will give him a good fight. Harry was not sure that he could actually win. Voldemort’s magic was everywhere around him, and he was reminded, if he had ever forgotten it, that the Dark Lord was stronger than he was. So much raw magic, of a temper entirely different from Harry’s own, clawed and fanged and of a quickness that saw exactly what to do to make things hurt most.

Harry lay there, and waited, and hoped against hope that Snape would not try to follow the Dark Mark’s call. He would be killed the moment he appeared, or, at best, held for torture later. The same thing would happen to any of his allies. Harry closed his eyes, and hoped, and tried to gather his strength against the aching anguish of the wound on his shoulder.

Someone moved close to him, and Harry opened his eyes, expecting to see Voldemort looming over him. Instead, Rosier crouched there, examining the bond on his left wrist to see how tight it was. Harry waited. He had no idea what to expect, now. Perhaps Rosier would loosen the strap.

He didn’t do that, but he did smile at Harry, his dark eyes gleaming like daggers, and he said, “Everything is a game, Mr. Potter.”

Harry recognized the phrase from the last letter Rosier had sent, but he didn’t see what that had to do with anything. “Yes, you said,” he murmured, turning his face aside. Rosier gripped it by the chin and turned it back. Harry jerked away as much as he could, though at the price of knocking his head on the stone and making his wound flare with hungry pain. His skin pimpled with disgust and distaste where the Death Eater had touched him.

Other Death Eaters were Apparating in now, constant sharp *cracks* making sure that Rosier’s voice would not travel far from Harry’s ear as he whispered, “You would do well to remember that. *Everything* is the game, do you understand, Mr. Potter? Every move that someone makes. Every word that he speaks. Every action he seems to take to proclaim his allegiance.”

“I am not playing,” Harry snapped.

Rosier raised his eyebrows. “Of course you are, Potter. The only ones who are not playing are dead.” He winked, and then rose and swirled away from Harry to take his place in the circle forming around the stone.

Harry lifted his head and studied the Death Eaters in their anonymous dark robes and white masks, since he had nothing else better to do. He recognized the shapes of many more men than women, some squat and bulky, most of them more slender and moving with the innate, trained pureblood grace. Harry wrinkled his nose. There were Muggleborns and halfbloods who served Voldemort, of course, but these all seemed to be of the pureblood stock, with their useless prejudices and their memories of life lived to a higher standard that could only be had by actually *living* it, not following the actions of a

monstrous madman.

Harry had not thought he would despise them so much. Perhaps he would not have, had he not, in many respects, been raised pureblood. He knew exactly what they were turning their backs on, what dances and history they claimed to respect and want back. Of course, they didn't want to have to live by those dances themselves, which would have demanded much harder negotiations with a Lord like Voldemort, rather than simply surrendering to his will. They merely wanted the world cleared of people who definitely didn't live by them.

Harry felt scorn coiling like a hot serpent in his belly, and used that to ride out the newest wave of pain from his wound.

In time, the *cracks* ceased, and the circle of Death Eaters tightened around Voldemort. He stood in silence for a moment, surveying them, and then nodded once.

"I have returned," he said. "*Kneel.*" The word was a command, but, more than that, Harry noticed, an edge of compulsion rode it. He tugged at his bonds, wishing he could be free somehow. Then they might notice that at least one person wasn't kneeling to this Dark Lord who was misusing his power.

Everyone fell to one knee without hesitation, save Karkaroff, who was already kneeling by Voldemort's side. Voldemort smiled at them. Harry shuddered. His teeth were more horrible now than they had been when he crawled onto Harry's chest and bit him, because they appeared to fit more naturally into his mouth.

"I have returned," Voldemort repeated softly, stroking Karkaroff's arm, "because of the loyalty of Bellatrix Lestrange, Evan Rosier, and our very own sleeper, who spent years making the enemy trust him and despise him and think him weak." He clenched his hand down. "Rise, Igor Karkaroff, Headmaster of Durmstrang, Occlumens and Legilimens."

Karkaroff stood. His face had entirely transformed now, Harry saw, and it was relaxed and confident. He stood as though the idea of cowering had never occurred to him. He turned and bowed to Voldemort, his eyes fixing briefly on Harry. Their glance shone with mirth.

"No one has suspected me, my lord," he said. "I can assure you of that. And within Durmstrang even now are a small clutch of fledgling Death Eaters, wanting nothing more than to serve the great Lord of whom they have heard so much." He bowed again, and stood there like that until Voldemort whispered to him.

"Rise."

Karkaroff looked up.

"I am much pleased with you, Igor," said Voldemort, and Karkaroff nodded to him and fell back to join the rest of the circle. Voldemort turned and scanned the circle slowly for a moment, then said, "I am not so pleased with some of the rest of you. Crabbe. Come to me."

One of the heavysset figures gave what looked like a start, and then took a step forward. Voldemort's voice snapped out at once, like breaking ice. "Did I give you permission to *walk* to me? *Crawl.*"

The figure went down at once, and Harry watched in disgust as Vincent's father crawled forward to the hem of Voldemort's robes. Voldemort let him get that far before he gestured with the long yew wand that Bellatrix or Karkaroff must have handed him when Harry wasn't looking and said, "*Crucio.*"

Crabbe began to writhe and scream under the curse. Harry forced himself to watch as the robe flew back and forth, revealing pale skin underneath it, and as Crabbe's limbs jerked and convulsed. He would be suffering the curse himself in a short time, he thought, and this way at least someone was witness to the suffering of others, as they would be witness to his. It was an odd bond to have with the Death Eaters he despised, but there it was.

Voldemort ended the curse when a line of drool began to run from Crabbe's mouth to the ground, and said, "You thought I would not return, did you not, Vincent? You believed that you were free of the service you once swore your life to. You are not, and never shall be. You will take your son at once from Hogwarts, Vincent, and raise him properly to be a Death Eater and follow me. I intend for him to have the Mark before a year from tonight." For a moment, he turned his head, his eyes gleaming as they fastened on Harry. "And I intend his first victim to be Draco Malfoy."

Harry gave another great heave against his bonds, but it was useless. Rosier had certainly not loosened them. He watched in helplessness as Voldemort sent Crabbe, blubbing protestations of loyalty, back to the circle, and then summoned and

tortured a few others who appeared not to have pleased him. All of them broke and cried under the pain. Voldemort gave all of them tasks—mostly trying to recruit other Dark pureblood families—and sent them back into the circle.

Harry memorized the information, and watched the sun.

Voldemort doesn't intend for me to survive, but I will, in spite of him, and then this information will be important.

“And now,” said Voldemort, his voice oddly sprightly, “we have a new Death Eater to be initiated. Cynthia Whitecheek, come forward.”

Harry blinked as the brown-haired woman he had seen in his vision crawled out from the shadows, more flexible and graceful on all fours than most of the Death Eaters had been. She halted at Voldemort's feet and tilted her head up. Harry could see her crazed eyes fix on his face, and she took a long, deep sniff, as though she appreciated the snake-like scent that hung around him.

“Cynthia Whitecheek,” said Voldemort, “werewolf, consort of Fenrir Greyback, do you consent to serve me all the days of your life?”

“I do,” said Whitecheek, her voice a growl.

“And do you consent to be loyal to me, putting my goals and not your own first, for as long as you shall live and carry the Dark Mark?” Voldemort held out his wand near her left arm. There was no robe sleeve for the werewolf to push back, since she was naked.

“I do.” Whitecheek held up her arm, steadily.

“Do you consent to wear my Mark upon your skin, and take no steps to remove or alter it?” Voldemort's voice was barely a whisper now.

“I do.”

Voldemort laughed, and then shouted, “*Morsmordre!*”

Whitecheek howled as a jet of black light shot from Voldemort's wand and coalesced on her arm, weaving into the snake and skull. Harry watched it form and tried not to care, tried to make his mind float in a distant place from his body, but he knew what happened next, from reading the histories of Voldemort's War, and his panting shook him.

“Your service is sealed in flesh,” said Voldemort. “Let it be sealed in blood.” He nodded over his shoulder, and Fenrir Greyback appeared, bereft of his mask. By the arm, he pulled a small boy. Harry guessed he was about eight years old, and couldn't tell if he was Muggle or wizard.

Did it matter? They are going to kill a child.

Harry threw himself furiously against his bonds, grunting. They did not give. He reached out relentlessly, again and again, with his magic, testing the barriers, hitting them, and falling back with an effort that made his eyes blur and his head swim.

Voldemort eyed him, and laughed, and Harry's scar burst into enough pain to cloud his vision even further.

Nevertheless, he saw the moment when Greyback released the dazed, sobbing boy, and Whitecheek edged forward, growling, then charged.

The boy tried to run.

Whitecheek was on him in moments, burying his small body beneath her own larger one. Harry watched, because he could do nothing else, and the boy should have at least a witness to his death. He saw yellowed teeth flash and bite down, tearing off the boy's right ear.

The boy screamed, so much pain in that sound, so much hurt that he couldn't understand the reason for. Harry, half-maddened, threw himself against the bonds again. Nothing happened at all.

Whitecheek tilted the boy's head to the side and used her thumb to pop out one of his eyes. She swallowed that, while the

child wailed and pleaded, gone beyond coherent words now into one senseless world of agony. Whitecheek wasn't trying to torture him, Harry knew. She had no interest in prolonging the kill. She was eating him, and that was quite bad enough.

Whitecheek rolled the boy over, gripped the skin of his throat in her teeth, and ripped her head sharply to the side. Wail, and scream, and gurgle, and then the sound was drowned in blood, as the boy's jugular split and he died. Whitecheek lowered her head, rubbing her face in the blood, licking at it frantically, as though she didn't want any of it to escape. Then she rolled on her back, bathing her hair in it, and drew one of the boy's arms to her mouth so that she might bite off his fingers.

"Well done," said Voldemort, while Harry panted and felt his gorge and his guilt rise, "my newest disciple."

Whitecheek looked up at him, and then rolled on her back, baring her belly in submission. Voldemort laughed, and gestured for Greyback to cover her with the robe he held. The other werewolf hurried to do so, murmuring in her ear. Then they turned and began feeding on the boy together.

Harry closed his eyes, because he could now, and guilt was eating him like a werewolf of his very own.

He died. He died right in front of you.

And you did nothing.

Harry didn't think it really mattered that his magic was bound. He should have done *something*. What was the good of having all this power, if he couldn't even use it to save a child?

"And now," said Voldemort, "we have another entertainment planned for you, my loyal servants. A matter of vengeance, too long delayed."

Harry sat on the guilt and lifted his head, fixing his eyes on Voldemort. *He's going to duel me. He must. He wants to. And then I'll be free.* The sun was still setting, but it could not be very long now before it set completely, and the barriers on Harry's magic would fall.

Bellatrix crept forward to kneel at Voldemort's feet, staring into his face. "May I?" she whispered. "Oh, my lord, may I?"

Voldemort nodded, with a smile, at her. Bellatrix stood up and came towards Harry. Harry braced himself to resist a few *Crucios* from her wand.

"Oh, and Bella?" Voldemort asked.

Bellatrix turned and looked back at him.

Voldemort smiled, a sharper chop of his mouth than he had shown so far. "Leave him his wand hand."

Dim, crawling horror woke in Harry, as at the approach of a fanged beast, when Bellatrix said, with a simper, "Of course, my lord."

She turned towards him, and in her left hand she carried a knife.

Harry tried to struggle. He might as well have tried to push the world off course. He had to lie there as Bellatrix knelt next to him and held up the blade, admiring it. It shone and sparkled with an edge that Harry suspected must have come from the mysterious incantations that she put into it.

"You took my right hand," she whispered to him. "It seems only right that I should claim a similar price from you. But since my lord wants me to leave you your wand hand, and that is your right one..." She shrugged, and let out a little giggle. "One must make do."

Voldemort moved to stand at the foot of the stone as Harry kept struggling, arching his back and chest up. Voldemort observed him in silence for a moment, amused. Under the direct glare of those red eyes, Harry felt his scar begin to burn again.

Then Voldemort drew his own wand and whispered, "*Crucio*."

Pain broke out in the middle of Harry's chest and raced up and down. He couldn't convulse to relieve it as Crabbe could, so

closely as he held. He could barely tell when it joined with the agony radiating downward from his scar.

He felt the moment when Bellatrix took hold of his left hand and began to cut through his wrist, though, notwithstanding that the tightness of the straps should have numbed his circulation.

He screamed.

Voldemort laughed.

The *Crucio* burned.

The scar flamed.

Bellatrix cut.

Harry felt himself falling deeper and deeper into the pain. Lily's voice whispered in his head—*Don't let it break you, ride it, roll under it, rise above it*—but the words no longer mattered. Everything was pain, glowing incandescent red-and-black, rolling like stormclouds above him. Everything *hurt*, it hurt so much...

He screamed.

Voldemort laughed.

The *Crucio* burned.

The scar flamed.

Bellatrix cut.

There was a bottom to the pain, and Harry hit it as he felt the bone and flesh begin to part. The knife bore straight down, and carried him to that point. Harry knew that he was not going to be able to do anything to stop it, even as he could not have done anything to stop the eating of the boy by Whitecheek.

His rage boiled, and then dived straight down into him with a scream.

He screamed.

Voldemort laughed.

The *Crucio* burned.

The scar flamed.

Bellatrix cut.

Harry felt his wrist part with a snapping, snarling sound, and knew his left hand was gone. He knew it, as much as anything, by the sudden increase of his hatred, by the way his wandless magic gathered and rushed towards what seemed like an escape from his body—

And found it only a trap, as it sparked and spun and spat out of control. Harry tried to harness it, reaching for the instinctive command he'd gained of it over the past two years, and it escaped him, running through his grasp like water.

Harry understood a moment later, in a single, despairing breath. He had bound his wandless magic so closely to his body, kept it so fastened to his skin, that a change in the structure of his body, a permanent hole opened like that, made it spill out wildly, untamed, unfathomable. He had lost control of his power, and there seemed to be no getting it back any time soon.

He screamed.

Bellatrix laughed, and Voldemort laughed, and moved away from the stone, lessening the pain from the scar and dismissing the *Crucio* with a flick of his wrist. Harry turned his head, inch by inch, to see the hand Bellatrix held.

She smiled at him, and then gestured with her knife and whispered something. Harry cried out again as the spell cauterized his wound, preventing the bleeding from killing him and sealing his wrist as a stump.

He hoped that might help him regain control of his magic, but no such luck. It only went on spilling out of him, spitting uselessly, creating small whirlwinds in the grass. Harry tried to tell it to untie his bonds, to strike at Voldemort, to hit and kill Bellatrix.

Nothing happened. The magic did not have to listen to him, so it did not.

Panting, more helpless than he had ever been, with his wrist on fire, Harry stared as Bellatrix whispered to him.

“I’ve put spells on the knife, baby, incantations I worked months on. You’ll never be able to fasten a hand on that ugly stump again. No spell will take, every false hand will fall off, and mediwizardry will just slide off it.” Bellatrix laughed aloud, and then held up the hand she’d cut off.

“As for what I’m going to do with this, that’s another part of the incantations.”

She slid back her sleeve, and Harry saw the ruin of her right hand, where he’d severed her wrist with the *Sectumsempra*. Other slivers of flesh were gone from it, too, where she’d cut the meat and muscle from her arm for Voldemort’s resurrection. She slid Harry’s hand down to rest against the arm, and then chanted three sharp words that Harry didn’t think were Latin.

His hand squirmed, and melted, and changed shape, and turned in the other direction. It was a right hand that settled against Bellatrix’s right wrist and melted into it, until only the different color of her skin let Harry tell where his old hand had begun. Bellatrix smiled at him, and shook her fingers, and took the knife into her right hand.

“A pity I will not get to do anything else with you,” she whispered. “My lord wants to duel with you, and will give you back your wand.”

Harry turned his head to see Voldemort standing there, Harry’s cypress wand in one hand, a smile on his mouth.

“Come, Potter,” he said, and broke Harry’s bonds with nonverbal severing spells. “We will dance.”

Without control of his wandless magic, Harry knew, Voldemort would kill him. He would die here, with so much left unaccomplished, suffering from the pain they caused him, and Voldemort would be free to walk the world again and cause more suffering, especially if Harry really had been the Boy-Who-Lived that the prophecy had chosen.

He would die.

And he would not be able to help anyone anymore.

The diving, screaming pain in him hit the icicle cage in which he’d confined his Dark fury and broke it wide open. Harry felt the emotions spill through him, making his face contort and his right hand—his only hand, now—reach out and catch the wand that Voldemort threw him.

He *hated*.

Oh, how he *hated* them.

There would be no one coming to save him this time, Harry knew, no one who would prevent him from unleashing his rage and hatred as he had done against Umbridge and against Lily. No Snape, no Draco to bring him back. He would die here, spending himself in fury and loathing.

And part of him—the part that had screamed at his own uselessness when he lay there watching the boy die under Whitecheek, the part that was sickened by his own folly in not controlling his wandless magic some other way, the part that had opened the cage and let the fury out—was fiercely glad of it.

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Sixty-Two: Deep Death Waits

I never knew, Harry thought, as he stepped away from the altar and approached Voldemort with his wand clutched tightly in

his hand, *that I could hate this much.*

The hatred stole his breath. It rushed and throbbed in him like another heartbeat, or like the love that his mother had once trained him to have for Connor. It was everywhere he looked, making the sight of the gravestones or the Death Eaters pale into insignificance next to the two largest things in his life. There was Voldemort, and there was his pain—the one present in front of Harry, the other something he wanted to achieve.

Voldemort watched him come, head cocked to the side, smile lazy. His voice, when he spoke, was low and had just a slight twist that Harry knew meant he was probably speaking in Parseltongue.

“Do you not understand what will happen here, Harry? You are done with. Your chances are dead. Your magic is spilling out of you, and will run wild until you die at the end of my wand.” He lifted his own wand slightly. “And there is no doubt that you will die. Have you thought about what our respective wands are made of?”

Harry halted a few feet from him and stared at him in silence. He didn’t say anything back. He didn’t think that Voldemort wanted a response, and besides, he couldn’t have given one. The words would have emerged from his mouth not as words, but as a shriek. He could feel the magic he still had control of, the magic that could be channeled through a wand, gathering itself like a leopard ready to spring.

Voldemort swung his wand back and forth. “My wand is yew,” he said. “Symbol of resurrection, of returning from death. And the phoenix feather within it is simply an extra promise. I was always going to return, Harry, and I was always going to defeat you.

“Whereas *yours...*” Voldemort made a grotesque motion with his mouth that Harry supposed was symbolic of curling his lip, since he had no lip to actually curl. “Your wand is cypress, Harry. Do you know the legend of cypress? It is the death tree. Cut it once, and it grows not again. The branches are hung in mourning, and for remembrance.” Voldemort lifted his wand higher, smiling. “I shall enjoy facing and hurting you one more time, my young nemesis. But remember. This was only ever going to end one way.”

He moved a step forward and swung his wand in a sharp cutting motion. “*Imperio!*”

Harry opened his mouth as the Unforgivable Curse hit him. He was laughing, but the laughter sounded like nothing he’d ever heard before. It was the choking sound of an animal dying in a trap.

He felt only intense contempt, flaying his throat from the inside out as it rose.

Does he think to take me with that? Does he really think my will can bend now?

The Imperius Curse hit his shields and faded into oblivion. Harry raised his eyebrows to Voldemort’s stunned stare and smiled mockingly. This time, he thought he could manage to speak, and in fact, words came out when he strained for them. “I’m not bowing to you, *Tom.*”

As he had suspected it might, the name made Voldemort bare his teeth in a silent snarl. He spoke in Parseltongue instead of English, again, his voice a low and intimate hiss. Harry wondered, faintly, if even *Voldemort* thought his words were ridiculous, and that was the reason he was speaking like this, instead of announcing it in such a way that all his Death Eaters could understand. “You have no idea what you are doing, boy. You will pay in a thousand waves of pain for every insult you have flung at me.”

Harry lifted his head. He could feel hatred pouring from him in waves, as though he had just climbed out of a dark ocean. It was wonderful how it felt not to care about anything anymore, not to know or feel it when he surpassed a boundary. He was out of control anyway, his greatest weapon still spilling uselessly from his cauterized wrist. Why should he give a damn?

He aimed his wand at Voldemort, and called. His wand magic, old, faithful friend, the one he’d mastered long before he tried wandless, came rushing at his call as he whispered the words, remembering the beach last summer.

“Accendo intra cruore.”

The Blood-Burning Curse came from him easily, fluidly, and he saw Voldemort’s eyes go briefly wide before he waved his wand and countered it. Harry didn’t mind. He’d expected that this would be no easy fight. Voldemort was newly returned to power, and he had always had more strength than Harry did. The trick was to keep moving, and to have another spell at the ready on your lips, and he did.

That acquaintance with Rosier was quite useful, after all.

“Cor cordium flammae!”

Voldemort hissed briefly, but countered it with a spell that Harry had never heard of, and which made him decide that Lucius must have been lying about there being no countercurse to Burning Heart but from another wizard’s wand. Harry shrugged lightly. He didn’t care. Everything around him felt light, drifting, and he didn’t know why he’d been so frightened of madness in the first place. He was going to die, Voldemort had seen to that, so why shouldn’t he have some fun before he went?

“Crucio,” he cast, and the hatred was there to fuel the Unforgivable, and, perhaps because Voldemort hadn’t been expecting it, that actually made him stagger for a bit. Then he dismissed it with a *Finite* and glared hard at Harry.

It came to Harry that he had an advantage in being so much smaller and lighter, and he really should use that. As Voldemort cast a Blasting Curse at him, he dropped to the ground and rolled behind a headstone.

The headstone took the force of the curse instead, which Harry thought was nice of it. He patted the stone in thanks, and then rose up from behind the marker, facing Voldemort again. He had had a thought. He turned it over in his head and admired it. It was pretty, if sharp.

“What do you think you are doing, Potter?” Voldemort whisper-hissed. “Do you really imagine that you can escape, even now?”

“No,” said Harry absently. His thoughts continued to turn. He had lost control of his wandless magic, and right now it was doing nothing more than flashing in useless purple lights around him. But wand magic was controlled with incantations and movements of the hand. He *should* be able to accomplish what he wanted to do, as long as he wrapped it in a unique word and wrist movement. Intention was usually a third component of spells, but, given the hatred baying inside him right now, Harry didn’t think that he would have a problem with that.

“Then what are you *doing*?”

“Hurting you,” said Harry, and smiled at him, and decided that he had never heard of a spell that used this word before. Not cleaning charms, and not mediwizardry, and not ordinary spells. And the wand movement—hm. A quick swish to the side and then back up again at a ninety-degree angle would work, he thought. Most spells used angles less than that.

Harry heard himself, as if from far away, begin to hum.

Voldemort narrowed his eyes at him, but, this time, cast a spell in Parseltongue. Harry didn’t recognize it, and had no preparation against the blow that caught his chest and began to squeeze about his lungs. It was literally turning the air in them to something else, he thought from his distance. Perhaps lead.

He concentrated, and said *Finite Incantatem* in his head, moving his wand in the proper motion. That spell was an old one, learned early in his training, and nonverbal magic was still magic that had to be done with a wand, most of the time. The sensation in his chest faded.

Yes, his word and his wrist movement were ready, and the intention aimed itself as Harry began to walk towards Voldemort.

Why not?

Harry lifted his wand. He could almost feel the dragon heartstring core tingle as he released his power in a stream through it, and he sang out the word he had chosen for his spell. *“Exsculpo!”*

The spell was new, and for just a moment, Harry could feel his magic fighting to take the shape he wanted, seeking a familiar incantation and not finding it. He gave a little sigh and pushed his will forward. Really, he wanted Voldemort to suffer. Was that so hard to achieve?

The spell trembled, and then obeyed him. A jet of purple light shot from his wand and landed on Voldemort’s stomach, while the Dark Lord laughed aloud.

“You are trying to erase me as you would a slate, boy?” He sneered. “It is not that easy to get rid of me.”

“Not erase,” Harry whispered, smiling. “That’s not the only thing that word means.”

Voldemort had exactly half a second to look suspicious before his belly split open and the spell started trying to scoop his internal organs out.

Harry watched as a soup of gray and green and white—and really, why he had he expected Voldemort’s insides to look at all like a normal person’s?—started to fall to the ground. Voldemort tried to cast a healing spell on himself, but his voice was trembling with pain and shock and, Harry suspected, wounded pride. Little boys he’d set himself the task of killing were not supposed to do things like that.

Harry might have been content to watch and wait until Voldemort recovered, so that he could go on chipping at the man little by little and bit by bit, but just then something else happened.

The barriers around Harry, the ones that had bound his wandless magic in his body until Bellatrix cut his hand off and kept his allies away from him, fell.

Harry turned his head in that moment of deep silence, even though he knew he didn’t have to look. He already knew what he would see.

The sun had set. Voldemort’s sun-tied power, enormous though it was, had gone, and he had no ability to will Harry’s magic motionless in the graveyard anymore.

Harry felt a smile flood his face, brilliant, dazzling, strong. He knew this was going to change nothing; he still expected Voldemort to kill him in the end. It was inevitable. Cleverness could only hold out against raw strength for so long, and Harry knew that this was the Dark Lord, who had spent years on years studying Dark magics, and doing sickening things to his body to keep himself alive at all costs. Of course he would win any duel they had.

But, for now, Harry was free to take a more complete vengeance than he had so far. He would give Voldemort something to remember him by.

He whistled softly, and got the attention of his wandless magic. It was no longer under his control, but it would at least pay attention when he called. Harry could feel its focus, as though it were a feral dog perking its ears to a once-familiar cry and deciding whether to come.

Harry asked if it was interested in hurting someone.

Tainted by his spiraling hatred, driven mad by his pain, it was.

Harry lifted his head, and fixed his eyes on Voldemort, who had repaired his belly. Through his eyes, from the bite on his left shoulder, from his severed wrist, the magic exploded. Harry didn’t try to master it. He just threw a blast of absolute final force at Voldemort, and was happy in the doing of it.

The force caught Voldemort, wrenched him twice, spun him once, and tossed him into one of the grave markers. Harry heard a snap, though it wasn’t the sound of a breaking bone; it sounded more like a twig. When Voldemort rolled back over, his left arm hung oddly.

Harry smiled at him.

Voldemort bared his jagged teeth in a soundless scream.

And his own magic rose around him, a Dark tsunami, deep and impossibly strong and unstoppable.

Harry found himself on his back, the magic swarming over him like snakes, held down by the strength of it just as he had been in first year. Knowledge and experience and old, old cruelty crouched over him. If Voldemort had ever been human, he had lost that distinction long ago.

Shall I teach you, child? his voice hissed from everywhere and nowhere, inside Harry’s head and into his ears and just above his body. *Shall I teach you what it is to hate?*

And Harry felt it grab him and drag him and plunge him into foulness. This was Dark magic gone wrong, the force that had

twisted and mutilated and fooled the Light magic into granting Voldemort the power to link to the sun through a false truce-dance. This was a force that bred webs, or broke them only for the Dark Lord's selfish ends. Harry felt dog vomit overcoming him, rising up, flooding his nostrils, filling his mouth and his ears with its weight and its stink.

He knew how his mother must have felt about him, now.

Drowning, he whistled again, and his magic cocked one ear.

Harry took a deep breath, gagging on the stench of evil not even present, and opened his siphoning ability.

The snake opened its jaws because it had decided that it wanted to, and began to swallow. The foul magic fell down its throat, and was not transferred to Harry, but borne elsewhere. Harry was just as glad. He was mad, maybe, but there was only so much of that stench and contamination that even he could take. He lay, and breathed, and felt the weight grow less and less.

Voldemort paused in that moment, and his inaudible voice laughed.

Harry, Harry, dear Harry. You are my magical heir, aren't you? I don't know how it happened, but that night, when I confronted you, I must have given you some of my own magical gifts. The Parseltongue was only one of them.

What you have forgotten, my heir, is that the ancestor is always better, faster, stronger.

Voldemort's own magic-eating ability became active. At least, Harry thought that must be what it was. It had teeth, though, not like his swallowing snake, and it swarmed his magic and ripped pieces out of it.

Harry screamed. This did not hurt as much as having his hand cut off, but it increased the sense of violation. His hand and his stump scrabbled at the ground, trying to stop the swallowing process. He did remember not to let go of his wand, but just barely.

So young, Voldemort's voice echoed gleefully in his mind. *So innocent. So pure.*

Harry drew a deep breath and reached out automatically to pull his power back into his body and out of danger. Once again, it slipped out of reach. Harry cursed, and sobbed, and asked the magic-swallowing snake to open its mouth wider, politely, the way he would have asked a magical creature.

The snake obliged, and swallowed more, faster and faster. As Voldemort's magic grew fat and swollen with what he was stealing from Harry, it also lost that strength right away into Harry's magic. They'd become a snake eating its own tail, Harry thought dazedly, or perhaps, given the stink of Voldemort's evil, a snake eating its own shit.

Voldemort snarled at last, "Enough!"

Harry was not sure whether the command was in English or Parseltongue, but it had its effect. The creature that his magic formed stopped ripping and sucking at Harry's magic. Voldemort turned, instead, to defend himself against the loss of more power.

The snake swallowed a bit more, but then Harry asked it to shut its jaws and stop. It obeyed. Harry gasped, trembling with the force of the relief, and wondering what would happen next. His magic lay next to him, swollen, grown, and diminished. Since he could not touch it or estimate it any more, he could not know by how much.

What happened next was a high, clear song.

Harry tilted his head back. A spot of golden light circled above him. It descended nearer to the graveyard, and Harry recognized Fawkes. He stifled a groan. Why had the phoenix come? Neither of them could escape, and Harry was sure, now, that he would soon have another death on his conscience.

Therefore, Harry thought, as he scrambled back to his feet, the best thing to do was ignore the phoenix.

Besides, he had the feeling that Fawkes would want him to stop feeling hatred. And he couldn't do that. He stared at Voldemort, and the hatred became intense desire to destroy—anything the man held dear, anything he valued. The trouble was, Harry didn't think he valued his Death Eaters all that much, and there was no chance of breaking his wand.

Perhaps memories would do just as well.

“I heard you were looking for your diary,” said Harry casually, as they fell into a circling pattern. He didn’t know if he spoke in English or Parseltongue. Certainly looking at Voldemort’s inhuman eyes was enough to make him think of snakes and speak their language. “Did you ever find it?”

Voldemort’s gaze snapped to his face, and he sucked in a deep breath. “Where is it?” he hissed.

“Somewhere you can’t find it.” Harry twirled his wand between his fingers, and circled to the right, and smiled. “Too bad that you’re going to kill me before I can tell you about it, isn’t it?”

Voldemort might have replied, but Fawkes swooped over him, golden claws aiming for his face. Voldemort ducked, and Fawkes swept around in a circle, voice loud and sweet and urgent.

Harry shook his head regretfully at him. Fawkes represented something wonderful that he couldn’t ever go back to. His emotions refused to be caged. He would die spending his anger. There was at least that consolation. He would die with his guilt and his shame safely buried, too, because death would pay for the death of the child he had not saved and cover up the shame of failing so badly as to lose his own hand.

Voldemort hissed a curse at Fawkes, but Fawkes dodged it easily and came to hover over Harry, singing loudly.

Harry shoved at him. “Go away, stupid phoenix,” he muttered absently, more interested in the spell Voldemort was readying than what Fawkes might think about this treatment. “You should have bonded to someone more worthy of you. I can’t help anymore, sorry.”

Fawkes chirped angrily. Harry looked up, his eyes narrowed. *I’m tainted. I can’t go back. Can’t he see that?*

It was a small thing, really, his irritation at Fawkes compared to his hatred of Voldemort, but that was the emotion his wandless magic chose to answer, and it abruptly leaped out of his severed wrist and attacked the phoenix.

Fawkes sang a lament as his tail feathers frosted over, and he flew higher and higher, still singing, and probably, Harry thought, shedding tears. Harry shrugged, glad that he was beyond any danger now. Harry wasn’t worth saving.

Voldemort’s spell hit him then—a simple Blasting Curse, but it flung Harry several feet. He rolled, standing up almost immediately, glad to have a situation that he understood better than most. He had trained for this. He had known that one day he would die fighting. He really never should have let anyone convince him otherwise.

For the next few minutes, he was blind to everything but the battle. Voldemort flung curses, and Harry dodged them or raised Shield Charms against them. He threw hexes, and Voldemort turned them aside, or caught them, changed them in midair, and threw them back at him. Harry decided that would be a useful skill to learn, and he should try and learn it—

Before he remembered that he was going to die here, and parted his mouth in a soundless laugh. That did rather make all his worries about his future seem pointless. And, well, he was sorry for Draco and Connor and Snape and the others—for Draco most of all—but he could already feel the gathering power around Voldemort, and knew the man was almost done playing with him. He was preparing a strike that would take Harry’s life once and for all.

Dying in battle against the Dark Lord. The fate I wanted, the fate I chose the moment I dedicated myself to serving Connor. How can I say that I didn’t see this coming, or that I’m not happy to be here now?

He decided that he might as well go out in a meaningful way, and that meant that he did want to take one of Voldemort’s Death Eaters with him, after all. He turned his head, and saw Bellatrix leaning forward from the circle, her lips parted as she watched the duel. Harry narrowed his eyes at her, even as one of Voldemort’s cutting hexes, like small knives flaying him all over his body, cut open the wound on his shoulder again. She wasn’t good at defense. He didn’t need his wandless magic to defeat her, the way he would have to have a chance against Voldemort.

He whirled to the side, presenting a tempting target for Voldemort. He knew the Dark Lord would hesitate a moment, though, unable to believe that Harry did not have some trick up his sleeve.

And Harry did. The trick just wasn’t for Voldemort. He gripped his wand and raised it, aiming at Bellatrix, picturing her dead and glad of it. He opened his mouth, prepared to utter the Killing Curse for the first time.

“I’m bored,” Evan Rosier, standing to Bellatrix’s right side, announced abruptly, and then drew his wand and flung a hex at

her.

Bellatrix, focused on Harry, didn't dodge it in time, and it caved in her ribs. As she fell to the ground, bubbling, Rosier winked at Harry, said, "I told you, you're interesting," and then turned to counter curses coming from the general direction of Greyback and Whitecheek.

Harry didn't have time to worry about Rosier. Voldemort was striding towards him, and this time, his magic rose like wings around him. Harry faced him, and knew this was the end. Voldemort might use the Killing Curse, or he would use something else—he probably would, so that Harry died in suffering—but his magic was like a looming wall, blocking out the last gleam of sunset and the last of Fawkes's song. Harry looked into death, and it looked back at him.

He didn't find it as fearsome as he might once have. Something had died within him when that boy did.

Voldemort smiled at him and made to speak, but then jerked his head to the side. Harry slowly followed his gaze, aware of a patch of silence there, but not knowing what he would see.

Dragonsbane Parkinson was striding forward between the gravestones, his black wrappings fluttering about him as if in a chill wind.

Words that Harry had nearly forgotten blazed into his head, words that Dragonsbane had spoken at last year's Walpurgis Night, when his prohibitions lifted and allowed him to talk to others with his mouth.

We will see each other again. And the next time but one is in a home of my kindred.

Harry had seen him with Hawthorn in the meeting in the Ministry at the end of August. And now he was here again, striding through a home of his kindred, a necropolis, a...

A graveyard.

The necromancer halted between two stone angels, and bowed to Harry, and lifted his hands.

And the dead arose.

Stone and earth cracked and creaked and groaned and shifted aside. Harry saw hands wrapped in bone, clad in cloth, wearing shards of wood as fingernails, scramble and tip aside the angels. Both of them missed Dragonsbane, who simply stood where he was, perhaps with his head bowed—it was hard to tell, given how swaddled he was—as the corpses stood and staggered past him, heading for the Death Eaters.

Most of the graves were breaking open now, and spilling out concoctions of dust and flesh, skeletons, nearly fresh bodies wrapped in shrouds, to advance on Voldemort's followers. Harry saw a few of the graves open but loose nothing save silver vapor. He supposed those were the ones with bodies so old that they had nothing to contribute to zombies, and could only produce something like spirits.

Dragonsbane stood in the middle of his kindred, and his hands flashed into view, pale and gleaming blue with the stone of his great ring, and he made several repeated motions, which Harry thought were part of his sign language. When he reached the end of the sequence, he began again.

Harry shook his head, not understanding, not wanting to understand, and turned back towards Voldemort. It didn't matter that Dragonsbane was here, any more that it mattered that Fawkes had appeared or Rosier had turned. None of them would manage to stand against Voldemort's magic. At best, the dead might take some of the Death Eaters, and Harry was vaguely glad of that.

He could feel an equally vague fear that if he allowed the arrival of his allies to matter, then he would have to live, drowning in his shame and guilt all the way. He thought he would prefer to die.

Voldemort aimed his wand. Harry could see that he was no longer playing, the arrogance that had driven him to this in the first place pressed flat by the weight of cold facts. He began to intone the spell that had no counter, no shield, and Harry knew he would not survive it this time. There were no barriers on his magic to be broken any more.

"Avada Ke—"

Something hit Harry full force and rolled him over. Harry found himself beneath a cold, solid weight, one that barely yielded when he pushed and struggled. Dragonsbane rolled off him at once, but he had done what he wanted to do. The Killing Curse had missed Harry, the green bolt of light soaring over his head to strike one of the masked Death Eaters and fell him. Harry heard Rosier's laugh, and knew that he yet lived, as if that would matter to him.

Harry glared at Dragonsbane. The necromancer was making no move to rise, lying on his back and making the same sequence of motions with his hands again and again. Harry found himself irritated that Dragonsbane was keeping his vows even now, as if they mattered more than telling Harry what the bloody hell was going on, but more annoyed still that Dragonsbane had deprived him of a relatively easy death.

A slight snarl was all the warning he had.

His wandless magic, the magic he could no longer control, sprang and then came down on Dragonsbane, howling as though Harry's irritation had been a surge of Dark, irrational fury.

Harry screamed and reached out his left wrist, without thinking. More magic spiraled loose from the stump and attacked Dragonsbane, ripping and snarling and clawing. In desperation, frantic, Harry tried to grab it and hold it back, snatching at it in any way he could imagine—with reins, with words, with his wand, with a web.

Nothing availed. The magic might as well have been a completely separate entity from him, even as it fulfilled the wishes it must have thought he had.

It tore Dragonsbane's chest apart, and Harry knew before he saw the pale hands stop moving and drop to the blood-matted grass that his ally was dead.

And as if someone had turned a key in the lock of his head, sanity returned to Harry with a click and a snap.

Harry went to his knees, screaming. He didn't know what emotion most drove the scream: fury, grief, guilt, self-loathing. But all of them were in there, and all of them made him feel, once again, as if he would rather die, notwithstanding Fawkes's song ringing overhead or Voldemort's delighted laughter behind him or what was happening to the Death Eaters.

You can't die. The thought returned to him with brutal suddenness. *You thought you could, but you can't. There is yet one more way that you might get out of this, one thing you haven't tried. You should have thought of it before, and you didn't, and now he's dead, but you've thought of it now and you're going to use it now, damn you.*

If nothing else, you owe Hawthorn and Pansy an explanation for how Dragonsbane died, and you'll have to get out of here to give it.

Harry turned. He lifted his wand. Voldemort had stopped laughing and watched him thoughtfully, his red eyes narrowed.

He understood what Harry intended in time to join in, but not in time to stop it. That was fine with Harry. Determination was riding him now, driving him as simple will to survive could not have done. He bore guilt, and he must pay the enormous debt he'd just incurred to the Parkinsons.

"Legilimens."

"Legilimens."

Harry and Voldemort spoke the spell at the same time, and, leaping, passed into each other's minds at the same moment. Harry rode the sensation of wind inside Voldemort's thoughts, clutching his goal to himself all the while.

Damage him. Wound him deeply enough that you can escape with your knowledge and he can't just follow you, or break loose from the graveyard and start hurting other people.

Hurt him.

Yes, I think I can do that. I'm already a murderer, aren't I?

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Sixty-Three: Of Hedges and Plains of Ice

Harry found himself standing in cold darkness. He shivered and squinted, expecting that at any moment he would grow warmer, or the light would lift and show him what sort of place Voldemort thought of his mind as.

Neither happened. Instead, Harry's eyes adjusted slowly to the darkness, and he realized that there were faint lights overhead—glaring arctic stars. He lowered his gaze slowly and moved his head from side to side.

He stood on a plain of ice, covered with snow, stretching off in every direction. Harry could see no hill or tree marking it, no place where the ground altered in any way. He edged his way forward, afraid that he would trip into a hole by the starlight, but though he stumbled, that came only from the slickness of the ice under the snow.

There was no sign of Voldemort's memories, or his weak points, or his defenses. Nothing but barren stillness wherever Harry looked, lying under a barely lit dark sky.

That was its defense, of course, Harry realized a moment later. In a place where nothing showed, nothing could be attacked. Any Legilimens who did manage to fight his way into the Dark Lord's mind would have frozen in bafflement, unable to conceive where he should search, and perhaps believing that his enemy had no emotions, no weak points, to attack.

Harry did not believe that. He had seen emotion on Voldemort's face, and even though it was covered over by Occlumency shields now, those shields had to be *somewhere*.

He lifted his head, but the arch of dark sky continued uninterrupted overhead, without a trace of a cloud that might have hidden anything vulnerable. There were the stars, of course, all isolated from each other. Harry contemplated calling up a wind and flying to them.

Hysterical urgency tried to pound in the back of his mind, telling him that he had to find the Dark Lord's weak points *now now now*, but Harry managed to dismiss it. Yes, the stars were a possibility, but he didn't know if they would work. It wouldn't be like Voldemort to use light to hide his innermost weaknesses. Harry knew he hated using Light magic. He would have harnessed his powers to the sun only in utmost extremity.

Harry's gaze lowered to the ice and snow beneath his feet again.

Yes, he thought, that's a much more useful possibility.

He knelt and scooped up a handful of powdery snow, then shivered when it stung his fingers. The sensations here were much keener than he'd felt when he was in Draco's mind, or Connor's, or Snape's. It probably had something to do with Voldemort's status as a master Legilimens.

Harry didn't think he would make much progress trying to scabble through the frozen ground with his hand alone. Luckily, he had another option open to him, if he could call it to him here.

Harry closed his eyes and remembered the animal he had been during his visions: mid-sized, covered with thick, warm fur, his paws draped with feathery hair. Perfect for balancing on snow, those paws, and tipped with powerful claws. They could help him both with running in this strange place, should he have to, and digging.

The transformation surged over him, taking him by surprise. Harry grunted slightly as he shrank, and shook his head as warmth enveloped his body. It was only something imagined, here, but imagination was as powerful as reality in a situation like this. It only remained to keep convincing himself that he really was warm, and not dissipate the protection.

He opened his eyes, and saw a right paw and a foreshortened left leg on the ground before him. Harry grimaced. It seemed that the trauma Bellatrix had inflicted on him had affected him enough that he couldn't shed the remnants of it, even here.

Maybe that's a good thing, Harry thought. Teach me to live with it sooner. And there are a whole bunch of things I'll have to live with.

He began to dig.

Turn. Spin. Lift head. Seek. He was in a deep green place, crowded with rustlings that laughed at him.

He hated being laughed at.

He lifted his wand and fired off a curse. It hit something in the general deep green darkness of it all, but only one of the rustlings ceased; the rest kept on, quieter but as obstinate and stubborn as before.

He hated all things obstinate and stubborn, unless they were so in service to him. Then the world had his permission to be as stubborn as it liked.

Move forward. Sniff. No smell but leaves and turned earth. Wrinkle of mouth; of course the boy smelled that way, since he took care to keep himself so innocent and *pure*, like the magic he'd swallowed earlier. No, he would think a bit of mud or corruption the stink of Lord Voldemort.

He might show that Lord Voldemort had been here.

As his eyes adjusted to the bit of light falling through the trees, he found that he was not in a house surrounded by trees, as he had assumed—of course the boy would have a house as a mind, or maybe a replica of Hogwarts—but a strange construction, partially hedge maze and partially forest. As if the hedge maze had been allowed to grow wild, he thought, staring at something that might almost have been the wall of a lane, thick green leaves scattered with gold. He reached out and ripped off one of the leaves, and was satisfied to hear a small, sharp shriek.

He moved a few steps further forward, cursing aside one of the sturdier trees when it got in his way. It fell with a crash.

Dark green and rustle and smell of earth and feel of leaf-flesh beneath his feet and taste of dark green in his mouth. Contempt and hatred and scorn and laughter and no doubt, no doubt at all, because how could he doubt himself, Lord Voldemort, the mightiest Dark Lord and the mightiest wizard to walk the earth? Dumbledore was nothing to him, was nothing, had been nothing, would be nothing, will be nothing.

Somewhere, the hedge maze, the forest, would have a heart. Voldemort would find it and destroy it.

Move forward. Lift head. Curse aside a branch. Laugh at the foolishness of an enemy who truly thought that he could battle Lord Voldemort, master and accomplished Legilimens, on mental ground.

Begin.

Harry was aware of distant pain. Voldemort was no doubt adventuring around the inside of his head, finding things to disturb, and there was the wound on his shoulder, which he knew one of the Dark Lord's spells had reopened, and there was the sharp pain of his claws scrabbling on the ice in front of him.

But he kept digging. He lowered his head and used his teeth when he thought it would help, moving aside frozen soil and particles of ice that clung with irritating persistency in his mouth. When he spat, they should have either flown out or melted and run away, but all they did was cling to his jaws as cold water. Harry snarled and lashed his tail, and kept digging.

The rim of ice abruptly cracked, and Harry found a tunnel underneath. The tunnel was not filled with wetness, as he had thought it might be, but it was cool and dark, stone with a roof of earth. Harry gave a glad little growl and kept on tearing, scrabbling, ripping, widening, opening the tunnel more and more up. It might have taken a far longer time to open a hole for a human, but in his small new body, he had a suitable entrance in just a few minutes. He flattened himself to the ground and squirmed in and through.

He found himself in an intimately familiar place when he landed, his thick paws cushioning him from the fall, though he staggered off balance on his left foreleg for a moment. The tunnel was quiet and dark, lit only by a faint radiance like that from a *Lumos* spell, and filled with tiny bones and skulls when Harry shifted. When he sniffed, an overpowering stink of rotteness assaulted his nostrils. Harry hissed and spat again, but this time he could be happy.

Voldemort's mind resembled the tunnel that led to the Chamber of Secrets.

Harry knew where he was going now.

He trotted forward, his tail up and his paws picking their way carefully among the skulls. His going was somewhat awkward

with a left forepaw missing, but three legs and determination could do wonders, and soon Harry halted before a door marked with emerald-eyed serpents.

Fear paralyzed him for a moment. Though the graveyard had probably surpassed it by now, the Chamber was still the scene of what he considered his worst memory, the one he had seen when Dementors approached him.

Harry pushed aside his memories. He was good at doing it when someone else needed him to, and this was one of those times. He lifted his head high, and hissed out the command for the door to open in Parseltongue.

The door folded back at once, and Harry stepped into a place darker than the Chamber had been, darker than the sky above the ice plains, though still lit with that faint, moving yellow radiance, which Harry finally realized was focused on him, and shone from his fur. Perhaps because Voldemort's mind really was dark, perhaps because he was convinced it would be, he had conjured up the light and drawn it along with him.

Objects lay everywhere: carved cups, scepters, thrones, crowns, jeweled lockets like the one with Slytherin's mark that Sirius had found and which had possessed him, wands of rare woods, old books, jeweled swords, rings set with enormous stones, statues of emerald serpents with silver eyes and silver serpents with emerald eyes, bronze sculptures marked with grotesque signs of suffering and death. Harry hissed, knowing a lot more than he had ever wanted to about what Voldemort valued, and worked his way towards the back of the room, where the statue of Salazar Slytherin had stood in the real Chamber.

He saw what he was looking for almost at once. Snape's voice flowed through his head, deep and resonant.

You'll find memories the most plentiful things in another wizard's mind. But don't be distracted by them if you ever get the chance to enter the mind of someone you truly want to hurt. You can look for the heart—the anchor of their sanity—or you can look for the center of memory. It's extremely hard to destroy, but if you can locate it, you can at least damage it. You'll recognize it as looking like a larger version of the memories, but there's only one of it, and it shines.

This did indeed shine, Harry found. It was a giant sword, plunged into the stone and held upright by a crack that gripped the tip of its blade, and covered with five jewels. One of the jewels was shaped like a cup, one like a book, one like a wand, one like a locket, one like a ring. Harry was not sure what the significance of that might be, but they did resemble some of the treasures scattered around the floor, and those treasures had to be Voldemort's memories.

Now, he only had to figure out how he would damage a giant sword made of what looked like to be hard steel.

Twitch of an ear. Lift of a head. Taste of the air ahead. He could do that, had adapted his tongue to do that, adapting his senses to be like the senses of poor dead Nagini.

The thought of her made him lash out, and another tree fell. He smiled, as the shriek of pain was louder this time. He intended to destroy the heart of Potter's mind, but that didn't mean he couldn't inflict many small wounds along the way.

Harry. Dear Harry. Dear dead Harry, who should have known not to challenge him on his own ground.

Deeper into the maze. Deeper. Around corners, pushing through walls of leaves, stepping past fallen logs overgrown with moss. Had to be a center of this, had to be a heart. Had to be something around here.

A dart of movement to the side! Lifting of the head, narrowing his eyes.

Something living. Something unaltered, something that might die. He would never die, no, of course not. Death was for lesser creatures, creatures who were still mortal.

He followed, moving through the leaves like a predator. The living thing ran, and he hunted. He was always a great hunter, was Lord Voldemort. In days before he grew too many for such things, had too many followers to have to do it himself, he had enjoyed hunting the victims he sacrificed for power and knowledge. There was a thrill in the blood, the hunt, that was like nothing else.

Dart. Anticipate. Turn. The creature was going this way, he would go this way, and he would catch it.

He stepped out into the middle of the lane of leaves, and waited. The living creature would have to come this way.

But it didn't. He stood in the midst of green darkness, touched with the faintest hint of gold, and waited, and listened, and still the living creature did not come at all. Child or rabbit or dragon, it didn't come out, and then the bit of light faded altogether.

He lifted his wand and conjured a light. Leaves shifted around him, and there was more of the impertinent rustling. He cast again and again, and the rustlings cried out and fell silent.

But they had done their work. When he could see again, he stood in a completely unfamiliar place, the maze, the forest, having reassembled itself into a new construction and hidden away the darting living creature that he was now sure was the heart of Potter's mind.

With a snarl—what right did a boy like this have to defy a master Legilimens? He should have rolled over to bare his belly at the mere chance of being near such greatness!—he forced his way forward, determined to find the path back to the living creature. He would catch it, and he would strangle it. Make Potter feel the pain and pay the price, as he had done for thirteen years of agony.

Harry walked around the sword several times, and still he could see no way of damaging it. He could not climb it; the edges were too sharp and too sleek, it really was nothing more than a great blade, and he would cut himself in doing so. Harry did not want to think about what would happen if he wounded himself in Voldemort's mind. The hilt was too far from the floor for him to jump to it and safely land on the crossguard, and scratching or tearing at the steel would have no result.

He sat down and lashed his tail, and then a thought came to him and made him feel very stupid.

I might have flown to the stars. What I imagine is real, here, and what I imagine right now is needing to be at the top of the hilt.

Harry thought determinedly about it, bending his mind in that direction, and ignoring all the "rational" thoughts that wanted to point out things like lynxes not being able to fly. He concentrated on the feeling of smooth metal rather than stone under his paws, and the floor being curved instead of straight, and how much he wanted to be able to do this and leave, instead of lingering here...

And it worked. The world jolted around him, and then he stood on the hilt, struggling awkwardly to balance on the immense curved guard that flanked the pommel. He snarled in triumph, and then lowered his head.

He had known, all along, if he could get to the hilt, that the easiest course would be to damage the sword by tugging out the jewels.

He locked his teeth on the yellow, cup-shaped stone, which might be a topaz, and began to tug. The stone barely projected from the metallic surface. His teeth were weary from biting through ice and the complicated, tangled root system that had underlain it. His body throbbed with exhaustion and pain and the longing to simply collapse and let something else happen that he had no part in. But he locked his hind paws and his right front one into place and kept on pulling, thinking of what price he had paid—and which other people had paid, too—to get him this far.

The stone trembled, at last, and began slowly to tip out from the socket where it had been placed. Harry went on prizing at it until he was sure that it would come out, and then released it and turned sideways to stand on the hilt.

Just in time. The jewel uttered a loud groan and slipped out of its place, tumbling to the floor of the Chamber of Secrets far below. It hit the flagstones and shattered, sending large pieces of itself rolling away to hide among the treasures of Voldemort's memories.

Harry felt the effect at once. The Chamber around him shuddered, and a good portion of the cups and jeweled statues on the floor grew tarnished. He snarled, let himself have a moment of gloating, and then turned to attack the locket-shaped stone.

Pain!

The pain took him off guard, and that made him furious. What right did the boy have to hurt him? Pain was for lesser mortals, living creatures who were going to die. He was Lord Voldemort, and he was never going to die. He had taken enough steps to prevent it.

He turned his head, blindly seeking, and the leaves behind him creaked. When he turned around again, they were pressing into his face, covering his mouth and his eyes. He snarled and pushed them away, but his hand slipped over their slick surfaces. They were weak, and fragile, and they had *no right to oppose him*, but they were doing it anyway, and they did not seem to care when he began firing curses into them, burning and blasting many of them away.

He fell back a step, only to recover his ground, and felt a dart of motion near his heels. This time, *this* time, he spun, and lashed out with one arm, catching the creature by its shoulder. It tripped and stumbled and fell, and then he had it, and it was staring up at him, the heart of Potter's mind.

It was a boy, about the same age as Potter, with blond hair and a pale face. Looked rather like Lucius, it did. He bared his teeth in a snarl. He had no idea why the heart of the boy's mind would be a Malfoy, but he had already paused to wonder too many times this evening. He should have killed Potter when he was tied to the rock.

He lifted his wand, prepared to cast the Killing Curse that would destroy the boy and the remains of Potter's sanity with it.

The locket-shaped stone smashed, and Harry lashed his tail. Then he paused, lifting his head, twitching his nose.

Something is wrong. Something in my mind is in danger.

Harry could only guess that Voldemort had somehow found the heart of his own mind, or perhaps the place where all his memories were stored. He had no time to lose, and he knew what to do, as though someone had whispered a plan in his ear. He imagined himself with lead weights fastened to his paws, and he leaped into the air and then came down again on the hilt of the sword.

The sword shook with the weight, and groaned, and then tilted slowly to one side. Harry bared his teeth and jumped again, though he came near to staggering and slipping off this time. He didn't know how much time he had left before Voldemort permanently damaged him, and he couldn't worry about it.

Focus my gaze on the path forward. That's what I have to do right now.

He jumped one more time.

The sword tilted and began to crash down.

Harry jumped. This time, he fastened his mind on a destination not part of the Chamber of treasures that surrounded him. He fixed it on his body, kneeling motionless on the grass of the graveyard, and built the image in his memory. Wand clutched in his hand, head twisted so that he faced towards Voldemort, legs folded beneath him, skin enfolding him...

I am here.

I am real.

I am home.

Harry gasped and opened his eyes, in time to see Voldemort begin spasming, as if the whole of his body were a single muscle that someone else had ordered him to contract.

He couldn't remember what he was about to do. There was a boy in front of him, but he couldn't remember who the boy was. He looked around, and stared at the leaves gathered near him, and wondered where they were. Had he come into the midst of a maze? The Forbidden Forest? Was he back in Albania, or perhaps in the untamed jungles of Africa?

The boy backed away from him, and then turned and ran. He stood where he was, not following. Other memories were shredding and diving around him, spiraling like stormclouds.

Where had he been? What was his name?

He had only one thing left to him as it seemed that all his memories might drain away forever: the fear of death, and the knowledge that, come what may, he *could not* die like this. Death was not for him.

He reached out, not in memory, but with an assured, guiding motion, the same way he would move his right hand. He touched a link that bound him to a secret place, a place that held one of the centers of his life. He tugged on the link, and it responded, the object it was bound to pulling him towards it.

He vanished, along the link, his mind folding into sleep, preserving the tatters of memory just as they were.

Harry stared as Voldemort's motionless body wavered, blurred, and then vanished. His blank red eyes closed in the moment before he faded. Harry knew this was no normal Apparition, and suspected that he had done something to prevent himself from losing the rest of his memory.

Of course he would, he thought bitterly, leaning on his left elbow and panting in and out with steady breaths. *It would be too easy otherwise.*

"Potter."

Harry turned swiftly, bringing his wand up in front of him. Rosier lifted his hands before his face, mock-cowering behind them. His laughter was deep, and assured, and amused.

"Good to see you that survived," he said. "I shudder to think of how boring my life would become if you hadn't."

"What game are you playing?" Harry whispered, turning his head from side to side to see about the rest of the Death Eaters. They were gone, and most of the motionless forms on the ground looked to be the dead that Dragonsbane had raised, fallen when his necromancy dissipated or their foes fled or their raiser died. Only one robed body lay still, the mask half-off; it was one of the male Death Eaters Harry didn't know by sight. Harry drew in a huffing breath, and wondered whether or not he should be glad that Bellatrix Lestrange wasn't dead.

"The game of life," said Rosier, with no irony in his voice. "The one I told you about, the one everyone plays. The one you could play yourself, Potter, if you were dedicated more to living than dying." He cocked his head and studied Harry's face. "Or perhaps you're awake to living now. I should be *so* glad if you were." He clapped his hands and smiled like a delighted child.

Fawkes circled down just then, his trilling song covering any reply that Harry might have wanted to make. He turned as the phoenix settled on his shoulder, and met his gaze. Fawkes stared at him with tears falling gently from his dark eyes. Harry studied them for a moment, and considered whether he should allow them to fall on him in the moment before they did.

He chose to let them. He would need some spiritual healing after—after. And he knew that he had to live now. He needed to get back to Hogwarts, reassure Draco and Snape and Connor that he was still alive, give everyone the information about Voldemort's return and about the actions he had commanded his Death Eaters to perform, and contact Hawthorn and Pansy about—

About.

Harry forced himself to turn and study Dragonsbane's body.

There could be no doubt that he was dead. Even necromancers weren't going to live with their chest cavities hollowed out and most of their major internal organs torn into small shreds. Harry felt a stir of magic in the air, and knew that his power was watching, half in and half out of his body, no more understanding that what it had done was wrong than a wild beast would.

Harry felt the edges of his grief soften and blur under Fawkes's tears. He bowed his head, and choked back the overwhelming bitterness of it.

Fawkes sang, and Harry saw the vision of what the phoenix wanted in his head. Fawkes wanted him to see that the ice on his tail feathers had turned to water mere moments after it formed, and that Harry had done him no lasting harm. He wanted Harry to cry out his grief, and then go back to Hogwarts and rest in the arms of people who loved him. He wanted Harry to

sleep, and go somewhere where he would be safe, and learn to come to terms with what he had done, and lie down and rise up with peace in his soul.

“I’m sorry,” said Harry, keeping his voice gentle. Fawkes meant well. Of course he did. A phoenix would not lie, though he might speak or sing in terms that would be misunderstood by any human not bonded to him. “I can’t do that.”

“Can’t do what?” Rosier asked, sounding interested.

Harry lifted his head, and his magic snarled around him, remembering the way that Rosier had tested the bond on his left wrist for tightness. “Go away,” said Harry. His voice was, perhaps, not so much gentle as weary, and Fawkes’s song increased in distress. “I can’t deal with you right now.” He lifted his wand.

Rosier gave a little huff. “All right then. There’s no need to be so dramatic about it.” He cocked his head, and met Harry’s gaze directly. Harry was a little startled to find himself skimming across the surface of the Death Eater’s thoughts. It appeared that his Legilimency extended beyond his eyes right now, floating unbound in the air around him, much like the rest of his wandless magic. Or maybe the magic was simply venting itself through this skill because it provided something for it to do.

Either way, Harry could make out implications of entertainment and pleasurable excitement beyond Rosier’s eyes. No matter what happened to him, his life would be a lot more interesting now. He thought the Dark Lord still alive, and Harry was alive in a very interesting way. He would have to run, with his former comrades after him. This was so *fun*.

Rosier broke their gaze and turned away, sounding slightly amused. “My Lord created a false truce-dance,” he said casually. “He fooled the Light into thinking he had a right to the power the sun gives on the equinoxes and solstices. I did tell you to watch the sun. Now I tell you to watch the sky. The primeval forces of the Light will find out the truth soon, and they no more like being tricked than the Dark magic of Walpurgis Night likes being confined.” He grinned over his shoulder at Harry. “They will snap back upon my Lord. Already, I think, a wind has been summoned, and it will stir other winds. We shall have a storm, perhaps more than one.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Harry asked.

Rosier’s face sprouted a wider grin. “I keep telling you and telling you, Potter,” he said. “It is a shame you never listen to me. *Everything* is a game.” He Disapparated with a sharp crack.

Only after he had gone did it occur to Harry that he probably should have killed him. Harry shook his head. He—did not feel up to causing more death right now. He was a murderer twice over this night, once by fact and once by omission.

He fixed his eyes on Dragonsbane, while Fawkes shed more tears. Harry did not use the clarity of mind those gave him the way the phoenix wanted him to. Instead, he used it to lay out all the facts before him and examine them, calmly, needing to know exactly what he was going to do when he left the graveyard.

One thing was clear. He bore the guilt of what had happened here. He should have been able to stop it, and he had not. He had failed his tests, and others had paid the price. Dragonsbane had sacrificed his life to bring him back to sanity, to recall Harry from being a Dark Lord—something he should have been able to do on his own.

How many failures?

Five.

Harry turned his head and looked at his left wrist. The physical failure.

He glanced at Dragonsbane. The emotional failure, and the magical one, and the moral one, that last shared with the half-devoured body of the poor boy next to Tom Riddle’s gravestone.

And the mental failure, to let Voldemort inflict damage on his mind.

Harry shook his head, and closed his eyes. Two things were clear. He bore the guilt of what had happened here, and he meant to make sure this *never* happened again.

He would move forward from this point on. He would be strong. He would not fail another test. He would summon Hawthorn and Pansy at once, and tell them the truth of what had happened to Dragonsbane. He suspected that their alliance with him

was ended now, that they would become among the deadliest of his enemies. That was as it should be. He accepted it. If it would not end his usefulness to other people, he would let them kill him. As it was, he would have to offer some other price, and resist only if they demanded his life.

He would return Dragonsbane's body to them. He whispered now, "*Mobilicorpus*," and cast a Disillusionment Charm on the body as it rose into the air. He did not want everyone gawking at Dragonsbane's wounds and wondering how he had received them when Harry Apparated back to Hogwarts. Voldemort's anti-Apparition wards had fallen when he vanished, so he could do that now.

Fawkes abruptly, frantically, grabbed Harry's chin in a talon and turned his face around. Harry blinked at him, wondering.

Fawkes sang again, and rubbed his plumes along Harry's cheeks. Harry could feel the temptation there, to fall into tears and what the phoenix considered healing.

"I'm sorry," Harry whispered. "I told you, I can't. I can't afford it." He closed his eyes, and returned to his mantra.

Three things were clear. He bore the guilt of what had happened here, and he meant to make sure this *never* happened again, and he had a much better idea of his own weaknesses now.

He knew he would have to go to Draco, and to Snape. He needed their comfort after what had happened here. He would have been a stronger person if he did not, but he also knew he would collapse if he tried to go without it. So he would go, and accept this weakness into his personal list of them, acknowledging it and knowing it was there in the future.

He tasted thick bitterness for a moment, but he forced it away. Bitterness wouldn't help. Bitterness would drag him backward, and stand a strong chance of pulling him again into madness. Madness didn't help, either. He would go forward. He would do what would help, and he would force himself to be rational about matters.

He would explain to them his magical failure—because his magic could endanger others, now, until he had a chance of getting it back under control—the emotional failure—because that was what made his magic dangerous—and the moral failure—because they deserved to know what he had done.

The physical and the mental failures...

Those are my own.

Harry knew he couldn't explain them, yet. He would need some time, himself, to assimilate and deal with them, and if he explained them to Draco and Snape, they would insist that he relax and heal in the way that Fawkes wanted him to. Harry *couldn't*. Part of that was the time factor, because there was a war on, now, and the war needed him, and he just didn't have the time to collapse and work himself into a frenzy and then work himself back out of the frenzy.

Part of it was just another weakness.

I can't. That's all. I can't stand to see their pity for those failures right now. The others, yes, because I'm more likely to endanger someone else with them, and they're more likely to condemn them. Accusation is easier to deal with than pity. I will tell them the truth, eventually. But not right now.

Harry glanced sideways at his left wrist and wondered. Bellatrix had said that all efforts to replace his hand would fail—probably an attempt to increase his suffering and mental anguish to parallel hers in the months since he had taken her hand—but she had not said that he could not conceal it.

"*Dissimulo manus!*" he murmured, and waved his wand at it. The glamour of a hand grew from just above the stump. Harry carefully fitted it to the way he remembered things, and, soon enough, he thought proudly, no one could have told the illusion from the real thing.

I will tell them, he repeated, to soothe Fawkes's furious, sorrowful crooning. *Just not right now. Later, when I can deal with it. I can't afford the time to break down, but I can think about it, little by little, and when I'm ready I'll tell them.*

He hesitated, considering for a moment whether he should bear the little boy's mutilated body with him as well, but he had no idea where the child had come from or who he belonged to. Dragonsbane's body he could at least be sure of delivering to his survivors. He might be carrying the boy further away from home, not towards it, if he took him to Hogwarts, especially if he had been a Muggle. In the end, Harry gently cast a glamour over the boy's corpse, to be sure it wouldn't be disturbed, and

knew that would be one of the things he would include in the story of this night he sent to Scrimgeour.

The tale of his failures, he would tell to those he needed to know. The information that Voldemort was back, everyone who was important must know, as soon as possible. The loss of his hand and the damage to his mind would remain between him and Fawkes and the Death Eaters for now.

Harry shook his head, and took a deep breath, and gathered his strength. No trying to break the wards around Hogwarts so he could Apparate in, he knew. They were more important than ever, with the Death Eaters back and Voldemort moving. Harry didn't think he had damaged the Dark Lord's memory permanently, only enough to buy a little time.

"Ready?" he asked Fawkes.

Fawkes cried at him.

Harry shook his head slightly, and let his right arm rest on Dragonsbane's floating corpse, and Disapparated them all, Harry and body and phoenix, with a crack.

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Sixty-Four: All Fall Down

Albus felt the pull of the boy's magic the moment he Apparated back to the outskirts of Hogsmeade.

There had been indications before then, of course: the sudden roar of rising Dark magic that made him fear Harry had died; the surging, triumphant laughter in his head that he heard, real or not, when Tom called his Death Eaters; the blazing of wards that were meant to alert him in the case of a concentration of Dark wizards in a certain area. But he had been able only to wait and to hope. He had not *known* what was happening from the moment of Harry's abduction...

Until now.

Harry was radiating uncontrolled magic like light, like heat, like fire, all the way up to the castle. Albus, sitting in his office and trying to think of strategies to combat Tom, felt him start to come closer as he would the tread of a nundu, or a rolling storm. Something had happened, something momentous, and Albus knew he would either fall before it—perhaps—or ride it—if he took the chance.

He closed his eyes and gathered the swirling mist of his compulsion, drawing it calmly back into himself. Perhaps a few people here and there in Hogwarts would blink or stare around in a daze, trying to remember what they had just been thinking about. Perhaps a few others would miss dreams they had grown accustomed to. For most of those who had slowly been turning to meet his opinion like flowers towards the sun, however, the influence had been too subtle. They would not notice it missing any more than they had noticed it present.

Albus had a better use for his compulsion, if what he imagined from Harry's slow approach was true. He held back until the boy was closer to the castle, within the wards, and he could open one of them as an eye on the outer grounds and actually see Harry's face.

The calm stoicism, laced through with pain to those who looked with clear eyes, told him all he needed to know. The constant soft tears of the phoenix on his shoulder—and Albus had to push back a flash of jealousy—were an even clearer sign. Something had happened to deprive Harry of his balance, and he would be some time getting it back again.

Time during which a master compeller might be able to influence Harry's actions, if he acted quickly and ruthlessly enough.

Albus had only moments to choose his course. He did not trust what would happen if he tried to use his compulsion when Fawkes was not distracted by Harry's pain. And without complete information, he could not know that he was choosing rightly.

But he thought he was, acting on what he knew of Harry's past. And if he was wrong, there was at least one chance that could *not* do anything but help him, no matter how far down the road its consequences might play out.

He acted, and breathed out the compulsion in a concentrated, swirling mass into Harry's mind. Not even then, however, was it going to force him to choose one course of action. It would only make it more likely that he think of something he was probably thinking of anyway...let his thoughts spill to the side, down a certain well-worn track...seek refuge in a place he

had often sought refuge in before...

And then it was done, and Albus sat back in his chair and opened his eyes, exhausted. A smile worked its way across his face in spite of himself.

The war had come. Tom had returned.

But the one disaster the Light could not afford—to have two Dark Lords working against it—had probably just been averted.

Harry hated to admit it, but Fawkes's tears were getting on his nerves.

The phoenix would not stop crying. He had not stopped even as Harry walked wearily back towards Hogwarts, noting along the way that no one appeared to have waited outside the castle. Of course, he thought, most of them would have no idea what Karkaroff kidnapping him had meant, or that Voldemort was back, as yet. The students would have retired to the school, and the outside observers would have gone home. His disappearance would be a matter of concern to a very few. Probably Dumbledore had felt that Voldemort had returned, and the former Death Eaters, and the Durmstrang students would be looking for Karkaroff, and Draco and Connor would notice he'd vanished, but otherwise, the wizarding world was in ignorance right now.

A pity that cannot last very much longer, he thought, and then stopped with a sigh as Fawkes gripped his chin yet again in one talon, turned it to face him, and began to sing. Harry stopped, since he didn't trust himself to keep walking forward and guide Dragonsbane's floating body around obstacles when he was like this.

Fawkes tried a softer song, warbling and drifting, ghosting gently across the surface of his mind. This time, the visions that appeared were more like dreams and less like messages. Fawkes was singing of the sun, Harry saw, and long, peaceful afternoons soaked in the sun, and white corridors. The white corridors coalesced as he focused on them. Harry had the impression that they were the image of a specific place, and that he had seen that place before.

Indeed he had. He recognized it in a moment as the Seers' Sanctuary, which Peter's mind had resembled.

Harry jerked himself backward, interrupting Fawkes's grip and sending him fluttering into the air. Harry recovered his balance and his breath, and shook his head at the distressed phoenix.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I *can't*. I told you that. Please don't ask me again."

"Harry."

Harry started and turned around. He would have expected either Connor or Snape to be the first one running to greet him, since his emotions had probably incapacitated Draco enough to put him in the hospital wing. But Draco, oblivious to what *should* have happened, stood behind him on the path past the lake instead, and then hurtled forward and grabbed Harry tightly in his arms in the next moment.

Harry hugged him back, letting his hand rest on Draco's spine, and holding his glamoured wrist just off to the side. He would have to be careful. Draco knew his emotions better than anyone alive, and Harry was sure that he was radiating pain and terror and rage and other things he couldn't anticipate even now.

"I felt pain," Draco was whispering into his ear. "But it was so distant. I think the connection between us decreases in intensity with distance. I knew that someone was hurting you, and I wanted to go help you, but Snape wouldn't even let me out of the dungeons until the pain stopped. Then he only told me that I could watch for you, and I had to stay within the wards to do that, and I had to come back inside at midnight if you hadn't shown up, or before then if any danger threatened." He drew back, staring anxiously into Harry's eyes. "What *happened*, Harry?"

"Voldemort came back," said Harry.

Draco's face paled, and he took a deep swallow.

Harry went on talking, trying to strike a balance between telling Draco what he needed to know and not choosing words that would send him into hysterics. "He took me to a graveyard and performed a resurrection ritual that used my blood to raise himself again." He closed his eyes, and the vision of Voldemort crouched on his chest and biting him seared in the blackness

of his mind as if it had never left. Harry jerked his head back, not going far in the tight hold of Draco's arms, and then shook it and went on in a calmer voice. "Then he called the Death Eaters. He gave them—certain instructions." He opened his eyes and looked carefully at his friend. "Draco, I'm so sorry, but Vince's father is going to pull him out of school, and he's supposed to be trained to kill you before next Midsummer."

This time, Draco went white to the lips—yet, strangely, Harry thought some of that pallor was fury and not fear. "I thought he had given it up," he said. "I really thought he had. He told me that his father wasn't willing to follow the Dark Lord anymore, and I thought...I thought that meant..." Draco shook his head, and said, "Never mind. What happened then?"

Tread carefully now. "Voldemort tried to fight a duel with me." Harry laughed at the expression on Draco's face, but cut the laughter off. The sound of it made Draco stare at him and Fawkes let out a sobbing cry of distress. "Yes, I know. Stupid of him. But he's stronger than I am, and he thought he could take me. And he probably could have, because they killed—I didn't tell you that, they killed a little boy, a werewolf ate him, and I couldn't do anything, and I wanted to die." Harry had to close his eyes again, to smother the pressure of the tears on them.

"Harry," Draco said, and squeezed him until he could hardly breathe. "Harry—you're blaming yourself for that, aren't you?" His voice tilted and crashed down into a mixture of anger and horror and pity that hit Harry like a lash and made him struggle to pull back a bit. Draco only tightened his grip, and Harry, weak with magical exhaustion and emotional drain, didn't have much choice but to stay. "Oh, Harry, *Merlin*, don't. I know you would have saved him if you could, because that's the kind of person you are." He stroked Harry's hair. "So you really couldn't save him. It's not your fault. Please, stop blaming yourself. *Merlin*, no wonder you hurt so badly."

Harry let his head fall forward so that it rested on Draco's shoulder. He needed this, he told the parts of himself that wanted to stand back and not be so weak, he needed this time to have some chance of keeping it together long enough to fight this war, and it was a convenient excuse. Let Draco think all Harry's pain had been emotional, and he would not look for a physical cause.

"Not only that," Harry whispered. "I was gone during the fight, Draco. I lost control of my magic, and my emotions. My magic still isn't entirely back under my control. Dragonsbane Parkinson showed up, and, well—" He lifted his wand and canceled the Disillusionment Charm.

He heard Draco gag, and turned resolutely to look. It was worse than he had remembered. The carnage had seemed almost natural in the graveyard, a home of death and the dead. In the clear starlight and wan moonbeams of a Hogwarts night, Dragonsbane's wounds—the wounds he had caused and created, he must never forget that—were an obscenity.

"My magic killed him," Harry said quietly. "He came to help, and my magic thought of him as a threat to me, and did *that* to him. He sacrificed his life to bring me back to sanity."

Once again, he lost his breath as Draco squeezed him, and murmured fiercely into his ear.

"You didn't do it. It's not your fault. You couldn't have known that he would show up like that. They'll *understand*, Harry. They have to. And meanwhile, *you* have to understand. You didn't mean to do this. You're not a murderer anymore than someone who accidentally spits someone on his sword is a murderer. You would only willingly kill to protect yourself or other people. *Merlin*, I love you."

Harry found the words only small comfort—he would until he came to terms with what he had done, he suspected—but he pulled them around himself and held them close nonetheless. At least they meant that he had someone to whom he mattered, someone to whom his comfort was important just because he was him, and not because of the part that he could play in the war.

It would be so different if this were my mother...

He nuzzled his head into Draco's shoulder and soaked up what the warmth and words could do for him, without demanding that they be something they weren't. At last he lifted his head and nodded to show he understood.

"I have to summon Hawthorn and Pansy," he whispered. "I have to tell them about Dragonsbane."

"I know." Draco smiled at him as he stepped away. The smile was wrenched to the side by a sorrow that Harry knew was almost as great as his own, as accepting of the consequences and foresighted about the future. "But, Harry, they'll understand. I'm sure of it."

Harry smiled at him, and then an accident happened, natural and unavoidable. Or maybe it was. Harry would have thought nothing of it on any other day, and that was why he allowed it to happen now.

He scolded himself afterwards, told himself to remember that he was living another life, one in which he had to deal with certain realities.

Draco reached out to take his hands. He confidently closed his fingers over Harry's right wrist.

His fingers passed right through the glamour of the left one.

Draco blinked and stared. Harry jerked his wrist backward, feeling hysteria pounding abruptly in his throat. *No. I can't do this right now. I can't. I can't talk to him about this—*

Then he heard the warning snarl from the side, and slammed himself back into calm, draining his anger into an Occlumency pool. *I can't get upset, or my magic will attack Draco. Merlin, I couldn't bear that. Hold still, Harry. Maybe he doesn't know what this means. After all, it's not like anyone's mind would just turn to Voldemort cutting off your hand as a natural thing to have happen.* Someone might think that if he knew the history of Voldemort's War, but Draco had been sheltered in that respect.

Draco blinked a bit more, his face still filled with blank surprise, and Harry summoned a smile. He might get out of this after all. He feigned a laugh. "Can't believe that happened!" he exclaimed, and aligned his hand more carefully this time, so that Draco would grasp the solid part of the stump that was still there. "We must have slipped in—"

Draco made a swift, darting motion, seizing his wrist this time and turning the replica of his left hand back and forth. Harry held still, and even raised his eyebrows as though asking *what* in the world Draco was doing. He thought he could escape this yet. It was not as if Draco knew his hands that well.

"Your left thumb doesn't curve that way," said Draco, sinking his hopes, and drew in a thick breath that rattled along his throat as though his mouth were made of sheet metal. He lifted his head, inch by inch, and Harry shivered as their eyes locked. Draco's had a sheer intensity that Harry had never seen matched, except by the keenness of the surface thoughts that Harry's involuntary Legilimency showed him. "Harry," he said, each word carefully intoned, "remove the glamour."

Harry could hear his own breathing, rushing along his lungs. He shook his head. "There's no glamour."

"Do not lie to me," said Draco, in exactly the same way. "Harry, remove the glamour, and remove it now."

"I don't—" Harry turned his head away, feeling his face flush and the pressure of tears increase against his eyelids again. *Merlin, why does this have to happen? It isn't right.* He bit his lip to hold back a sob. "There's nothing there," he said, when he could force his mouth open again.

"I know that," said Draco, taking and twisting his words to have a meaning that Harry never intended for them to have. "Now, Harry."

Harry thought he should have held out against this. He was weak, so weak. Why couldn't he resist what was happening to him? Why couldn't he pass any of the tests that anyone made of him tonight? Should have been stronger, to resist Draco's pleas. Some have been faster, to prevent Draco from ever catching hold of his wrist in the first place and pressing matters this far.

"I'm waiting."

Harry swallowed, and acknowledged the failure, and removed the glamour.

He heard Draco hiss out his breath. Then he took up Harry's severed wrist and moved his arm carefully in a circle, no doubt examining the stump from all angles. Harry bowed his head, shivering. Draco's touch hurt where Bellatrix had cauterized the wound, but not much more than the bite Voldemort had given him. What really cut and flayed him were Draco's eyes, the knowledge that someone was seeing what he really was, and that he was too weak to hide evidence of his failure.

Instinctively, he tried to retreat, to curl his left arm close to his chest. Draco braced his feet and pulled, and Harry found himself stumbling forward, ending up in Draco's arms again. Draco was gripping his wrist with one hand, the back of his neck with the other, and murmuring a ferocious litany in his ears.

“Never hide from me, do you understand? I want to know everything you are. I don’t *care* that you think you failed. You didn’t. Come to me with things like this, Harry. Don’t retreat.” Draco’s hand stroked his wrist, and Harry jumped. “Now, we can get a replacement hand—“

“We can’t,” said Harry. The words sounded choked. He hated himself for that. “Bellatrix cast spells on it so that I couldn’t grow another hand there, or heal the wound, or get a replacement.”

Draco stood in silence for a moment.

Then he said, “That *bitch*.”

Harry shivered at the vehemence in his voice, and the more so because it was the only word Draco called her, as good as a vow of vengeance. He pulled back a moment later and stared into Harry’s eyes, his gaze still strong and honest as a blade.

“It’s going to get better, Harry,” he said. “We’re both going to make it better.” He didn’t seem to feel the need to add the words *I promise* or any equivalent. Like his epithet for Bellatrix, Harry supposed, they implied the rest of what they could mean by the simple virtue of being said.

Harry nodded. He couldn’t speak around the lump in his throat, but he could nod.

“You’ll come to the Manor for the summer,” Draco went on, speaking with a calm, absolute authority that reminded Harry of Lucius. “We’ll work on breaking the spells on your wrist. And then—“

“What? Draco, I can’t!” Harry twisted, using some of the moves Lily had taught him when Draco tried to restrain him, and broke away. They stood there for a moment, Draco with his head cocked slightly to one side and his gaze drifting back and forth between Harry’s eyes and his wrist, Harry with his feet braced to resist an attack. His magic stirred around him, then settled uneasily, like disturbed mist. Harry took a deep breath and explained, even as he sprouted the glamour of his left hand again. “Look at it from my eyes. Your parents wouldn’t rest until they found out the truth about my hand, would they?”

“Of course not,” said Draco, but it was obvious he didn’t understand how that connected to Harry’s not staying with him for the summer. “There are several rooms in the Manor that are charmed to remove any glamours that visitors are wearing, in fact. It wouldn’t be long before they noticed.”

Harry nodded. “And while I could trust your mother with that knowledge—“ *maybe, if I had to* “—I wouldn’t trust your father. It might even convince him that I’m weak and no longer worth allying with.”

Draco opened his mouth. Harry waited.

Draco closed his mouth. Harry nodded.

“Maybe it would,” Draco conceded grudgingly, and rubbed his forehead. “I don’t think so, but it’s at least possible that he would use the knowledge to gain an advantage in some way. He can’t abandon you right now. I shudder to think of what else he could do within the terms of the truce-dance, though.” Draco nodded, slowly. “Then you’ll stay with Snape.”

Fawkes gave a sad little croon, and from Draco’s startled glance upward, Harry thought he, too, must have had a fleeting image of the pale couches and sunlit rooms of the Sanctuary.

“With Snape,” said Harry firmly. “Not with the Seers.” He frowned at Fawkes and kept walking. He would meet with Snape as soon as he got back to the castle, if possible. His guardian deserved to know that he had returned safely. Or, if he ran into Connor first, then he would reassure him. Either way, after those meetings, he would need to write a letter to Scrimgeour and one to Hawthorn.

Things turned out rather differently than he expected, though, because the cowed figure waiting for him near the doors to the entrance hall was Hawthorn Parkinson.

Draco had slipped away without a word, other than the faint whisper to Harry that he would tell Snape and Connor he was back. Harry nodded, and followed Hawthorn in silence to a small room he hadn’t known existed on the third floor, Dragonsbane’s body floating behind him. Hawthorn hadn’t yet glanced at her husband’s corpse. Harry couldn’t tell what that meant. Perhaps she was so angry that she thought she would kill him if she looked?

Hawthorn opened the door to the room. Inside, a fire blazed on a hearth just swept free of dust and dirt. Three chairs waited in a triangle, one of them in front of the other two. And Pansy sat on one of those chairs, her hands folded on her lap and a very faint frown on her face.

Harry would have halted, warned her, cast another Disillusionment Charm, done anything he could to prepare her for the sight of Dragonsbane. Hawthorn did not. She simply took over the *Mobilicorpus* and guided Dragonsbane into the room, then set him floating in front of the hearth, next to Pansy's chair.

Pansy's face turned the color of whey, and then she began to cry. Harry bowed his head. He had resolved to himself to face this, or he would have run away already, but it was hard to be here. He had to call up images of several quicksilver Occlumency pools to keep himself still.

Hawthorn turned around. Harry saw that she was white around the lips, but the rest of her face was almost normally pale. She crouched down beside Pansy and put her arms around her. Pansy turned and buried her face in her mother's shoulder, winding her arms almost tight enough around Hawthorn's neck to strangle her, all the while weeping and weeping and weeping.

Of all the unworthy emotions to feel in that moment, the last Harry would have thought himself capable of was envy. But he felt it, and he acknowledged it, and then he put it back in the Occlumency pool. He lowered his gaze and waited.

At last, Pansy's tears faded. She sat back up, and her mother conjured a handkerchief for her to wipe her face. While she did so, Hawthorn stood and took the chair beside her daughter. Harry sat down in the one in front of them at her slight motion.

"Tell us," said Hawthorn, her voice clipped and quiet, "what happened in the graveyard?"

Harry blinked, wondering how she had known it was a graveyard, but began. He gave them the same recitation he had given Draco, minus the cutting off of his hand, and told the story of Dragonsbane's murder. He never looked away from Hawthorn's face, and she never changed expression.

Pansy's choked little sob in the middle of the story was almost enough to undo him, but Harry told himself he had no right to shed tears. He had broken the alliance. He had murdered Hawthorn's husband, Pansy's father. He had no reason to be here but to face his crime. So he told the story with his own white face and iron determination, and lapsed into silence when it was done. He wondered what they would do with him. He had already resolved to defend himself against nothing but a deadly curse, and then he would run from the room, more to spare his magic attacking either of the two women than to protect his own life.

Yes, women, he thought, teased by a stray thought, as he met Pansy's eyes at last. *She is now*. Every trace of girlhood was gone from her face.

Hawthorn said at last, "Tell me, Harry, were the signs that my husband repeated these?" She lifted her hands and began to guide them, slowly, through a sequence of motions. Harry squinted, making sure that the way her left palm turned was really the way Dragonsbane's had, and that she had made three snaps with the forefinger and thumb of her right hand, not two.

"Yes," he said at last. "He showed them to me several times. I don't know why he showed them to me, though." He swallowed. "I couldn't understand his sign language."

Pansy hissed, a sound that seemed to start from a long distance away and gradually come closer, rather like Voldemort's laughter at his resurrection. Harry shivered and shrugged away the comparison. "What makes you believe that it matters if *you* understood it?" she spat. "Selfish—"

"Pansy, that is *enough*." Hawthorn embedded her last word in the middle of a growl. The look Pansy flashed her mother was full of betrayal, but Hawthorn took no notice. She only went on steadily looking into Harry's eyes, and Harry thought that he was seeing the Red Death for the first time. "Harry. Dragonsbane repeated those signs to you on purpose. They mean, 'Do not mourn me. This is my fate. Thus I die.'"

Harry could feel himself shrinking in his chair. "I—that's not possible. Why—"

Hawthorn closed her eyes, seemingly the only concession to weakness that she would make. "Necromancers foresee the death of any wizard or witch they come into contact with, Harry," she said quietly. "They cannot tell them the time or manner of it, however. It is a lonely life. But they also foresee their own deaths. And they keep living in spite of it. It is a life that

takes more courage than I can understand.” She opened her eyes, and the first signs of tears marred them. “Did I tell you,” she murmured, “that my husband was not in Slytherin, though many people assumed and claimed he was, and even I almost believed so at times? He was a Gryffindor.”

“He didn’t—“ Harry stopped. The conclusion was inescapable. *He came to the graveyard knowing he would die.*

“I suspected,” Hawthorn went on, her voice quiet, implacable. “They are forbidden to tell us lesser mortals outright, but it was there, in his signs for the last year. He wrote many long letters to those he had known and left behind in his former life as—well, it does not matter what his name was now, since he gave it up to choose a name that echoed mine and to take my surname. He prepared his accounts. He spoke often and often with a certain spirit he could not name to me, but whom he said had told him tales of you, because he died defending you from a certain menace.”

Harry bowed his head. *Sirius.*

“I suspected,” said Hawthorn softly. “When my Mark began to burn this evening, he had me Apparate with him to Hogwarts, and then he—followed the link between my Mark and the Dark Lord. Somehow. I still don’t know how he did that.” She sniffed slightly, as though taking in the scent of sorrow. “That was when my suspicion coalesced into certainty.”

“How could you have known what signs he would use to talk to me?” Harry whispered.

“Because I have seen another necromancer use them,” said Hawthorn. “They are always the same, a sign that any necromancer will give before he or she dies, whether or not there are any around to interpret them.” She reached out a hand and held it motionless in the air between them. Harry had no idea whether or not she wanted him to take it, and didn’t move. “You *must* understand, Harry. Necromancers do not regard death as we do. It is not an ending to life, and they know that very well. It is only another stage, and in many ways, they revere it *more* than life. By saying ‘Thus I die,’ they are claiming their part in a ritual greater and more sacred than anything the living can grant them. That is why no necromancer would try to step aside from his death, even if that is possible, which I am not sure it is. That is the moment of inevitability, the moment when their vision ends.” Hawthorn turned her head away. “Harry, you were part of the instant when my husband closed his eyes to the world. You actually gave him the passage into death. You have done him more honor than you can imagine.”

Harry buried his head in his arms. The idea that he was not a murderer was too shattering for him to deal with right now. He had to think about something else instead, and he found it in the words, “How did you know that it would be in a graveyard?”

“I heard his words to you last Walpurgis Night,” said Hawthorn. “When he left me to go to you, I knew it would be in a home of his kin. He died in a *graveyard*, Harry, among those he loved and honored. No necromancer could ask for better.” She paused a moment, then said, “Harry. Look at me.”

Harry lifted his head, blinking. Hawthorn had her left sleeve pulled up, and was tracing the silver scar that bisected the Dark Mark’s skull. Harry shivered as he felt a tickling sensation start along the complementary scar on his own skin.

“The alliance hasn’t broken,” Hawthorn said, “or this would have burst open, and you would have bled to death. You did not. I think that is because my husband was a necromancer, and knew long before even you were born how and where he would die. You could have killed him deliberately, and that would have kept the terms of the alliance.” She tipped her head, amber eyes full of light. “We are still allies.”

Harry stared at him, and couldn’t imagine what he would say next.

Someone else could.

“I’m not,” said Pansy, her voice high and jarring.

Hawthorn looked at her daughter. “What?”

“I don’t want to be allies with him any more.” Pansy rose to her feet and crossed her arms. Her eyes cut at Harry in the moment before she turned her head away. “He killed my father. And maybe he chose it, and maybe it was always going to happen, but he was my D-Dad, and I *loved* him, and Harry *killed* him, and I don’t want to be in the same alliance with him any more.”

Harry listened in silence as Hawthorn tried to talk her daughter out of it. Pansy would not be moved. Harry had known it before Hawthorn tried to convince her otherwise. It was all right. He had received more than he deserved, with Hawthorn still believing in him. Both of them had known Dragonsbane was going to die, he thought, even as Dragonsbane had, but Pansy

had thought of it as “dying someday” and Hawthorn had suspected an actual date. Pansy was doing nothing more now than following her own beliefs and inclinations. It was as it should be. If she was recoiling from the shock that the sight of her father’s corpse had dealt her...well, that was also her choice, even as it had been her mother’s choice to reveal Dragonsbane’s death like that.

In the end, Pansy bared her left arm and pressed it to the scar on her mother’s, while Hawthorn murmured in sorrow, “Released from bonds of blood, released from bonds of flesh, released from bonds of alliance. May your solitary path be prosperous, my child.”

Pansy staggered a little when the ritual was done. Harry felt the same thing, like the snapping of a cord he hadn’t known was taut between them. Pansy nodded coolly at him and turned for the door.

When she reached it, she turned back. “I am going to honor my father,” she announced. “I am going to do what he would have been proud of me for.”

He met her eyes, and once again his Legilimency darted out in front of him, reading Pansy’s intentions there. She was going to become a necromancer.

Harry blinked as Pansy slipped from the room. It was an unusual ambition, and one that he didn’t know if she had the tenacity to hold to. But he wished her luck.

“Harry?”

Harry turned to Hawthorn and bowed from the waist. “Thank you,” he said simply. “I—perhaps that wound will not go so deep, now.” He didn’t know that for certain, but it at least might help bleed off some of the venom, to know that Dragonsbane had known this fate was coming, and even embraced it.

Hawthorn eyed him narrowly. “Are you well?” she asked. “There is so much pain and weariness in your scent.”

Harry dredged up his smile. “I’m all right,” he answered. “In pain and weary, but as soon as I’ve seen my guardian—“ he could not quite deny himself a visit to Snape, not now “—then I’ll go to the hospital wing and rest, I promise.”

“See that you do.” Hawthorn stood, and then reached out for him. Harry let himself be hugged because he was too surprised to prevent it. “Keep yourself safe,” she whispered into his ear. “You do not know how glad I am that you are alive, or how much we need you.”

“I think I might have some idea,” Harry murmured, thinking of what use he could be to the war effort. There was a small part of himself, a very small part, that really was excited at what was coming.

This is the war that I’ve been training all my life to fight.

Harry met Fawkes not far past the door of the room where Hawthorn had taken him. She had let him go, finally, with one more solemn promise extracted from him to take himself to the hospital wing as soon as he was done with Snape, and gone to bear both herself and Dragonsbane’s body to the outskirts of the wards, so they could Apparate back to the Garden. She had shown no sign of noticing his lack of a left hand, for which Harry was profoundly grateful.

Fawkes scolded him with a stream of notes as he walked towards the dungeons. Harry had so many images in his head that he couldn’t even tell what he was being scolded for.

“Will you shut up?” he muttered at the phoenix as he passed down the main corridor towards Snape’s office.

“I think he is very wise,” said his guardian’s dry voice. “After all, you bear many wounds that you have shown yourself capable of ignoring.”

Harry looked up with quick gladness. Snape was striding towards him from an alcove along the wall. He met his eyes—

And his Legilimency darted out, picking up memories from Snape’s mind in a swift trawl. Images sped past Harry’s eyes, thoughts of how Snape was guarding him from himself and regrets over having taught him to resist the *De Profundis* curse and worry that Harry would find out about the compulsion on Draco—

Wait.

Harry felt himself begin to shake. His eyes stayed fixed, though, and now that his Legilimency had a likewise fixed purpose, it sped forward, fleetly snatching more and more of the memories he wanted to look at.

Snape had given the Potions book to Draco. He had known, all the while, that the book bound anyone who opened it to complete a certain potion. It put a compulsion on them, one that made them ignore most other important things until the potion was safely brewed.

It put a compulsion on them.

A compulsion.

And Snape had known.

He had *known*.

Harry felt his mouth open, so that he was screaming without breath, without sound. His magic blew out past him and grabbed Snape, not hurting him for the moment; Harry was too deeply in shock to wish anyone pain. The magic simply suspended Snape in midair and twisted him around, watching him all the while as if he were some loathsome, tiny insect.

And then Harry's rage came bounding up behind the shock, and smashed into him.

He took a step forward, and saw Snape begin to choke, the magic forming into a pair of hands that gripped his throat. Harry thought someone else was present and speaking for him, until he realized that, yes, that really was his own voice coming out of his own mouth. Apparently, the magic had decided that he needed no help with this particular task.

"You knew," the voice said. "And you gave him the book anyway, and when I gave you the chance to tell me the truth about the compulsion, the night Draco blurted it out, you lied to me. On purpose. Deliberately." Harry could feel his rage rising, knew how easy it would be to kill, and knew exactly why he would kill, too. "And you used compulsion, and you used it on *him*."

"Do you have the slightest idea of how much he means to me?"

Snape's face was turning black. Harry wondered why for a moment, because the hands hadn't gripped him that long, and then reminded himself that it was the pressure and not the length of time that mattered.

His rage trembled. The magic whispered about him. It would be so easy, so easy to kill him—

But that would only bring him pain, and Harry was in enough pain already, as one of the people he had counted on being able to trust pulled back a mask to reveal a traitor's face, and the trust itself crumbled and crazed and cracked into ruin.

He opened his hand, actually trying to make the same motion with both of them as he showed the magic what to do, and the fingers on Snape's throat parted. Snape dropped limply to the floor, and lay there for a moment. Then Fawkes left Harry's shoulder and soared over to him, shedding tears on his bruises. Harry knew he would live.

And the pain had overcome the rage now, and his magic was simply howling around him, the cry of a maddened, wounded beast.

"I trusted you," he whispered, and then he turned and ran.

He burst out of the school, sobbing, having got his breath back by now. The magic made enough noise for the both of them, though, sweeping around him and rising up into towering wings as they came out from between the walls, howling steadily, the sound of a werewolf in mourning.

Harry stumbled towards the Forbidden Forest, tracing, he thought, the path he had used in second year when his magic had similarly gone out of control and was pulsing around him. He didn't make it that far, though. He fell to his knees and wept, while around him his magic swayed and sang and howled.

Something sang back.

Harry wiped frantically at his tears with his hand and lifted his head to the black sky. The moon had gone behind a cloud. Even the stars seemed dimmer. It was the darkness between the stars that pulsed and shimmered and shook, and Harry could hear the song of the Dark magic growing closer and closer, reaching eagerly out to him.

Come with us. Ride with us. What need have you to hold back now? You know the joys of unrestraint, and they will never accept you back anyway, all those creatures who live so willingly within walls and limits. Come.

Harry trembled, wrapping his arms around himself and bowing his head. He knew that he would never have to worry about hurting anyone again, not if he went into the Dark music. It might still happen, but he wouldn't care. Or he would lose his magic into the great wash of power around him, becoming one with the river, the wind, the song.

He would escape accusations of murder.

He would escape knowing that Snape had lied to him, and that he could only ever trust one person again, and that the refuge he had counted on obtaining was gone, swept away like a house in the flood.

He didn't really want to, not with the part of him that thought he should stay alive for the war and concentrate on his mistakes and making sure they never happened again. But that was not quite as strong as the part of him that longed for escape, any escape, in the wake of this latest fanged epiphany.

He felt the Dark magic land close beside him and pace towards him. Harry looked. It had the form of an enormous black wolf, with his own green eyes, marked with a bolt of silver lightning on its forehead. It snarled at him and danced its forepaws in invitation, tilting its head back so that it could look up at the sky. Harry stood, shivering, and moved a step forward. He would never have to be cold again if he went with it, because he would forget what warmth was.

Fawkes flared into being above him, song loud and defiant. The wolf screamed as the light fell on it, and stumbled a step back, crouching as though it would leap and engulf the phoenix.

Harry gained his sanity back again for the second time that evening. Or should it be third, since he'd slipped from it twice? He thought that, and other such irrelevant things, even as he turned and ran into the Forbidden Forest.

His magic bounded beside him, puzzled but still attached to him. Fawkes soared along above him, singing. Harry could feel magical creatures who might have bothered him ordinarily drawing back from them, not willing to tangle with someone accompanied by the fiercest of both Light and Dark fury.

Then he became aware of movement off to the side, and turned his head. A three-headed snake slid there, heads all turned towards him. A Runespoor.

"Have you come to us at last?" was its excited greeting. *"We told you to come back to us when you could hear the singing. We mean you to listen."*

Harry caught his breath in a sob, and stopped running. He had not remembered that part of the meeting in the Forest for months, but now it blazed in his memory, hard and clear as lit notes of music. He nodded, slowly. His magic danced beside him, and looked back and forth between him and the snake.

"Follow," the Runespoor ordered briskly, and then slid into the woods. Harry followed, now and then stumbling on holes in the Forest floor. Even with the light from Fawkes's feathers, which was brighter when he actually settled onto Harry's shoulder, it was as dim under the thick branches as it had been under the lake.

He at last reached the hill where he had met the Runespoors in the autumn. They were gathered in a half-circle now, and when they saw him, they lifted their heads and hissed deeply.

"Break our web," said the one who had led him, whipping around and looking up at Harry. All three heads hissed as one, lending the Parseltongue a slight echo effect—comparable to, but not as strong as, the rippling voices of the Many. *"It was wrought of song, the Light music that we can hear but not sing. We will teach you the Dark music, the means of hearing it and yet resisting it. The Runespoors were great singers, once. With your help, we shall become so again."*

"Very well," said Harry simply, not even sure what he was agreeing to but knowing it would keep his thoughts off the reason

he had come out here, and then knelt so that he could rest his body while occupying his mind.

He could see the web almost at once, a thicker-stranded one than the Many's, splitting into small shining threads near each Runespoor, so that it could snare all three heads on each snake—or two in the cases where the Runespoor's other two heads had bitten the critical one off. Harry reached out and laid his magic carefully along the webs. It went along with him, seeming concerned more than sorrowful now, not sure what he was doing.

Fawkes began to sing.

Harry took a deep breath as the song was answered by a hissing croon from the Runespoors, turning to a discordant music like peas being rattled about in a drum. The two songs mingled, flowing around each other and coming in two distinct streams to his ears. One was the frenzied symphony of the Dark music he was already familiar with.

The other was strong, and bright, with an undertone of rage. The song of the Light magic, Harry supposed, and it was angry with Voldemort for tricking it, getting ready to recoil upon him.

He followed the path of Fawkes's song. There was no other way to describe it. As the phoenix was bonded to him through their established connection and to the Light song through his voice, so Harry could follow that three-link chain and find himself in the midst of a roaring golden river, singing as it ran to the sea, as the sun and the moon rose and turned and fell. This was the music of the spheres, Harry thought, generated by the movement of the lights of heaven. The stars sang, too, but in voices too high and cold to be of much use. It was the sun the phoenix especially sang to, and the moon could serve as another chorister, gathering the sun's light and reflecting it back.

Harry wondered how many creatures were singing in the world that he never heard.

A small golden tributary stream ran into the mighty river, and Harry located it easily, not only because it was there at all, but because it was befouled. The web stretched across it as a dam, and streaks of black curled into it. Harry wrinkled his nose. This was a corruption of Light magic. Whoever had done this had been in haste, and had simply slapped tangled webs and bits of twigs and moss together and then dropped the whole thing in the stream.

He gently scooped up the dam, and step by step began putting its materials to the side, on the bank of the stream. He could sense the web's threads around the Runespoors fracturing as he did so, and the Light music itself helped him, the stream eager to run clear and free again. Harry gathered and scooped, gathered and placed, and slowly, slowly, the swirls of black in the gold faded. The tributary chattered at him and sang like a bluebird at dawn.

As he worked with the Light music, the Runespoors touched the Dark song, he thought. They were working it into him, showing him the patterns that underlay the seeming chaos. It was the chaos that made the Dark music so hard to resist. It seemed ever-changing wildness, and as long as that was the case, then a human mind became lost in it—and intrigued by the thought of no two moments ever being the same. But there were some patterns there, some notes insistently repeated, some others coming and going with less frequency, and once he knew what they were, he could listen to the music without fear.

His wandless magic went along with it.

Harry felt the magic pursuing the knowledge of the Dark music inside him, intrigued and impressed and lulled by the thought of understanding it at last. As the Runespoors sang and taught him, chorus by chorus and verse by verse, his magic learned it, too. As Harry stooped and gathered material from the stream to place on the bank, all the while using one hand, the magic became used to the thought of doing labor with one hand and did not find it so bad. As Fawkes sang, his magic nudged at the bond between him and the phoenix, and accepted it, and curled up inside his body again like a restless cat come back home.

Harry sang and worked and learned, refusing to acknowledge the coming of the magic, until it was unmistakable. Then he opened his eyes, and found the Runespoors slithering freely around him, and Fawkes just coming down from the song on his shoulder, and his wandless magic once more bound, part of him, losing its free will in the wonder of knowing what he knew and being *his* magic.

"Thank you," said the Runespoors. *"Thank you. We will not attack the other humans now. We have our song back. That is all we wanted. And now you can go to sleep, little one, now that you are returned."*

Harry wanted to protest that he didn't need to sleep—until he tried to stand up and fell over, and Fawkes bit his ear hard enough to draw blood. Then he decided that maybe he did, after all.

He curled up in the middle of the clearing, Runespoors piled warm and lazy around him, and drifted into sleep on a music

like drumming peas that did not let him think about anything else that had happened to him that Midsummer night.

No matter what else happens to me, I am still vates. There is still that.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Sixty-Five: Call It Compulsion, Call It Madness

Albus frowned slightly. It seemed that his compulsion had not been as successful as he would have liked. Nightfall, and Harry had fled outside Hogwarts and was sleeping in the Forbidden Forest, as he saw when he focused his eyes through a knothole in one of the trees.

Perhaps he should be patient. After all, assert the compulsion too strongly, and Harry would be sure to feel it. He must keep the reins light and loose until he could pull Harry up and arrest him in his plunging course.

But an intuition itched behind his eyelids, telling him that he didn't have much time. Yes, he might catch Harry in a carefully constructed trap, and the boy's fight with Severus—Albus had felt the echoes of angry Dark magic all the way up in his office—suggested that it was working. Still, all the students left the school in a few days, and Harry wouldn't have an excuse to remain here if he was not staying with Severus. He would travel away, and then Albus would have, at best, the uneasy knowledge that his compulsion was working in him without knowing why or how.

No, he would have to take the chance. At least Fawkes was asleep now, and so was Harry, and it was easier to make an impression on a dreaming mind than a waking one. Albus drew in more of his gift and then exhaled it in a great, sweeping miasma over the boy resting among the Runespoors.

Harry stirred and murmured fretfully, but sank back into slumber again. Albus continued to watch. He had pushed as much as he dared. Now he had to wait and see whether his designs would be frustrated or answered, whether Harry would save the world or damn it.

He hoped he would not wait long.

Harry woke to something pecking him. He sat up slowly, assuming it was Fawkes, until he realized the phoenix sat with his head beneath his wing on a branch not far from him. Harry frowned and looked about until he noticed the pale belly of a barn owl hovering beside him. Carefully, Harry adjusted his glasses and reached out to make his left arm a perch for the owl.

The talons scored his bare skin and drew faint lines of blood. Harry supposed he should really go inside to the hospital wing soon and have those and the other wounds treated. For now, though, he was too busy.

He unrolled the letter, slowly and clumsily, and grimaced when he recognized the handwriting.

I will not bother with greetings. We cannot afford the time, and you would think it insincere of me anyway.

My old siblings are not helpless without my lord. They are going to cut off the head of the serpent, and watch the body thrash in helpless convulsions. Do you want to come and protect the snake, or hear of it later? I would be most pleased to bring you a personal report from the Ministry. I am going in early to watch the fun. Do let me know if you want to come with me. I know two areas free of anti-Apparition wards.

*Still playing the game,
Evan Rosier.*

Harry rubbed his face with the letter and tried to get rid of sleepiness and the sickness that wanted to assault him as he remembered Snape's betrayal. It was still hours from dawn, by the position of the moon. He hadn't slept long. He didn't want to waste time figuring out riddles handed to him by a Death Eater who was probably mad anyway.

But something about the wording lingered in his brain, tickling it. This was a wizarding proverb, not one of Rosier's poetry quotes.

In a moment, he remembered. There had once been a plot to assassinate a Slytherin Headmaster of Hogwarts that used the same words. In the end, the assassins had had to give up their plan because they couldn't get close enough to the Headmaster

through the walls of the wards.

Cut off the head of the serpent, and watch the body thrash...

Harry's eyes popped wide, and he heard a gasp rip from his throat. He shook out the letter again and stared at it.

Yes. Rosier did mention the Ministry.

Scrimgeour. They're going for Scrimgeour.

Harry stood, sending the barn owl into flight with an irritated hoot, his mind scrambling around his skull. Somehow, he had thought the Death Eaters wouldn't want to move while Voldemort was still in hiding and healing, which was stupid. Of course they could have had plans that he'd directed them to put into practice even before his resurrection. And of course someone like Karkaroff was clever enough and high enough in standing with the Death Eaters to force them into motion, even if the others wanted to wait.

They want to assassinate the Minister. Of course they do. What a bold move, what a statement of power! And the country would thrash around like a snake with its head cut off.

Harry tossed the letter hastily to the ground, struggled away from the last of the Runespoors, and began running through the Forest towards the limit of the wards. Even now, he would not try to Apparate within them, lest he tear some of the most-needed protections against Voldemort. But he could Apparate from outside them, and that would get him to the Ministry in time to warn Scrimgeour. Harry thought he could remember the gray room where the Hounds had brought him. That had been free of anti-Apparition wards, though they might have been put back up by now with the disbanding of the Hounds.

So be it, then. Now that he had control of his magic back, Harry thought he could survive even a bounce from wards like that without splinching.

Probably.

He pushed away the small snarl of uneasiness in the back of his mind. He would preserve his life, oh yes, he had to, because this was for the war, and he had to answer the training his mother had given him. But he would preserve other lives, too. He had failed tests in the graveyard, and even before then. He hadn't figured out that it was Karkaroff who must have downed the Aurors and blocked up the Floo Network the night of the raid on the Ministry prison, even though he should have. He hadn't kept Sirius alive, even though he should have.

He was not about to let Scrimgeour die.

He reached the outer limit of the wards and slowed his run abruptly as he noticed someone standing in the light of a *Lumos* glow. He stared when he recognized the dark eyes and the mad grin. Evan Rosier bowed to him.

"You are taking me up on the offer of Apparating to the Ministry after all?" he called cheerfully.

Harry bared his teeth, unable to help it. His determination was surging along the edge of rage, and the sight of a Death Eater now called up memories of just a few hours ago that he would much rather avoid. "Not on your life. I'm going, but I'm going to Apparate to an area that *I* know of."

Rosier laughed at him. "I didn't mean that you should actually come with me, Harry—may I call you Harry?"

"No," said Harry curtly, and closed his eyes, trying to remember the exact size and shape and color of that bare little room.

"I would just give you the description of the room, and then you could Apparate there yourself," Rosier continued smoothly, interrupting Harry's memories. "One of them is a little-used room off a private office of the Minister's. It has four close gray walls, and a table that's bolted to the floor in the middle of it and can't go anywhere. The smell is that of blood, from when they cut into a unicorn in there one time and couldn't get rid of the reek. Can you see it?"

Yes, Harry could, far more clearly than the ten-month-old memory he'd been trying to call up. For a moment, he weighed whether he could trust Rosier against the need to get to the Ministry on time.

His mother's voice whispered in his head, chasing away all doubts. *You will sometimes have to make allies of your enemies. You can trust them to act in their own self-interest, as long as you know what they want. When their goals and yours no*

longer coincide, then you may drop them. There is no shame in doing so. They are evil if they would oppose your brother, and have no sense of honor to lose.

Harry nodded, once, and then, holding the image of the room clear before his eyes, he Apparated.

It felt as though someone had shoved him down a tube and were slowly squeezing him out. Harry had Apparated before, and even from London to Scotland, but then, he'd known both the place he left and the place he arrived in very well, and he'd had rage at Dumbledore driving him. Now he was aiming for a place he didn't know very well, and he could almost feel the magic tumbling through space beside him, anxiously seeking a way for him to land safely, seeking a room that matched the description in his head.

Then it was there. The stink of unicorn blood wrongfully spilled, familiar from the Forbidden Forest in first year, hit his nose, and Harry opened his eyes to find himself in the room Rosier had described. He'd landed just a few inches from the table. He moved towards the door at once, even as he heard a *pop* from behind him that was probably Rosier. Harry ignored him. He would harm the man if he attacked, and if he did not, then Harry saw no reason to encourage him or pay attention to him.

"Oh, good," said Rosier. "No one else is here. I hoped that no one else would be. They must be using the other one."

Harry knew, distantly, that he should have flinched or had *some* reaction to the information that the Death Eaters could have been here. He didn't, not really. Even the thought of seeing Bellatrix barely infuriated him. He was busy casting the reverse to the locking charms on the door, and then stepping out into the office beyond.

It was well-lit, and when Harry moved up to the padded chair behind the desk and touched it, it was still warm. Of course, Scrimgeour must have been working late, he thought, or the Death Eaters would have aimed for his home, wherever it was.

He turned and looked at Rosier. "What else do you know about this plan?"

Rosier lifted a shoulder with a faint smile. "Only that a spy was supposed to lure the Minister out of his office, Harry. Something about wanting to expose a few more Death Eaters pretending to be loyal Ministry officials, like Walden Macnair, to him." Rosier chuckled. "Oh, he's going to meet Death Eaters, I suppose. Just not the ones he expects."

"Where was the other place we could have Apparated in?" Harry demanded, thinking it reasonable that the traitor would walk Scrimgeour in that direction.

"One of the offices on the second floor, which Walden secured for us bit by bit," said Rosier. "This particular office is on the third."

Harry ran for the door again. He could feel the hum of wards around them, and the very least the wards would do is prevent Apparating. He suspected that a few of them were already calling alarms about unwanted intruders in this office. Once again, it wasn't something he had time to stop and worry about.

He found an empty corridor, decorated with sleeping portraits, beyond the office, but even as he began walking down it, a figure stepped out of a door to his left. Harry gripped his wand and spun into a battle-crouch, almost flinging a hex before he realized it was Tonks.

She stared at him, her hair changing from blue to pink. "Harry?" she asked. "What are you doing here?"

"Hello, sweet girl," said Evan Rosier from behind her. "I bet you taste like blueberries."

Harry flung a body-bind at Rosier, yelled at Tonks, "He's a Death Eater, extremely dangerous, leave him alone," and then ran up the corridor, looking for some sign of a staircase or the lifts. He knew he should be able to remember—his mother would have been so disappointed in him that he could not—but his mind was blurring and racing, and Ministry geography was the last thing on it right now.

At last, the hallway ended in a door that opened on stairs leading up. Harry ran up them. The only sounds, bounced back from the walls, were his own footsteps and labored breathing. Dimly, he was aware that the wound Voldemort had given him had torn open again.

Stubborn thing, he thought, and opened the door at the top of the next flight of stairs, sure that he had found the second floor.

Sounds of fighting at once worried and reassured him, and he hurtled forward, running possible battle arrangements over in

his head, trying to calculate how many Death Eaters were likely to be there, and telling himself over and over that the sounds meant Scrimgeour was not yet down and dead.

He turned a sharp bend, and came out into the mass of Auror desks that he remembered from his visits to Scrimgeour when the man was still the Head of the Auror Office. Hexes and curses fizzled steadily from the middle of it towards the right side, where Harry could see a small group of frazzled Aurors making a valiant stand.

Among the Death Eaters attacking them were Fenrir Greyback, Walden Macnair, Karkaroff, and a few other heavysset men Harry didn't recognize. A seventh man lay motionless on the floor not far from them. Harry didn't have time to see whether it was a Death Eater or an Auror.

What *he* cared about was that the attackers were a good distance from the defenders—one of the Aurors had raised a ward that, while it couldn't deflect all the hexes, was forcing the Death Eaters to remain a dozen feet away—and they had shelter from their desks, as well. No matter what spells Harry chose for this fight, they were unlikely to hurt Scrimgeour or his allies.

His magic snarled in happiness, or maybe that was him. Harry moved forward and aimed his wand.

"*Exsculpo!*" he hissed, this time using a different intonation than the one he'd used on Voldemort. The spell surged through him and out, still unfamiliar and exciting for its very unfamiliarity.

The purple light hit one of the unfamiliar Death Eaters in the leg, and the leg abruptly ceased to exist. He cried out and listed to the side, then fell hard and knocked his head on one of the desks. He was out, Harry thought, at least for now.

Karkaroff whipped around and saw him. The man's eyes narrowed at once, and he snapped, "Greyback. Avery. Macnair. Take him. I'll kill the Minister." He turned again to face Scrimgeour, while the other three began blasting desks aside to get to Harry faster.

Harry took a brief moment to survey the Aurors. Two of them were wounded, but the others looked well. Scrimgeour, in particular, was still hearty, and Harry could see his yellow eyes lock onto Karkaroff's as if he could sense the strongest Dark magic there.

Then Harry had other things to worry about, because the lead Death Eater—who was a stranger, so he must be Avery—was almost on him, calling up a Blasting Curse that would probably hurt Harry if it hit.

If it hit.

Harry rolled to the side and under one of the desks. He was just small enough to make it, and he knew he was lucky that the desks were hollow underneath. He curled up tight and heard Greyback snarl and Macnair answer some question Avery had asked with a curse. Apparently, they had lost track of him for at least one precious moment.

Harry smiled, and knew it was a feral smile.

Always use what's around you. That's what she taught me.

He gestured with his right hand in the direction of the desk, and intoned a nonverbal Levitation Charm. The desk rose in the air, rotating slowly. Avery let out a triumphant yell as he caught sight of him.

Harry winked, smiled, and then flung the desk at them as hard as he could.

Greyback ducked out of the way with all the agility of a werewolf, and Macnair raised a Shield Charm that would keep out heavier weights than a desk. Avery, stunned and already stepping towards Harry, wasn't so lucky. The desk hit him in the face and body, and blew him backward, sending him spinning into the wall. Harry pulled up the desk so that it didn't crush his legs, turned it, and this time threw it at the back of Karkaroff's head.

Macnair had caught on to what he was doing, though. He cried out, "*Wingardium Leviosa!*" and seized control of the desk. Then he sent it flying back at Harry.

Harry's own Shield Charm bounced the desk off quite handily, and it hit one of the others hard enough to snap its legs. Harry stood, glancing down. Papers had spilled out of the desk, hardly sharp missiles, but able to be used as distractions if he picked them up with magic and flurried them around the room—

Then he caught sight of Fenrir Greyback, crouched in the aisle next to him and snarling. He was already rising to his feet, and Harry moved to pour strength into his Shield Charm. There weren't many spells that would affect a werewolf, even in human form, and he would need the moment to think of one.

"Here, puppy, puppy, puppy!" sang a voice from the back of the room.

Harry stared even as Greyback spun around. Rosier stood near the door, swinging his wand in his hand and clucking his tongue.

"Does poor lost little puppy want a treat?" he asked, and held up what Harry thought was a sweet shaped like a bone.

Rosier knew his opponent. Greyback howled in utter fury, sprang up onto the nearest desk, and dived at Rosier. Rosier sprang aside, laughing, and set Greyback on fire.

Harry turned around, thinking that no matter who won the fight, it could only be better for his side. He scanned quickly for Macnair, using his magic to lift up the papers—

And saw that Macnair had stepped around to the side, angling to get within reach of the ward protecting the Aurors. Karkaroff was still in front of them, exchanging spells with Scrimgeour. The Minister had fallen fully into the duel, and Harry doubted that he was noticing Macnair. His Aurors were watching him.

Harry shouted a warning, but his voice went unheard in the noise of Macnair intoning, "*Sanguinolentus!*"

The Bloody Cut Curse was a red, hissing, spluttering thing. Harry saw it take flight from the end of Macnair's wand and aim straight for Scrimgeour's shoulder like an evil star. Harry flung out a hand and tried to take control of and turn the curse the way he had seen Voldemort do, but he suspected he had failed, or did not yet know the skill, when it did not even wobble in its path.

Scrimgeour was going to die.

And then someone dived between him and the curse and took it on his own shoulder. He went down fast, bleeding ferociously, but not before Harry had time to see that his hair was red.

Percy.

Macnair let out a wordless shout of frustration, Harry one that echoed it, and Scrimgeour a battle cry. He forced Karkaroff back with a Blasting Curse aimed at the floor under his feet, spun on his bad leg, crouched over Percy, and aimed his wand at Macnair. Harry could see the longing to kill burning in his eyes. With one of his staff bleeding to death, it would have been so easy.

Instead, he remained an Auror, and the only spell he took Macnair down with was, "*Petrificus Totalus!*"

Macnair collapsed. Harry turned sharply to deal with Karkaroff, but he was already running. Greyback and Rosier were gone from sight, and the last unfamiliar Death Eater who had come with Karkaroff lay still beside the one whose leg Harry had taken, bleeding from a head wound.

"Feverfew, Mallory, get him," said Scrimgeour, efficient as always, and then knelt down beside Percy.

Harry hurried towards them, ignoring the looks that Aurors Feverfew and Mallory gave him as they ran past. They might think it strange to see him here, and perhaps even stranger that he wouldn't hunt beside them, but Harry knew his duty. Karkaroff was only one capture, in the end.

Percy's life was more important.

Harry stepped around the desk and crouched down beside Scrimgeour. The Minister, his face pale and utterly devoid of all emotion, was pressing furiously on the cut in Percy's shoulder, trying to stop the blood. It wasn't working. That was impossible, Harry knew, with *Sanguinolentus*. The wound simply kept bleeding, resisting any pressure or clotting, until the patient died.

It resisted most healing magic, too, and Harry knew only the most basic medical spells. But he had something else he thought might work.

He closed his eyes. *Fawkes?* He tried to summon the phoenix for the first time. *Fawkes, I need you now!*

The phoenix popped into being above him, with a startled squawk, as though Harry had woken him out of a sound sleep. But he fluttered down to Harry's arm when Harry held it out for him, and saw the situation at a glance.

Tears welled up in his dark eyes, and fell on the wound, Scrimgeour pulling back his hands in silence so they wouldn't obstruct the way. Harry held his breath for a moment, and then closed his eyes as he realized the bleeding had begun to ease off. The Bloody Cut Curse had come very near costing Percy his arm, but it would heal, if slowly, under the phoenix's tears. Percy would have to spend some time in the Ministry's infirmary or St. Mungo's for blood loss, but that was so much better than what it could have been.

Harry felt Scrimgeour touch his shoulder. He blinked his eyes open, and looked at the Minister.

"You're wounded, too," said Scrimgeour, without any particular emphasis, his eyes on Harry's chest.

Harry blinked and looked down. His robes had fallen open, and his shirt underneath it was soaked with blood. He tugged the cloth slowly away from the gaping bite, and winced when he realized that the edges of it had turned black and begun to stink. *Some poison that Voldemort carried in his teeth, probably.*

He remembered, abruptly, that Fawkes had cried on the wound earlier, and though it had closed and almost ceased to ache, it had not healed.

"What curse did that?" Scrimgeour asked, dividing his attention between Harry and Percy. Fawkes's tears were coming more slowly now. Scrimgeour wiped the blood away from the cut, revealing a long, wicked scar that ran like a rope around Percy's upper arm. His eyes held plenty of emotions now, hope and pride and fear, as he stared at the young man who had nearly died saving his life. Harry glanced politely to the side, to let them have their private moment, as he answered.

"No curse. Voldemort bit me."

He looked back to see that Scrimgeour had jumped as if jolted by lightning, and so had the Aurors who remained with him behind the desks. Harry rolled his eyes. *It's just a name. What I have to tell them next is what should really shock them—or maybe not, since they just survived an attack by Death Eaters.*

"Voldemort has returned," he said quietly. "He resurrected himself in a dark Midsummer ritual—"

"There are no dark Midsummer rituals," interrupted one of the taller Aurors. She looked as though she were spoiling for a fight.

Harry rolled his eyes at her. "A *corrupted* Midsummer ritual then, I should have said." He could feel his breath coming faster, but he refused to let it. He would not permit his emotions to take him over and make him react like a child in front of the Minister. The dryness he could put into his tone did counteract them, somewhat. "I was under such temptation to notice semantics at the time, since I was tied to an altar in the middle of a graveyard."

"Go on." Scrimgeour's eyes were narrow, and drinking in light and information. The eyes, Harry thought, of a man preparing for war.

Harry described the ritual as concisely as he could, telling all the details of Voldemort's plans, and the fact that he was incapacitated due to memory loss for right now, but that that couldn't last for long. In the middle of his story, Aurors Feverfew and Mallory returned, with Tonks beside them, to report they had lost Karkaroff, and there had been no sign of Rosier or Greyback. Avery, Macnair, and the two heavyset Death Eaters were their only captures, since the traitorous Ministry official who had led Scrimgeour here had died in the first round of curses.

Harry warned them about the two unwarded rooms.

"I will take care of it," said Scrimgeour.

Looking at him, Harry thought he could almost relax. *Yes, he will. I am proud to have such a man on my side as we go into war against Voldemort.* Even thinking about how Fudge would have mishandled things made him want to shudder.

Percy chose that moment to groan and open his eyes, and the look on his face when he realized that both he and Scrimgeour

were still alive completed Harry's contentment.

There's such courage, such goodness, in the most unexpected places, he thought, watching the moment that he was sure had just completed whatever silent test Scrimgeour had been making of Percy. *That's the thing to remember as we go into this war. That's the thing that will lead us back to peace.*

He ignored, as best he could, the fact that Fawkes had wept on his bite wound and only managed to close it again, not ease the blackness or the stink of it.

Harry trudged wearily towards the castle for the second time that night, Fawkes perched heavily on his shoulder. At least he had no dead body floating behind him this time, Harry thought. He supposed that was an improvement.

He rounded the last bend in the path, and Snape was waiting for him.

Harry snarled. His magic boiled around him for a moment, before he calmed it down. He wouldn't try to confine it to his body this time, and it was in no danger of wildly attacking people as it had been, but he still didn't want to choke or burn or fling Snape into a wall. The man had betrayed him. That meant he didn't deserve even that much of Harry's notice.

He made to walk around him, but Snape said, as if he had a right to demonstrate his concern, "Where have you been?"

Harry ignored him, and only stepped further to the side. Snape stood motionless. Harry took that to mean he wouldn't touch him, and thus was taken completely by surprise when Snape sniffed once, then reached down and wrenched his robes and shirt—which was stiff with dried blood—to the side.

"What is this?" Snape whispered, staring at the bite wound.

"None of your business." Harry ducked his head and pulled sharply away. "Go back to sleep, why don't you, Snape? You can hear all about it in the morning, as much as Madam Pomfrey ever tells anyone about someone else's wounds. I'm going to her. Good *night*, Snape," he added, when Snape didn't move.

"Where were you?" he demanded again.

"You. Can't. Know." *Perhaps he is feeling a bit thick-headed after all the loss of air to his brain when I choked him, and needs that reminder.*

"I would like to know." That was Draco's voice, and he had appeared behind Snape, a *Lumos*-lighted wand of his own in his hand, competing with the dawn's faint radiance in the east. Something was wrong, though, because his face was tight and pale, and his voice was hoarse with fury. Harry raised his eyebrows. *He's angry with me? Why? Surely Snape told him why I ran away earlier, and I'm back safe now.*

"I went to the Ministry," said Harry. "I received warning that the Death Eaters were trying to assassinate the Minister. I went to help stop them."

"Where did you get this warning?" Draco stepped closer and closer, and Harry stifled the temptation to back up. He knew he hadn't done something wrong. How could he have? He'd risked his life to help save someone else's, and though in the end he wasn't the one who'd taken the *Sanguinolentus* curse, his aid had made a difference in the fight, and he'd got the chance to tell Scrimgeour about the Dark Lord's return. Harry considered that a win-win situation.

"Rosier sent me a letter—"

"You trusted the word of a *Death Eater*?" Draco was yelling now, from only a few feet away, and that was disconcerting as hell, because Harry still couldn't figure out what he'd done wrong. "Harry, why in the name of Merlin didn't you come back and get me? Get McGonagall? Get *Dumbledore*, for that matter? Why didn't you raise the alarm, instead of running straight into what could have been a trap?"

"But it wasn't a trap," said Harry.

"You trust Rosier, then?" Draco looked as if he were going to tell him how foolish he was, if he said yes.

“Of course not,” said Harry. “But he offered to tell me about one of two rooms in the Ministry that weren’t warded against Apparition, and I—“

“You do realize that they would have been Apparition points known to *Death Eaters*?” Snape had the gall to step into the argument, his face gone so pale that he looked almost sick. Harry stared at him in scorn under which he’d forced the pain. *What does he want? He doesn’t care about me, he’s made that obvious, and I don’t think he’d have any other reason for sticking his big nose in.*

“I knew that,” Harry snapped. “But when it was a choice of save the Minister’s life or dither around—“

“You could have been *killed*,” said Draco, and seized his left wrist in a silent reminder of what else could have happened to him if the Death Eaters had taken him. “Merlin, Harry, don’t you ever think?” The anger was gone out of his voice, but left in it was a cold disappointment that hurt worse. “Getting kidnapped isn’t your fault, I know that, but you willingly went out of your way to put your life in danger *again* tonight. And now there’s this.” He nodded towards the bite wound at the juncture of Harry’s neck and shoulder. “You didn’t go see Madam Pomfrey at all this evening.” He checked the light in the east. “Last night.”

“I was a bit busy,” Harry said.

“Doing what?” Draco leaned towards his face. “Do you know how frantic I was? Searching every room in the castle, worrying when I could feel you and then suddenly not feel you—“

“Freeing Runespoors,” said Harry, so that he could concentrate on answering the question and not on what he’d done to Draco.

Draco closed his eyes. “Harry,” he said. “Merlin. No one’s asking you to start fighting the war tonight.”

“But the first strike of the war came tonight,” said Harry. He was trying to understand, really he was, but their concerns seemed so far away from his. Yes, he knew he had hurt Draco, and he hadn’t wanted that to happen. But Draco was speaking as if Harry could really have taken the time to run back to the castle and talk with him—and Harry knew Draco wouldn’t have let him go to the Ministry if that had happened, any more than McGonagall and Snape had the night of Rosier and Greyback’s raid on the jail. Didn’t Draco see that everything was *different* now that Voldemort had come back, that Harry had to fight his evil when and where it appeared? “I didn’t plan that, either.”

Draco startled him by wrapping an arm around his shoulders, and bending his face close to him to whisper in his ear.

“Harry, you’re wounded and exhausted, and you haven’t even taken the time to cry over Dragonsbane, I don’t think, and you’ve had a fight with Snape. You *have* to get some rest, or you’re going to break down.” Draco hesitated for a moment, then added, “I think you might actually need the breakdown, but I know that you don’t think it can happen right now or right here. Come back to the Manor with me this summer. I’ve been doing some thinking, and I don’t really believe my father would turn his back on you.”

“Yes, he *would*.” That was another certainty that Harry felt drawn to, even though it had emerged from inside his head like an iceberg coming out of the fog. “I just don’t want to risk it, Draco. Please.”

Draco shook his head slowly. “Your second best option was Snape, and now he’s not an option anymore. What else are you going to do for the summer, Harry?”

“I don’t know.” Harry tugged against the arm which held him. “I’ll decide later. I promise. I’ll decide later.” He could feel tears gathering behind his eyelids, and they alarmed him, when he’d been feeling so calm and confident half an hour ago. Probably Draco was right, and he did need some time and place to recover from the storm. But he didn’t think, at least at the moment, that he could bear the intimacy of spending eight weeks with Draco. If nothing else, he would begin feeling insanely guilty every time he had to run or Apparate into battle and didn’t take Draco along—and then he would feel insanely fearful that Draco, who had his empathy, would take too many wounds of one kind or another in the fighting. There had to be a solution that wasn’t the Sanctuary and wasn’t Malfoy Manor and wasn’t Snape, but Harry didn’t know what it was, yet.

Draco sighed at him. “I’m walking you to the hospital wing,” he said. “And then I’m staying with you. It’s not like we have classes tomorrow.”

He turned to guide Harry up the path. Snape fell into step on the other side of them. When they were only a few paces from the doors into the entrance hall, Snape cleared his throat and said, “Harry—“

“Don’t.” Harry refused to look at him. “I have nothing to say to you.”

Harry was tired.

He was tired, but he didn’t want to sleep. He lay on a bed in the hospital wing, staring at the ceiling. He’d kept his eyes closed long enough to fool Madam Pomfrey, who’d applied several antivenin spells to his wound, exclaiming in shocked tones about its state all the while, and considered giving him Dreamless Sleep, until Harry convinced her he’d already tumbled into slumber on his own. Draco had remained with him, as promised, but he hadn’t had much rest, either. It hadn’t taken long for him to let his head droop on his crossed arms and fall asleep in the chair next to Harry’s bed.

Meanwhile, Harry’s mind raced busily along a track of thoughts that seemed to emerge from that selfsame fog in his head, but be clear and distinct.

They won’t stop pushing at me. Snape is acting like I’ll forgive him. If I stay at Hogwarts, I even might, because that’s how weak I am, and he’d always be interfering when I needed to do something for the war.

Narcissa will push, too, and Draco, if I go to Malfoy Manor. I don’t care what he says about Lucius. At the very least, he’ll probably think the loss of a hand disfigures me. Harry shifted his severed wrist carefully to the side. He hadn’t shown it to Madam Pomfrey, either, to Draco’s palpable displeasure. As understanding as he said he was of Harry’s desire to hide the wound, it was obvious that he thought it would be better if Harry told someone else. Harry thought he might yield, too, if Draco kept up the pushing in his moments of emotional collapse. And that would be disastrous, with some of his other allies as well as Lucius. There were old pureblood prejudices among the Dark families about the ugly, the disfigured, the broken. Wizards with a false leg and eye like Moody’s, or a limp like Scrimgeour’s, were welcome—among the Light. The Dark purebloods often liked to pretend that such casualties never happened to them, the same way they liked to pretend that divorces and second marriages and powerful Muggleborn witches and wizards never happened.

And I can’t go to the Sanctuary, whatever Fawkes thinks, Harry concluded. They’d push me, too, and they really wouldn’t let me leave if I wanted. I’m not even sure that I could, if what Peter said about shadows and illusions around the Sanctuary is true. And it would take news forever to reach me. I can’t be that far away from the rest of the wizarding world right now.

He needed a place where he could collapse and work his way back up. That much was obvious. He also needed a place where people wouldn’t push at him to speed up the collapse, and wouldn’t push at him to prolong it, and where he could go forth to battle when he received a vision or a warning from his allies. He needed, in fact, a place where the people around him were blind to him, and what he really was.

His body stiffened, and his breathing grew rapid.

Lily.

The thought seemed mad at first, but when he tried to chase it away, it circled back, and hovered in the front of his mind, and demanded that it be considered.

She doesn’t know me. She’s blind to me. The Maze told me that. She wouldn’t see anything I didn’t want her to. She’s never going to notice that my left hand is missing. She wouldn’t notice my emotional collapses, either. I could appear before her in tears, and she wouldn’t care. She’d probably urge me to dry them up and participate in battles like the guardian I was raised to be, in fact.

The more Harry thought about it, the more reasons he seemed to see, the fog peeling away from them as they crowded into his head thick and fast.

When I went into battle, she wouldn’t try to hold me back. I understand why Draco got worried, really I do, but I also didn’t realize he would have wanted me to come to him about this. And he would insist on either both of us going into battle, or neither. If he gets killed...

He had to stop thinking for a moment. The tremor that racked his body at the mere thought would have broken him otherwise.

I can’t risk that.

And there's another thing, another advantage that I wouldn't have anywhere else. I need to recover my strength and my confidence. I failed too many tests in the graveyard. I have to find some I can pass. Lily would set me tests that I already know I can pass, because I've resisted her attempts to break me before.

His mind churned and shifted, and briefly seemed to turn upside down. Was he *mad*, to be considering this? What kind of idiot was he? He should go to Malfoy Manor with Draco. What prestige he stood to lose in Lucius's eyes was nothing compared to the damage his mother might do to him—

And then the fog rushed back, or, rather, peeled back from more thoughts, and Harry shook his head.

Not mad, though the rest of them will think it. I need a rest period with someone who doesn't care about me, who's blind to what I really am, and the Maze reassured me she was both those things. And she's the only possible candidate. If I went to the Garden or to Blackstone or the homes of any of my other allies, I might not get the same level of caring I would at Malfoy Manor, but I would get pushed. And Snape could invoke his legal guardianship to get me back from them, if he really tried. On the other hand, if I said that I was going back to my parents of my own free will, then he couldn't do anything.

And then he remembered another fact that made the whole thing perfect.

James still loves Lily. That means that he'd support me, if I told him that I really did want to reconcile with her. He'd like to have both his wife and his son in the same house. I saw that on the beach yesterday morning. For a moment, Harry felt incredibly old, and weary, and changed, that all this had happened in only a day, and then the sunlight of certainty came back. With both of my parents backing me, Snape wouldn't stand a chance, legal guardian or not, and Draco promised not to hurt both of them or talk to anyone else about what they said, so he couldn't oppose me, either.

Harry nodded, the course consolidating itself in his head. It would seem like madness to many—it had seemed like madness to him only a moment ago, a foreign presence in his head—but now he saw his way clear. He would do this in order to recover, in order to have an eight-week period of time to come to terms with what had happened without anyone else pushing and pulling at him.

He created an illusion of himself to lie in bed and slipped off in search of parchment and ink. He had two letters to write.

In his office, Albus toasted the fire, and the air, and himself.

It had been an incredibly difficult dance, and worn on him badly, to struggle with the boy's will, but the mist had slipped in through the cracks in Harry's emotional exhaustion and uncertainty. The compulsion had worked.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Sixty-Six: Harry and Lily

“Mr. Potter.”

Harry jumped. Of all the people he'd expected to catch him halfway to the hospital wing—his letters safely written and sent to his parents—McGonagall hadn't been one of them. He turned and looked up at her, checking automatically that the glamour of his left hand was still in place.

“Professor,” he told her, inclining his head. “Is there something wrong?”

“Yes,” said McGonagall. For some reason, Harry hadn't appreciated quite how severe she could look before this moment. Her glare was still not as icy as Snape's, but it contained a deeply personal disappointment that made Harry fight the urge to squirm. He knew he was doing the best, the only, thing he could do. That would have to content him against the disappointments of those who thought they knew a better way. “You know very well that Madam Pomfrey did not want you to leave the hospital wing before several days had passed.”

Harry blinked. That hadn't been something Madam Pomfrey had said herself, though, to be fair, he might have missed it in the rush of information she muttered last night. And he was feeling rather light-headed from lack of sleep, too, which could explain it.

"I'm doing well, Professor," he said, and gave her a smile he knew he needed no glamour to disguise. He had been far more at peace since he made his decision.

"You are not," said McGonagall. "Mr. Potter, you forget I am an Animagus." Her eyes narrowed down at him. Harry wondered if she had that look in front of a rathole. "I can smell something stinking on you that should not be." She reached out, and made almost the same gesture that Snape had, prying aside his robe and shirt to study the bite wound.

Harry looked down, ready to explain the smell as something Madam Pomfrey had rubbed on him. He did have to stare when he saw the blackness creeping back around the edges of the wound, though. So far as he knew, that shouldn't have happened. The antivenin spells were supposed to take for anything short of a nundu's breath.

"Come with me, Mr. Potter," said McGonagall, and grabbed his left arm, luckily above the glamour. Harry really would have to get used to telling when other people were about to do that, he thought, and adjusting his own position accordingly. "Since you cannot be trusted to take care of yourself, I will escort you back to Madam Pomfrey."

Harry knew it would be no good protesting, so he went along quietly. Besides, the letters were sent. He had made arrangements that would allow him to recover his balance. Dealing with an irritated professor was nothing, compared either to what he had faced last night or what he would deal with once he saw Lily again.

A tremor ran through his frame, and Harry realized he was afraid.

Well, I was afraid with Voldemort, too, and I failed the tests. This time, I just have to be sure that I pass.

McGonagall was as good as her word, marching him straight back to his bed. The illusion of himself had dissipated, but there was no need for it, Harry saw; Draco hadn't awakened. He must have been too deeply asleep for his empathy to rouse him when Harry moved. Besides, the empathy would have reported only happy emotions to him, worry succeeded by calmness.

That is the way to fool him, Harry thought, as he let McGonagall arrange him on his pillows and call for Madam Pomfrey. *Just show him my true emotions. He's not going to know until too late that I'm not happy about going to Malfoy Manor, but happy about going home.*

Home.

The word sounded wonderful, and it had settled into his mind with indelible weight. Of course he should be happy to be going home. His mind still did give odd jerks and twitches, during which he thought himself mad, but he recognized madness from his touch of it in the duel with Voldemort, now. He was sure that he was sane. He was sure that he was taking the best steps he could. Nothing but desperate need would have induced him to summon his mother in the first place, so that must obviously mean that desperate need was working now, and he really *needed* her.

Madam Pomfrey came bustling out, a smile lighting her face, but it died when she saw Harry's wound. She pointed her wand at it, and let out a sharp breath when a black, swirling mist soared up from it.

"What is that?" demanded McGonagall, squinting at the cloud. Harry was grateful that she asked. He didn't want to go about drawing extra attention to himself right now. He kept his hand folded and his eyes on his hand, his breathing sonorous and as deep as he could force it to be.

"The bite's infected with a changeable venom," Madam Pomfrey said, her voice taking on an almost detached tone at first, but speeding up as she grew more and more worried. "It *was* poison at first, but now it's become a Dark Arts curse. And I suspect that if I counter the curse, the bite will attain another poison, a different kind this time. And with each counter, the spread of the infection becomes faster."

She looked sternly at Harry. "I've got some books on changeable venoms, but it's been a long time since I looked at them," she said. "For now, since the curse is only having the same slow effect as the original poison, I'll leave it be. I'll need at least a day to look at the books before I try to heal you permanently, and then you'll need to rest here for at least four days. In the meantime, Mr. Potter, *stay in bed*. Your own magic levels become prey for the curse as it advances, unless you can manage to sleep and restore them." Her eyes grew even sterner then, as though she suspected Harry had gone elsewhere that morning, but she turned and went into the back part of the hospital wing.

"I'll bring you and Mr. Malfoy food and something to drink, Harry," said McGonagall softly, bending over him. "So that you don't need to leave the hospital wing for any reason." Her glare was still worse than Madam Pomfrey's, but when Harry kept mute about any possible explanation for his being out of bed, she turned and stalked away with feline dignity.

All the noise had awakened Draco, as Harry had suspected would probably happen, though he fortunately didn't appear to have heard anything about changeable venoms. He blinked and rubbed at his eyes, then frowned at Harry. "You were out of bed this morning?"

Harry looked carefully away from him, and smoothed his emotions into serenity and happiness. Draco was not going to find out anything from his empathy, if Harry could help it, but he might be able to figure out that something was wrong from Harry's actions.

"I was," Harry admitted. "I had to think, and I had to come to some conclusions." He smiled at Draco, allowing himself to take joy in his friend's expression of cautious relief. Harry really did want Draco to be all right with where he would stay for the summer, and not angry at him any more for venturing to the Ministry. He had the five days he'd stay in the hospital wing to soften him, at least. "I came to them, and, well, I'm not as upset as I was."

"Good," Draco whispered, deliberately taking hold of his left wrist. "That's good." He hesitated a long moment, then said, "Harry, we *do* have to talk about what you did wrong in going to the Ministry last night."

Harry sighed. "You really did want me to come and get you, then?"

"How could you even *think* I was joking about that?" Draco sounded something between hurt and furious. "Of *course*, Harry. Always, always, always. I was hunting frantically for you, and you'd just been through hell." He paused again, then said, "You've said more than once that you feel like you're taking too much from me. Well, if you keep doing things like run off to the Ministry and endanger your life recklessly, that might be true."

Harry instinctively tried to move away from him. Draco countered the motion, leaning back in his chair and staring at Harry until Harry had no choice but to glance at him. Draco looked at least as grim and determined as he had the day he convinced Harry that he loved him, the day he freed the unicorns.

"I won't say I can't live like this," said Draco, "because that's obviously not true. I'm still alive when you get back from your mad expeditions. But I don't want to live like this. It's not fair to me, Harry, and there's no reason for it, not when you can come tell me the reason for your running off and we can figure out a plan together." He chewed on his lips, then said, "You're not the only one who worries about sounding strange. *I* think I sound strange. But this is the only way I know how to talk about this." He covered Harry's stump carefully with his own hand. "I haven't done anything like this so far, because I know that you don't want to be forced, but if you keep endangering your life recklessly, then I *will* force you to stay put, Harry."

Shit. There's no way that he would understand if I talked to him about wanting to go home for the summer. I'll have to hide.

Harry lowered his head. "You wouldn't put compulsions on me, would you?" he asked.

"No," said Draco. "And I won't break any of the promises that I made you, such as not speaking ill about your mother. But anything else is fair game, Harry. Sleeping potions, body-binds, glamours—lying to you if I have to. I won't allow this to go on. I think you should have the choice to do the right thing of your own free will, which is why I'm telling you this at all. Otherwise, I'll just hit you with *Consopio* or a bit of Dreamless Sleep in your food the next time I think you're doing something stupid, and when you next wake up, it'll be in Malfoy Manor." He leaned closer to Harry. "Without the glamour," he added.

Harry swallowed. *I'll have to be more careful than I thought. Not only will he not let me go if I tell him the truth, but I have to make sure he doesn't even suspect that something is off.*

Well, better I give him a carefully worded promise now than suffer later.

"All right, Draco," he whispered. "I—you win."

Draco raised his eyebrows. "Just like that? Somehow, Harry, I don't think that you've just sworn off all impulsive and stupid heroic action with a few words," he drawled.

Harry shook his head. "No. But I know what you want from me now, and I won't—I won't blame you if you use sleeping potions or body-binds or whatever you think you need to on me, *if* you really think my life is in danger." He glared sternly at Draco. "For no other reason."

The relief filling Draco's eyes was painful in its intensity. He bowed his head. Harry looked the other direction, and hoped that Draco would understand when the truth emerged. He didn't like to think he was risking his bond with Draco by lying. On the other hand, he could be risking his only true chance to heal and help other people if he told the truth now.

And my mother always taught me to think of others first.

"Thank you, Harry," Draco whispered, and then McGonagall came back with breakfast for both of them and a stern injunction for Harry to rest and Draco to go back to the Slytherin common room, and there was no more time to talk, and no more moments in which Harry had to fool Draco, either. He ate the eggs and sausage McGonagall had brought hungrily enough, remembering only now that his last meal had been with James on the beach yesterday morning. He hadn't been able to eat other meals as the day wore on and the time got nearer for Connor to brave the Third Task.

That was another thing that made him wince, the thought of his brother.

He'll just have to understand, too.

Lily slowly smoothed the letters in her hands and let out a little painful breath. She was standing in the kitchen of the house at Godric's Hollow, the same place where her life had changed forever a year and a half ago, with summer sunlight pouring in through the windows. The sun could have been a thousand times brighter, though, and its radiance could not have matched the brilliance of her mood at the moment.

Dumbledore's letter had come first, telling her that she would have good news in a short while, and to prepare for a journey to Hogwarts. And then had come the letter from Harry, in which he told her that, now that Voldemort was arisen, he thought it appropriate he should return home for a little more training. Could she come and talk to him? There were questions he wanted to ask her, first.

Sometimes, *sometimes*, oh how she hated to admit it, her long faith had wavered and almost cracked during the months she spent here, alone except for the house elves Albus granted her. James's letters, and Albus's, could barely reassure her, not without word from her sons. She had started thinking, sometimes, as she sat by herself in the silence, that perhaps she had done something wrong in raising Harry and Connor the way she had.

She did not want to think that way, because she had gone too far down this path to be wrong now, *if* she were wrong.

But now her faith was restored, glittering like a diamond in her mind, and her heart had been healed in the sunlight.

Albus was right. Harry always was going to come home at last. And if I'm alone with him, or just him and James, for eight weeks, then I can set to rights all the bad lessons he's learned in the outside world—tell him the truth about himself, and get him to acknowledge it, and help him avoid being a Dark Lord.

All my sacrifices are recompensed, all my mistakes are paid for.

Harry opened his eyes slowly. He had known for some time that there was another presence in the room, and even who it was, but he'd wanted to wait until he was sure that no one else was coming in. But no, it seemed that Draco was in the Slytherin common room, and Snape would know better than to visit him, and Madam Pomfrey was fully occupied with trying to learn something about changeable venoms in her books. Harry wasn't even sure that Connor knew about his condition yet—Draco had admitted to not being able to find him last night, and he might just think that Harry was somewhere around the school—so he didn't truly fear a visit from his brother.

Harry sat up at last and nodded to Dumbledore. "Sir," he said. "I trust that you know I've written to my mother?"

Dumbledore blinked. Harry blinked a moment later. *Why did I think he knew that?* He wasn't sure, but there it was, a certainty as unshakeable in his head as the idea that Lucius would turn his back on him once he saw the disfigured hand.

"Ah, yes, I do, Harry," said the Headmaster a moment later. "And as you have no doubt surmised by now, I have the hospital wing under a variation of the spell that protects Hogwarts from Muggle eyes. Anyone but your mother thinking to visit you right now will find themselves caught up in other plans instead, and they will not return to thinking about you until your interview with Lily is done."

Harry relaxed. "All right. Thank you, sir." He felt, because he could not prevent it, the tickle of uneasiness that ran through him at the thought of being alone with Dumbledore, or even with Lily, in a room where no one else could reach him, but then he told himself again that this was for the best. It was a harder road than just going back to Malfoy Manor would have been, but wasn't the harder road the right one, most of the time?

Yes, he answered himself firmly. Negotiating compromises for the magical creatures is harder than binding them with webs. Creation is harder than destruction. Forgiving someone is harder than just being angry at them all your life. And it seems that I'm born for the hard road, one way or the other.

"I will leave you alone with Lily during your interview," said Dumbledore, pulling Harry's attention back to himself. "She expressed a desire to speak to you with no one else listening."

Harry nodded. It was what he'd been hoping for, but hadn't been sure he had a right to demand. "Thank you, sir," he repeated. Then he drew in a deep breath. His mother was probably here already, or Dumbledore would not have cast the spell. Of course, since Lily lacked magic now, he couldn't distinguish her approach from that of anyone else. "I'm ready to see her now."

Dumbledore eyed him in silence for a long moment. Harry kept his face calm and his will resolute. He *was* ready for this, no matter the mad itching in the back of his head that said he wasn't.

"Very well, Harry," said Dumbledore at last, and went to the doors of the hospital wing. "Then I will let her in."

Harry lay back against his pillows and waited. His wound was only a bit more painful than before; what Madam Pomfrey had said about the curse spreading no differently than the poison, as long as it wasn't counteracted, was true. There was so much sunlight coming through the windows of the hospital wing. He watched it, and heard a distant song, so pure that it reminded him of Fawkes, in the moment before it faded and diminished.

"Hello, Harry."

Harry drew in his breath and faced his mother.

She looked more fragile than she had been when he saw her last. She held no light-globe this time, but only a thin sheet of parchment Harry thought was his letter. She walked with no limp from the bite his snake had taken out of her ankle, Harry was glad to see. Her eyes met his steadily as she took the chair that Draco had sat in earlier.

"You said that you wanted to ask me some questions," she whispered. "Anything, Harry. Now that you are coming home, I will give you anything that you want, with no holding back."

Harry nodded tightly. He should be glad of her declaration, given that he wanted to ask her some extremely searching and personal questions. He didn't know why his throat had swollen shut, why he had to cough to get the words out, why Lily's watching him with patient, anxious eyes only made nausea boil up in his stomach.

The song shimmered in his ears. Harry shook his head, and his throat and head were clear, and his stomach was calm, and why had he ever thought that he felt as bad as he did?

"I want to know why you agreed to sacrifice us in the first place," he said quietly. "What persuaded you that Godric's Hollow should be left open to Voldemort the night that he attacked us? Why did you become dedicated to the war effort in this particular way?"

Lily blinked at him, her mouth briefly falling open. Then she said, with a rusty chuckle, "I must admit, I didn't think that would be what you asked."

"I know the training you gave me," said Harry. "I know the philosophy behind it. Now I want to know where you got that philosophy. Why do you believe the way you do?"

Lily sat back, nodding slowly. She linked her hands together on her stomach and said, "All right, Harry. You know I've told you before that I didn't know anything about magic before my eleventh birthday. I came from a Muggleborn family, yes, but this wasn't even a family who indulged my sister Petunia and me with stories like Santa Claus. My parents were very clear-minded people who didn't hold with what they called 'superstitious nonsense.' Nevertheless, they believed in something when they could see it happen, and they had to admit that magic was real when they saw it happen. So they were happy and

proud to have a witch in the family.”

Lily paused to draw breath. Harry turned his head again. He didn’t know why he expected the sunlight to be glaring on the windowsill, actively burning a hole in the stone, rather than just lying there tamely.

“My sister wasn’t very happy,” said Lily softly. “I tried not to let it bother me, but we’d been close as children, and her jealousy *did* hurt. She kept saying that it was like fairies stealing me away. So I came to the magical world determined to embrace the people here, since I didn’t really have a sister after I found out I could do magic.

“And I found out that I was in the middle of a world where everything was polarized, and there couldn’t be that kind of happy acceptance I’d craved and looked for. Voldemort was just rising then—not much more than a rumor and a name, but most people above the age of sixteen knew war was coming. Even we first-years knew there was something wrong, something dark and burning in the very air.

“And I found out that the fact I was Muggleborn still mattered, even though I was in Gryffindor. Students who wanted to show the right kind of beliefs loudly welcomed me, even when they weren’t people I would have chosen as friends. Other students sneered at me, played pranks on me, called me names, all for a heritage I had no idea existed until just a few months before I entered Hogwarts. I was alone in a world I didn’t understand, and even when I studied or asked questions, it didn’t help. Even as they reacted to the war, most people didn’t want to talk about it, as if that would somehow draw the war to them.”

“You were alone,” said Harry, feeling that he understood. The song was back, and he had to close his eyes for a moment. Sunlight lay on him, as heavy as a hand. “Did you start reading about pureblood history then?”

He opened his eyes to see Lily nodding. “Yes, I did. And I grew to understand my enemies better, and to realize that not every pureblood was an enemy—but also to realize that I could never be one of them. Oh, Harry, James’s family was kind and welcoming to me, and so were children of other Light wizarding families, but they showed with every little speech and every little word that I wasn’t, quite, their kind. They were all lordly condescension, and I was nothing but a peasant, and there were stupid beliefs about Muggleborn witches and wizards being less powerful than purebloods—never mind that pureblood families could have Squibs from inbreeding too closely. There was a stretch of time in my third year when I considered abandoning the magical world altogether.”

“And then?” Harry asked. This mattered to him, he thought, of course it mattered to him. He had wanted to hear his mother’s story before he went home, to understand more about what *she* had sacrificed and to see what effect her words would have on him. He had thought, hoped, that her words would hurt him. Then being in her presence would be a test to pass.

He hadn’t expected to find himself thinking more about song and sunlight than about her words.

“And then Albus summoned me to his office, along with a small group of other Muggleborn students, and talked to me about what part I could play in the war.” Lily smiled dreamily at the wall. “He told us that he’d noticed we wanted to do something, but were frustrated by our lack of knowledge of the magical world, or just our lack of ability, since we were still children. He asked us if we wanted to be more than children. And I and a few of the other students said yes.”

Harry could feel his breath rushing in and out of his lungs. But he wasn’t breathing hard as he had been when trying to suppress tears. There was a pressure of warmth growing in the center of his chest—far below the wound, so it couldn’t be that—and an uneasy shifting and churning of thoughts in his mind.

Lily continued, obviously fully caught up in her tale. “And so we began secret training, not so much in spells—Albus didn’t want us to actually take the field until we were old enough—as in the ethics of sacrifice. Albus told us what would be coming, and a lot of what he predicted came to pass, like the specific Dark Arts spells Voldemort used. He told us the future would be terrible, but we could glow like beacons to brighten it. Many of the adult wizards were caught in the same trap of fear as our fellow students, and they wanted to stay neutral in the hopes that Voldemort wouldn’t notice them.” Lily snorted. “Fine policy *that* was when he began to slaughter them. But they still tried, always thinking that it might happen to the family two linchpins away, but it wouldn’t happen to them. So we were the ones who had to take up the burden of hope. Albus told us that the younger we became accustomed to carrying it, the easier a time we would have of it.”

She stretched out her hands before her and pulled them in towards her chest, as if gathering an invisible child there to hug. Harry watched her in a haze. Song was burning in his ears, buzzing in his stomach, and there was a slow, faint white glare of light before his eyes, like an afterimage that was growing instead of fading.

“By the time we left school, we were ready to fight, and so were the other young Gryffindors Albus had trained. And then

one day he told me of the prophecy—he always trusted me more than any of them—and then, when you boys were born, I knew there was a good chance that it could apply to you.” Lily took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Harry found that he missed their clear, bright green, stained with tears though it was. It had been helping him focus beyond the light. “It was a hard struggle, but I nerved myself to leave you alone to face Voldemort in the end. Albus was the one who gave me my courage, my place in this world. And it all fell out as he said. You survived. The path to Voldemort’s destruction was laid. Do you know what it means to me, Harry, that it’s partially through my sacrifices that you’re going to destroy the monster who made my childhood in the wizarding world so hellish?”

Harry couldn’t have responded if he tried. The light was burning all around him now, and inside his head, if the song was any indication. He thought it might have something to do with the phoenix web, but he couldn’t imagine why Dumbledore or Lily would be trying to put one on him now, when he’d already agreed to listen to his mother and go home for the summer.

The light drew closer to him. In panic, he lashed out with his will in a mental blow, trying to prevent any web from ever gaining a hold on his mind.

He hit a block he hadn’t even known was there. It was rather like falling across a chair in a darkened room. He let out a sharp breath, and then struck once more, instinctively, trying to destroy that block.

It broke.

The compulsion fell apart, and the sunlight rushed in.

This time, he could hear the song, rich and vivid and clear. *Fawkes*, of course it was, and he’d been singing along their bond, sending the sunlight all phoenixes were bound to along their connection, trying to wake Harry up. Harry didn’t know if he’d actually wanted to panic Harry so much he struck out or just raise him into the clarity of sight, but either way, it had worked.

Harry opened his eyes, to see everything around him bathed in the clear, merciless light, and looked straight at his mother.

He saw her as she was to him now, and fell back against his pillows in shock. It was no wonder he hadn’t been affected by her words. She was...

She was...

She was *small*.

Everything about her was small, and not just because she had no magic. The posture she’d taken in the chair, which before he might have thought was a noble bowing of her head and neck before circumstance, was a meek cringing. There was no honor and no pride in her face, only fear and a humiliated hope that she might yet get back something of what she’d lost, power or contact with magic. The hand she put out to him did not reach, but grasp.

Harry couldn’t understand. *I was angry and hurt at her at Christmas. Why have I managed to change my mind about her so completely?*

Because he had been happy in the months between, he realized, Fawkes’s song thrilling through him and carrying the truth along his veins like blood. He hadn’t reserved a spot for Lily in his life. He had no need of her, not any more. Perhaps a month, two months, ago he might have turned back to her, but since then, he’d freed the southern goblins and had the bond with Draco and realized...

Realized that Snape had betrayed him, and lost his hand, and done and seen murder.

Harry grimaced. *Not every experience in those months has been happy.*

But he had grown beyond her now. He would always carry the marks of her training. That was true, and that was probably what people like Millicent were thinking of when they insisted that Harry was marked by his past.

But he needed her no longer. And now he had heard her story.

And what came upon him then, a stream of warm emotion quite separate from the freedom that Fawkes had handed him, was compassion.

Lily had, in a way, been under a web of her own, though Harry doubted that Dumbledore had used compulsion on her. He

couldn't have known, so long before the prophecy, that this one Muggleborn girl would become that important, and he had keener and less chancy weapons to hand. Harry had no doubt that Dumbledore had trained Lily even as she said he had and that that training was the web on Lily's mind, imprisoning her free will and making her think that she mattered only in the context of war.

She is so small. She has sacrificed her free will and foisted sacrifices on others for a false ideal. She's wasted her life. Why should I not pity her? She hurt me, yes, but I can choose to forgive that. And I do so choose.

For that matter, where did Dumbledore learn those ethics of sacrifice? Could he have been a victim of his own mentor, and that mentor a victim of his own, and so on back down the line? Harry drew in a deep breath. Then, if that's the case, what they did to me, deliberate as it was, was really only the end result of a long line of people making sacrifices. Perhaps none of them ever escaped it. But I am the lucky one, the one who can choose to end the chain here.

I am vates, and I can step away.

Even as Fawkes materialized on his arm, however, Harry had two other realizations.

I can't let on to Dumbledore that I've broken his compulsion, or that I even know about it. He would only try to imprison me again. I can't go and live with Lily for the summer—I see that now—but he'll try to force me if he thinks I'm not going. I have a grace period, those days that Madam Pomfrey says I have to stay here and heal my wound. I'll pretend to be under the compulsion for that length of time, and think about where I'm going to go instead and how I'm going to keep Dumbledore out of my mind when I do.

The second realization was more startling. Even as Harry bowed his head and said softly, "I understand, Mum, and thank you," he was reeling under the implications of it.

A vates is a vates to everyone and anyone, breaking any webs. Perhaps my greatest responsibility is to the magical creatures, but that doesn't mean that I'll only free them. I have to consult the free wills of wizards and witches, and try to unbind them where I find them tied. Doesn't that mean—doesn't that mean that I have to be vates to Dumbledore and Lily, too, and try to break them free of these webs of absurdities that imprison their minds?

It made him sick for a moment, as Lily leaned across and clasped his hand and murmured thanks to him in a broken voice, but he could see no way around it. If he started making exceptions, then he would be forever doing so—saying the northern goblins were too hard to free, for example, and must simply remain imprisoned. He would have to be *vates* for even Voldemort and Bellatrix, if they came to him and were sincerely repentant, unlikely as that was to happen. So he had to be *vates* for Dumbledore and Lily.

But that also means that I have to keep them from impinging on the free wills of others. And I have to start doing it immediately. Lily will be easy. I'll just tell her that I'm coming home for the summer, and she'll go back to Godric's Hollow contented for a little while.

Dumbledore, though...

Fawkes gave him an encouraging croon, and Harry smiled down at him and stroked his feathers.

"He must have come to you after you knew you were the Boy-Who-Lived," said Lily. "He did, didn't he? A reminder of your allegiance to the Light."

Fawkes squawked indignantly, but Lily would not know he was indignant. Harry just nodded, while his mind turned to Dumbledore.

If Fawkes will help me, I think I can manage to contain his compulsion. And my deception should help me with him, too. He's still so focused on controlling me that I don't think he'll trouble looking elsewhere. Play the good little puppet for the next few days, and that will make him complacent. Then I can think more seriously about how to set him on the road to realizing what he's done, and healing.

The thought, the plan, was like a lifeline, towing him to shore. Harry could feel himself relax completely for the first time since Karkaroff had Porkeyed him away yesterday. He had always done his best healing when he was helping other people. He could do it that way this time, too.

Of course, if I'm going to act like an unbinder, then I have to unbind all the unnecessary deceptions.

It was a necessary one, he told himself, that made him kiss his mother on the cheek and say, "I've decided to come back home with you, but I need to stay here for five days while Madam Pomfrey heals my bite wound from Voldemort." He touched his chest. "I'll see you again then?"

Lily smiled tenderly at him. "Of course, Harry." She briefly skimmed his shoulder with her hand just above the wound. "If I still had my magic, I think I could have healed this," she said softly.

Harry just bowed his head, and sat in silence until she was gone.

There have been so many sacrifices, and they haven't made her any more courageous or Dumbledore any wiser. They have to stop.

And that means that I have to go have a little talk with Draco.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Sixty-Seven: Only Forward

Harry met Draco in the hallway outside the hospital wing. Draco had a worried look on his face, but, to Harry's surprise, it didn't relax into relief on seeing him. Instead, he narrowed his eyes and hissed, "What are you *doing*? Madam Pomfrey told you to stay in bed the rest of the day!"

Harry shook his head. He'd honestly forgotten his promise to the matron, and had only wanted to see Draco and tell him the decision he'd come to. "I'm sorry. I—"

Draco took his hand and pulled him back towards the door of the hospital wing. At least he kept his voice low as he snapped at Harry. "I think you should show her that hand. What if the wound becomes infected?"

"It was cauterized—"

Draco closed his eyes. "I either didn't know that, or I'd forgotten it," he whispered. He nudged the doors of the hospital wing open and pulled Harry back to his bed. Harry rolled his eyes, but complied with the motion. It seemed like something Draco needed to do.

Once he was arranged to Draco's satisfaction, Harry took the opportunity to begin his speech before Draco could go off into some rant about how inappropriate it was to be running around with a missing left hand and a cursed bite wound. "I wanted to let you know that you won't need the sleep potions and the body-binds and whatever other spells you had ready," he said. "I'm not going to go off into danger without telling you again."

Draco stared at him. Harry stared back. He *did* consider this a true resolution, and if he didn't yet dare tell Draco everything ~ Dumbledore could be listening through the wards, and was almost certainly doing so ~ he could promise this much. It would relieve the most pressing worry Draco had about him.

"You can't just change your whole behavior like that," Draco said at last, revealing the source of the disbelief in his eyes.

"Yes, I can." Harry balled his hand into a fist, and it *felt* as though the left one were doing the same, even though he knew it wasn't. Fawkes, who had briefly vanished when Lily had gone, popped into being on his shoulder again and let out a soft, reassuring croon. Harry let it soothe him back into a faint smile at Draco. "If I concentrate. If I try to remember, instead of just dashing away. I can't say I'll stop trying to save other people's lives, but I'll talk to you about it and take you along." He imagined what Dumbledore would be thinking as he listened, and made his voice soft and submissive, a sop for his invisible audience. "It's the least I could do, after ~ after the graveyard ~" He turned his head away as though overcome.

Draco leaned forward at once, his confusion evident. "Harry?" His empathy would be telling him something much different than Harry's words and expressions, Harry knew.

"I can only ask you to trust me, Draco." Harry raised his eyes and made his gaze as intense as he knew how. "I made you the promise you wanted. Now will you please leave me alone?" He dropped a whine into the middle of his tone. That would help fool Dumbledore, too, to think that Harry was recoiling into himself instead of reaching out.

Draco blinked, once, twice. He knew Harry was passing some sort of hidden message along to him, but seemed unable to

make much more of it than *Trust me. Wait.*

Since that was the only message Harry intended to give, he was satisfied, or he would be if his friend just accepted it, gave in, trusted him, and waited.

Draco bowed his head. “All right,” he whispered. “But I don’t believe that you’ll keep this promise yet, Harry.”

“That’s understandable,” said Harry. “You’ll have to see me keep it first, right?” He closed his eyes. “I think I’ll rest for a little while,” he said. “I went ~ I mean, my mind feels tired. Thinking, you know.” That was another silent gift to Dumbledore, to make him think Harry was tempted to talk about the conversation with Lily, but wouldn’t. He let his breaths sidle closer and closer to true sleep.

Bewildered silence from the side. Harry rested, and waited, and hoped that Draco did not push it. He did mean his promise, as it happened, but Draco being too suspicious could mean a renewal of the compulsion, and then he would fail to keep his promise, because he would be dashing into danger all the time.

Besides, Draco would want to kill Dumbledore and Lily if he knew about the compulsion or the visit. Promise or no promise about Lily, Harry trusted him to find some way around his words if he felt strongly enough. Telling his parents was an option, as well as abducting Harry to Malfoy Manor.

It would take Harry some time to persuade him that forgiving Lily and Dumbledore, helping them heal, was best, rather than angrily opposing them. What they had done was ~ well, done. What they could do in the future was what concerned Harry, and the moment Draco let himself be persuaded Harry wanted to rest, he would start changing Dumbledore’s actions.

“All right,” Draco whispered at last. “All right. Since I didn’t tell Connor about you yet, and it’s not common knowledge you’re in the hospital wing, I’ll go and do that.” He paused, but Harry didn’t open his eyes to see the expression on his face, which left him with the gesture when Draco leaned down and kissed his forehead. “I love you,” he whispered, and then departed.

Harry breathed, and breathed, and breathed, and then reached out along the bond to Fawkes. *Fawkes, is Dumbledore paying attention to us at all?*

The phoenix began softly singing a song that Harry thought was a lullaby. It formed a vision in his mind, however, of the Headmaster reading paperwork with a smile on his face. Harry gave a shallow nod. Yes, he thought Dumbledore had been watching him after all during the conversation with Draco, but now he wasn’t.

Slowly, carefully, Harry explained to Fawkes what he wanted to do, altering his opinion several times when the phoenix gave a little croon of approval or chiding. Then he reached out, even as Fawkes lifted his voice in more glorious music, and carefully touched the outer edges of Dumbledore’s mind.

The Headmaster was a floating presence in the school, a much more powerful one than anyone else. His gifts of magic and compulsion, as well as his mind, extended beyond the edges of his body like an aura. Harry walked carefully through them, guided by Fawkes, who lived in this world of light and color and fire all the time. He was alert to any small twitch that would reveal Dumbledore had noticed them and they would have to leave before he could sense who it was.

Dumbledore kept concentrating on his paperwork, though, and Fawkes found Harry an old door from the time when he used to be Dumbledore’s friend. In a few minutes, Harry stood in an unfamiliar mental world, shaped like Hogwarts, but with odd decorations: much wider windows, mirrors reflecting the constant flow of sunlight through them, and only three House crests, repeated separately and in a twining flow of lion, badger, and eagle. Harry was unsurprised to see that the lion was the largest in the shared pictures, rearing over the eagle and the badger as they crouched and looked up at it.

No place for the snake here, he thought, then shook his head. Sarcasm wouldn’t put him in the right mood to start gently rendering Dumbledore’s compulsion powerless, and such an odd thought might shove his presence to the forefront of Dumbledore’s mind.

Carefully, with Fawkes a mental presence beside him, he sought out the compulsion, here represented by Hogwarts’s wards. The Headmaster had used this particular gift to enforce his will so often that it underlay all his other magic. Harry had a hard time thinking of a way to tame it, until he remembered that Dumbledore was a Declared Light wizard.

He reached up and touched the mental analogue of Fawkes, asking to borrow one bright feather—not actually a feather, of course, but the phoenix’s magic and will concentrated into images. Fawkes crooned happily and let one drop into his hand.

Harry began waving it, lighting a small fire at the tip of it. The wards came alive at once, Dumbledore's compulsion reacting first to a mental intruder, and Harry felt the Headmaster lift his head, blinking.

Harry reacted back, drawing up the fire from Fawkes's feather and sending it in shining strands to loop around the compulsion. Even then, however, he did not create a web; he did not think he could do so and still keep a clean conscience about the healing. He set the light flowing in streams, delicate and fascinating—and familiar to Dumbledore. He would think his phoenix was trying to reconnect with him.

The wards turned to follow the streams. Dumbledore was thinking about Fawkes now, Harry knew, as memories of the phoenix flashed past him. He did not realize—of course, he couldn't unless he was actually in his own head now and witnessing what Harry was doing—that the wards of compulsion were flowing alongside the streams of light, subdued by their interest. There was another presence here, they knew now, but it was one who had been once been friendly. And the light was so *brilliant*. Anything that added friendly radiance to the inside of their master's head was welcome. Part of Dumbledore's gift would focus on following the extra light around, some of his thoughts would shift in that direction instead of focusing on other things, and he would never know what was truly happening.

And since the part of his mind taken up like that was the one that did most of his compelling, that would greatly lessen his intention of compelling other people.

It's a delicate defense, but it will do for now, Harry thought, as he slipped out of Dumbledore's mind and back into his own. Fawkes came along with him, song low and peaceful. This had been a good idea, and he was happy to have helped.

Harry did feel a faint pang of guilt. He wished he could simply have spoken with Dumbledore, instead of interfering with his free will in any way. But he didn't think Dumbledore would listen to him the way he was now, and he would almost certainly renew the compulsion. Harry had to be careful, had to hide. In time, he would, he thought, free the Headmaster from the cage he'd put himself in.

I suppose Snape would think that unworthy, he reflected drowsily, the mental effort combining with the magical to relax him. *But I can forgive his crimes against me if I want, and I'm not the one who has the right to punish him for his crimes against others. What I can do is make sure he won't commit any more. That is more worthy than any other course of action, whatever Snape thinks.*

Harry woke up near evening. For a few moments, he lay in silence, enjoying the slanting, purple light, his mind perfectly blank and perfectly at ease. The only person with him in the hospital wing was Fawkes, and that helped increase the sense of rest.

Then the hospital doors were flung open, and Connor came storming down the middle of the aisle of beds, staring at Harry all the way.

Harry winced when he sat up, and saw his brother's eyes go immediately to the side of his chest where the bite mark was, and then to his left hand. Harry winced again, and stifled the urge to moan. *Draco told him everything, didn't he?*

"I asked Malfoy to set a spell telling me when you'd wake up," said Connor casually, as he sat down in the chair next to the bed. *That chair is seeing a lot of traffic today*, Harry thought, attempting to take his mind off the misery of the impending conversation. "And then I asked him to leave us alone while we talked. He did both those things. That's good of him, I think." He paused. "There was one thing I didn't tell him."

Harry frowned, unable to imagine what that could be. *Was it how worried he was about me?* That was flattering, to think his brother was that worried about *him*, but from the fixed stare Connor went on giving him—for one moment, and then another, and then another—Harry doubted that was it.

"Well?" Harry asked at last, and tried to make a joke. "I've had enough suspense in the last day, Connor. Don't leave me in it now."

Connor ground his teeth with an audible sound. "I had a letter from James," he said. "It was a short letter. He didn't need long to babble at me and tell me that everything was fixed, that everything would be all right over the summer." He leaned forward, until he was approximately three inches away, staring at Harry. "He said that you wanted to come spend the summer with him and Lily at either Godric's Hollow or Lux Aeterna."

Harry sucked in a breath between his teeth. He would never have thought that James would be so stupid as to write to Connor. Of course, perhaps he thought that Connor would agree as long as Harry sincerely *wanted* this.

Connor had got to be more like Draco and Snape than James in the last few months, though. There were times that he would distrust and oppose Harry because he thought that would do the most good, Harry thought.

And he knew, none better, how stubborn his brother could be.

“Look, Connor—” Harry began, soothingly. Dumbledore would understand if he talked like this, he thought. Having Connor tell what he thought was the truth to other people would interfere with the summer plans, and that was not something Harry wanted to deal with, particularly if Snape found out.

I hate this secrecy. But I have to hold to it, or the thing they all think is true will be true. Dumbledore will probably panic and put me under a compulsion strong enough that I can't break it—

Wait. McGonagall. She has some control of the wards. As long as we do it when the Headmaster is occupied, or Fawkes and I strengthen our hold on him a little bit more, then I can ask her to manipulate the wards so he can't hear us. Then I can tell Connor and Draco the actual truth.

Harry relaxed. Connor didn't miss the change. He'd had his mouth open to rant, but now he sat up and shut it, his hazel eyes hard. “What?” he demanded.

“Professor McGonagall already gave me a lecture today,” said Harry, letting his voice whine again. “If you really want to lecture me, go get lessons from her. Or just bring her here.” He rolled his eyes, then pinned Connor with the same intense glare he'd given Draco, trying to talk with his gaze. “I'm sure that she'll be just thrilled to hear what you have to say. And so will Draco. And all of you will be so thrilled to hear my response.” He let his head fall back on the pillows and turned away as if sulking.

He could feel Connor's silent bewilderment. But he must have thought he had nothing to lose. Harry certainly wasn't going anywhere.

“All right,” he said. “All right. I don't know what's going on, Harry, but something obviously *is*.” His voice grew firm again, as though he was not about to let whatever Harry had to say change his mind. “And when I come back with them, I really do expect to hear all about it.”

He stood up and left the hospital wing, less dramatically than he'd entered it. Harry rolled back over and slowly exhaled.

Is he busy, Fawkes?

The phoenix let out a reassuring croon, and Harry braced himself to wait, hoping that it wouldn't take Connor long to find Professor McGonagall and Draco and return with them.

The three of them entered sooner than Harry would have liked—sooner than he was ready for, at least. He tried a nervous smile, but it fell flat at the dangerous gleam in Draco's eyes. Connor had told him about James, then. Harry swallowed.

Draco didn't even wait. He had his wand drawn as they approached the bed, and he tried to cast a body-bind on Harry.

“*Expelliarmus! Mr. Malfoy!*” McGonagall did not so much bark the words as hiss them. She grabbed Draco's wand and fixed him with a steady stare. “I suppose you have a good reason for trying to hex Mr. Potter?” Harry could see dislike in the lines of her face. McGonagall never had liked Draco, and Harry wasn't sure why, other than the fact that he secretly sneered at her, and had mocked her behind her back, and made it plain that he thought he could do Transfiguration better without her instruction...

Yes, come to think of it, that might be enough reason.

“He's clearly acting irrationally, Professor,” said Draco coolly. “I told him what would happen the next time he did that. And he doesn't keep his promises, either,” he added, with a harsh glance at Harry that didn't hide the hurt behind the anger.

“Deputy Headmistress,” said Harry, earning McGonagall’s scrutiny. He knew Dumbledore wasn’t paying attention right now, but he could start doing so at any moment, and that made it so hard to ask for what he wanted. “Could you—that is, you’re making progress with the wards, aren’t you?”

Connor stared. Draco blinked, and then nodded as if he got it.

McGonagall had seized it faster than either of them, by the slight widening of her eyes. Harry wondered if she was as completely Gryffindor as he had always thought she was.

“Yes, I am, Mr. Potter,” she said. “Would you like a demonstration?”

“If you don’t mind,” said Harry, slumping back against the pillows in relief. He fought not to wince as that strained the bite wound. That would be healed tomorrow, Madam Pomfrey had said, or possibly tonight, and that meant that he had to just live with the pain until then.

McGonagall nodded once, and then lines of red and gold coiled around the bed. Harry studied them, but wasn’t familiar with them; many complicated wards were really layered defensive spells, not single ones in and of themselves, and could only be understood by wizards who cast them or integrated their essences into them. Harry asked Fawkes in his head if the wards would prevent the Headmaster from listening in, and Fawkes warbled his approval. Harry relaxed a little further.

“The Headmaster thinks I’m his good little dupe,” he said. “I’m not, not really. But I have to pretend to be for the next few days, or he’ll think something’s up.”

“And that would have something to do with you going back to your parents?” Draco’s voice was a hammer blow.

“I’ve decided not to do it, now,” said Harry quietly. “I don’t know where I’ll stay for the summer yet, but that option’s definitely out.” He hesitated, then decided that no explanation would be good enough without the full truth. At least with McGonagall, a responsible adult, there, Draco was unlikely to go storming off to the Headmaster’s office and try to hex him. “Dumbledore put a compulsion on me that took advantage of my weakened emotions, and worked with my training to make me think this was a good idea. Fawkes finally broke me free of it this afternoon.”

“Was that when Lily visited?” Connor demanded. “James said she was going to.”

Harry frowned. *I’m disturbed that he’s taken to calling them by just their names, instead of what they were to him. He was calling James Dad just a short time ago. Really, I can’t blame him for not wanting to be around Lily—and I wouldn’t want him around her either—but I hope his relationship with James can be salvaged.*

He had another reason to wish that Connor had kept quiet a moment later, when Draco made a sound that resembled a groan and a sigh and a whimper all mixed. “Harry,” he whispered. “You would have gone *that* far backward?”

“Only forward, now,” said Harry impatiently. “It was the compulsion, I told you.”

“And where are you going to stay for the summer?” McGonagall’s lips were pursed, but her face wasn’t pale, as Harry had half thought it would be. Instead, her eyes shone. She looked as if she were going forth to battle.

“I don’t know,” said Harry. “I haven’t decided that, yet.”

“The Manor,” Draco whispered. “Harry, you have *no other choice*, unless you change your mind about Professor Snape.”

Fawkes crooned helpfully on Harry’s shoulder, and once more poured his choice—the vision of the Sanctuary—into his mind. Harry shoved the vision away, splintering it into shards of light, not hard enough to hurt the phoenix, but hard enough to make his rejection plain. “No,” he said aloud. “Either the Seers or Snape would make me go backward. They’re too obsessed with the past. I *have* to go forward. I can’t go crawling back to Lily, and I can’t obey Dumbledore the way he wants me to, and I can’t dwell on the past. I’ve decided to forgive Lily and Dumbledore—“

“*What.*”

Draco said it as if he could not believe it, as if it would not dare to be true, as if the reality of the universe would bend and change with his words, and make Harry the unforgiving kind of person who would insist on punishment. His eyes were large now, and not less bright than McGonagall’s, though Harry knew the cause was different.

Harry drew in a deep breath. “Draco, listen to me.”

“I don’t want to,” Draco whispered. “I don’t *want* to, Harry. That—that’s insane. You’ve left them alive behind you how many times, and they’ve come back up to stab you in the back *how many fucking times?*” By now he was shouting, and if Harry had had empathy himself, he was fairly sure he would have been overwhelmed by Draco’s emotions. “No. No. I refuse to allow this, Harry.”

“Draco,” Harry repeated. He hated to do this, but it was the only way to arrest Draco in the middle of an action that might otherwise cause everyone more pain. “You promised to leave her alone.”

“I never said anything about him,” Draco snarled.

“I’m handling him.” Harry almost laughed at the expression on his face, but the first ripple through his muscles made the bite ache like hell, and he muffled it. “Did you think I would make the resolve to move forward and then leave him alone? No. I’m confining his compulsion, first. I’ll have to move slowly. He’s so alert, and I have to access his mind through Fawkes. But I can handle him. I want to keep him from hurting others, and me, too. Then I’ll do what I can to get him to listen to me, and see that what he did was wrong.”

“And her?” Draco’s voice was low and ugly.

“I’m not sure yet,” Harry admitted. “It will probably depend on where I stay for the summer. I’ll ignore her for the eight weeks if I can, so that I can get some rest and decide on a better course of action. Otherwise, I’ll make sure that she can’t touch my brother or anyone else she might go after, and then handle her by letter. I think, so long as she believes that she might have some chance of influencing me, I’ll always be her prime target.”

“You’re handling this all wrong,” Draco whispered.

“And how would you suggest I handle it?” said Harry, then held up his hand. “No, wait, never mind. You would suggest that I expose everything that happened to the wizarding world.” He shook his head. “That wouldn’t get them justice, Draco, nor healing and understanding. That would get them ripped into *bloody shreds*.”

“That’s what they deserve!” Draco didn’t even seem to realize that he was breaking his promise not to speak ill of Lily. His face had gone so savage that Harry didn’t recognize him. Of course, he was still Draco—just a part that Harry had never met until now. Draco was usually gentle with him, understanding so much and urging him to take steps only as he felt ready for them. Not now. Very much so, not now.

“Pardon me if I don’t think seeing the Headmaster of Hogwarts ripped to bloody shreds would do the war effort much good,” said Harry, freezing his own voice. “Pardon me if I don’t see what good it would do Lily, who doesn’t even have magic to defend herself any more, forced to act out her shame on the stage of the *Daily Prophet*. No. I’ll handle this, Draco. I won’t be kind in forcing them to face up to their delusions. And I am going to use force on them, the same way I would on Voldemort and other people who’ve proven they won’t stop at certain limits. I’ll feel guilty about it, but I’ll use it. *I’ll handle this*.”

Draco just stared at him, breathing hard.

“And now I have to ask you to make another promise,” said Harry.

“I don’t care what you make me swear by.” Draco had never resembled the dragon he was named for more than at that moment, Harry thought. He reminded Harry of the Welsh Green, as much disdainful pride as anger. “I am *not* going to swear a vow not to hurt Dumbledore.”

“That isn’t what I meant, you prat,” said Harry, rolling his eyes. “I’m going to ask you not to tell Snape about any of this.”

Draco went quite still then, as if he had thought of something Harry didn’t know. He bowed his head. Harry felt the struggle happening inside him, and knew it would be a mistake to try and influence it. He waited.

At last, Draco lifted his head, and hissed out between his teeth, “All right. All right, damn you. But *only* because you have a plan, and you made that promise not to go into danger any more. It’s off if you ever, *ever* do anything like let your mother visit you without warning me again.”

“I was under the compulsion then, and that’s not going to happen again, so Lily visiting won’t, either,” said Harry, vast relief flowing through him. “Thank you, Draco.”

He looked up at Connor and McGonagall. "I'm not going to them for the summer," he said. "I promise you that. Are you satisfied? Are there any other questions that you need to ask?"

Both of them shook their heads. Harry didn't know if they were truly satisfied, or if they simply needed the time to assimilate this new information. McGonagall would probably ask him more questions later, Harry thought, but she already had some hints about his past anyway. He would deal with telling her new information.

"Do you want me to leave the wards up around your bed, Harry, so that Albus cannot spy on you?" McGonagall asked.

Harry shook his head. "No. He would notice if he couldn't see me at least sometimes. Thank you, though, Professor."

McGonagall nodded, and handed Draco's wand back to him, with a warning look. The wards came down—just in time for Madam Pomfrey to bring in a tray of food, murmuring words about changeable venoms and the position of the moon, and then hurry away again. Connor squeezed Harry's hand tightly, once, and strode out of the hospital wing. McGonagall followed more slowly, turning at the doors to face Harry.

"You know that you can talk to me if there is ever anything you need, Mr. Potter," she said. "I hope you know that."

"I do, Professor," said Harry, reluctantly admitting that even the beef broth Madam Pomfrey was serving him smelled delicious. "Thank you."

She inclined her head to him, keeping it bowed longer than strictly necessary, and left.

Harry tried to share his meal with Draco, as he moved around to the chair, but Draco shook his head. "I ate earlier," he said, "because I thought that you might try that. You'll eat all of this, Harry." He paused, and then reached out and stroked Harry's hair back from his forehead. Confused, wondering if Draco wanted to see the lightning bolt scar, Harry kept still.

Draco was indeed staring at the scar, but Harry didn't think he was really *seeing* it. He was looking at something else. Then he closed his eyes and put his hand on Harry's shoulder.

"Merlin, Harry," he whispered. "Aren't you ever going to get any rest? Any peace?"

Harry could understand why he said that. There had been an awful lot happening in the past few days. But he knew just how to answer—with the truth, in fact. "That's the reason I've made the plans I have, Draco. In the end, I am going to have peace, because I'll help other people. And I love being *vates* and helping others, you know that."

Draco sat down heavily, keeping his eyes closed. "I meant just a rest, now," he whispered. "Some chance to recuperate yourself."

Harry frowned in confusion as he started eating. "I'm in the hospital wing," he said, around spoonfuls. "I *am* resting."

Draco gave a little half-laugh, half-sob, and opened his eyes again. His gaze startled Harry. It looked much like his own, older than the eyes of most of the teenagers around them.

"Of course you are," he said. "At least I can be here to make sure you really do rest."

He sat there, holding Harry's hand and talking softly to him. Millicent came to visit, and Blaise, and since Draco refused to leave Harry's side, they got sent to the library for books Harry wanted to read: mostly books on removing Dark incantations, as it happened. Harry didn't know if he could break the spells that Bellatrix had put on his wrist, but he was going to try.

It was only when he was falling asleep in the middle of a page that he realized he had made an important tactical error.

Neither McGonagall nor Connor had promised not to tell Snape.

"Mr. Potter. Mr. Potter, can you hear me?"

Harry stirred drowsily and opened his eyes, flexing his hand. It felt wrong, oddly cold, until he realized that Draco had been moved from the chair and levitated into a second bed, so that he couldn't be gripping it. On his shoulder, Fawkes gave a

sleepy croon. Madam Pomfrey stood near Harry, holding her wand high. It was lighted with *Lumos*, and her face was haggard.

It took Harry a long time to focus on her. He'd been hearing a call in his dreams, a rising, rushing, and falling voice. It reminded him of the ocean, but the ocean didn't sing like that. It was enough to occupy all his attention.

"I am sorry to wake you so early," the matron whispered, "but the most powerful incantations to end a changeable venom need to be performed at sunrise."

That made sense to Harry. Sunrise to oppose sunset, the passage from darkness into light made to undo the damage that the passage from light into darkness had done. He sat up, nodded, and waited as Madam Pomfrey gently peeled his pyjama top away from the wound. It occurred to Harry that he didn't remember getting into pyjamas. He frowned a little.

"Fawkes?" Madam Pomfrey said softly. "This is very delicate work. If you would please move?"

The phoenix uttered a sad little sound, but did lift and fly away from Harry to perch on the back of the chair. Madam Pomfrey stood over Harry, still, only turning a little so that her shadow from the *Lumos* spell fell over the wound. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. It occurred to Harry that she was struggling against some keen emotion, perhaps fear.

"Mr. Potter?" she whispered. "This will hurt. You may see uncomfortable things."

"I knew that," said Harry. "I don't think it can hurt more than getting the bite in the first place, or...seeing what I did."

Madam Pomfrey smiled a bit. "Yes," she said. "There is that."

She opened her eyes, and then lifted her wand. "*Resecro!*"

Harry felt a shock run through his body. He shivered, and then bowed his head. It felt as though Madam Pomfrey had reached into the bite wound and touched his heart, which beat not far from the blasted thing. And now she was pulling, or the spell was, tugging at something dark curled in the center of his chest that had wanted to stay there. The thing snarled and dug its claws in, like a disturbed beast.

"*Resecro!*" said Madam Pomfrey a second time, and moved. Harry opened his eyes to see that she'd taken her shadow from the bite wound.

The dark thing began unfurling along the path of the incantation, fighting all the while. Harry felt an echo which he thought was the memory of Voldemort's teeth digging into him, and shuddered. Then he cried out in spite of himself as sudden sharp, hot pain surged through the center of his chest.

An image of teeth shone before his eyes. *Fangs*, it had fangs, and it was fighting with all its might to hold onto him, they were ripping his flesh the way that Voldemort's barbed teeth had...

"*Resecro!*" Madam Pomfrey shouted, and her voice had risen to a battle-cry, a bugle, no longer entreating or pulling, but commanding.

Desperately trying to focus on something other than the image of teeth or the scream resonating in his ears—a scream that was not his own—Harry opened his eyes and focused on Madam Pomfrey. He was startled to see that she was blazing, surrounded by a shimmering white corona, cutting like glass, like adamant. The magic was unfamiliar to him, and he supposed that it must come from her training as a mediwitch.

She put out a hand, and this time, her voice was contemptuous, dismissing the enemy from the field of battle. "*Resecro.*"

The curse *screamed*, and then it flew out of Harry, coiling and winding in Madam Pomfrey's hand rather like a tapeworm. Madam Pomfrey strode across the hospital wing and lifted the writhing, squirming, biting curse into the light of the sunrise coming through the window.

Harry saw the moment when the thing combusted and began to burn from the inside, because the flames were at first a dark green, the color of *Avada Kedavra*, turning to the living green of his own soul. Madam Pomfrey held her hand away from her as it burned, her face disgusted, and then, when it turned into green ash, continued holding her hand there as she turned her head and smiled at Harry.

“It’s gone,” she whispered. “I’ll have to do a lot of washing, but it’s gone. Rest now, Mr. Potter.”

Harry nodded dazedly. He was aware of Draco beside him, asking worried questions, awakened by the screaming, but he found that he couldn’t keep his eyes open. Fawkes returned to the shoulder and crooned, and just in case there had been a doubt that Harry could resist sleep, the sudden warm presence near his head banished it. He fell comfortably into deep, peaceful slumber.

And he did not dream, but the rising, rushing, falling call was in his head all the same. This time, its message was unmistakable.

Come to us.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Sixty-Eight: A Toy and a Coin

Harry? Harry, I found my body!

Harry blinked and stirred, slowly opening his eyes. He hadn’t heard from Regulus in so long that it took him a moment to recognize the voice. Then he smiled, as he realized that Regulus had really only left a few days ago to find his body and stay there until he knew where it was. It simply seemed longer than that, because of everything that had happened since then.

“Welcome back,” he whispered, making sure to keep his voice low enough not to wake Draco. It was afternoon from the slant of the light, but both of them had irregular sleep schedules by now. What with the removal of the curse in his shoulder wound this morning, Harry thought that he could sleep for a week solid. “Where is it?”

In Wayhouse, Transfigured! Regulus would probably have done a jig if he could. *I finally figured it out. I nosed and nosed and nosed, and still couldn’t sense any trace of a preservation spell. And then I realized that I could sense some of the old and familiar magic from the summers I spent in Wayhouse. Spells on the room that used to be the nursery, in fact. I was just always in too much pain before to sense it, or I didn’t stay with my body long enough, because it was boring. I’m Transfigured into a toy, I think.*

“Of course,” Harry breathed, remembering the room full of figurines that he and Narcissa had passed through when they were there. “Do you know what kind of toy you are?”

No. But it shouldn’t be that hard to figure out. Once you can go to Wayhouse and I see it, I think I’ll know it—

His voice paused abruptly. Harry shut his eyes, knowing what was coming.

Oh, Harry, Regulus whispered. *No.*

Harry sat in resigned silence as Regulus searched through his memories, growing more and more indignant at each one. He retreated into incoherent promises of vengeance on some of them, moans of pain on others, and Harry was startled, when he found the image of Dragonsbane dying, to feel a warm silence much like a sensation of arms surrounding him. He shifted, wanting Regulus to go on. Being held like that occasioned a sense of faint unease in him even when Draco did it.

Regulus at last reached the last clear memory he had, of Madam Pomfrey removing the changeable venom from his body, and sighed out. *Why do the worst things happen to you when I’m not there to prevent them?* he whispered. *And why do the worst things always happen to you?*

Harry shrugged, then hissed as pain and exhaustion both punished him for the too-sudden movement. He couldn’t believe that he was still so tired that even a few minutes awake wore him out. “Just lucky, I guess,” he murmured. He knew he could speak in his head to Regulus, and he would switch to that if Pomfrey entered, but just now, he didn’t want the intimacy of it. He could feel Regulus’s rage and pity, sweeping through him in unending waves. That was bad enough.

If you can even joke about being lucky—

“Bad fortune is luck, too.” Harry lay back, trying to make plans. It didn’t help that his thoughts were swirling like paint splattered with water, moving in constant, lazy colors, dragging him towards sleep. He hated it, but it seemed like he was going to have to rest some more. “We have to get you out of Wayhouse,” he muttered, his eyelids drooping. “Now that the wards are down like that, someone might already have walked in. Unless you can raise them again?” he added hopefully.

I tried. But Wayhouse is having one of its moods again. I could raise the barriers on Grimmauld Place and the others. That one is just going to have to remain unprotected for right now.

Harry nodded. Merlin, even that made his head feel hot and heavy, as if he had a fever. “Then I’ll write to Narcissa. Can you communicate with her?”

Well, no. She has no link to the Dark Lord. She was never Marked.

“We’ll work a solution out somehow,” Harry muttered. “I think I should go with her to Wayhouse, but—”

You are not going anywhere for the next four days except to sleep.

Harry blinked. The sense of the words was sliding away from him, and he had to carefully form and hold the next sentence in his head for a few moments before he spoke. “You need to be protected.”

Let the adults take care of this for once, Harry. Go to sleep.

Harry yawned, and burrowed into his pillows. The last thing he felt before he fell asleep again was a hand stroking his hair, and he honestly didn’t know if it came from outside or inside his head—if Draco had awakened and come over to soothe him, or if Regulus was causing it. He didn’t find out, either, because he was gone before he could open his eyes to check.

Harry opened his eyes, already feeling much better. As he should, he saw, with a quick glance out the windows of the hospital wing. It was already evening, and he hadn’t done anything productive with his day except for his brief conversation with Regulus. (He didn’t count lying passively under the spell that removed the changeable venom, because there Madam Pomfrey was doing all the work, and he had only to endure). He turned his head, his stomach rumbling, planning to ask for food and then parchment and ink so he could write to Narcissa.

He checked, sharply, when he saw her sitting in that damnable convenient chair next to his bed. Her hands were clasped on top of her folded knees, and except for her expression, she might have been a statue. Her blue eyes were alive, though, and alight, and fixed on his face. She gave a faint nod when she saw him awake, as though they were continuing a talk they’d already begun.

“I came to see what had happened to you,” she said quietly. “We have had letters from Draco, of course, and the warning that came when Lucius’s Mark burned. And the Minister made an official public statement that the Dark Lord had returned yesterday. But I still wanted to know what you had suffered in person.” She leaned across the bed and put one hand on Harry’s forehead. Harry winced, even though he’d had no pain from his scar or visions about Voldemort since he worked such damage on his memory. The cool touch of Narcissa’s hand, combined with that look in her eyes, said that there was someone else here worried to death about him, though.

“I promise you,” said Narcissa, her voice eerily formal even though she wasn’t making one of the old binding oaths, so far as Harry knew, “that my sister shall suffer for what she has done.” Then her voice *did* take on the cadence of an oath. “Suffer to the ends of the earth and back again, suffer as salt in her wounds could make her suffer, suffer what she has done answered and given threefold.” She paused, then gave Harry a beautiful smile. The beauty could not hide the coldness of it. “When I am done, she will never laugh again.”

Harry couldn’t speak, and in his head, from his chill gasps of shock, Regulus was in the same state. In spite of the fact that he could be giving Narcissa an important clue if she didn’t already know about it, his eyes darted to the glamour of his left hand, only to find it gone.

“Draco did not tell me,” said Narcissa, answering his unspoken question. “He’s not even here right now, because I made him go eat dinner on his own. I cast a spell that banished glammers when I entered the hospital wing, Harry. I wished to know if you were hiding wounds worse than what Draco had told me you had. From there, my magic confirmed my sister’s handiwork..” She paused a long moment in silence. Then she said, words viper-quick, “I suppose that you can tell me the purpose of this foolish, dangerous farce?”

Harry lifted his head. Narcissa, of all people, had no right to reproach him. He had done this to avoid the scrutiny of the world she had grown up in. “I suppose you think that Lucius will accept me with a missing hand?” he spat. “That the other Dark pureblood families would think a crippled wizard any kind of a leader? I did this for a very good reason, and you know

it.” He summoned the glamour back with a thought, this time making sure that his thumb curved the right way. He had adjusted the look of the illusion in the past day, with Draco’s reluctant help, and soon he was satisfied that he would have it perfect. “Kindly don’t lecture me on hiding it.”

Narcissa blinked slightly, her mouth falling open. Harry wondered why, until she reached out, grasped his chin, and carefully tilted his head so that she could look into his eyes. Harry stared back at her, determined that no matter what she might say, he would not crack.

So, of course, she had to say something that made sure he did.

“Harry,” she breathed, “how could you think that would *matter*, next to what you promise us?”

Harry jerked himself roughly away. *Merlin, not again.* He could feel tears burning and trembling near the back of his eyes. He scrubbed at them roughly. He was so *fucking sick* of crying. He was not going to do it again. And he wasn’t going to pay attention to Narcissa’s attempts to soften the blow. He knew that she only spoke of her own opinion, not the opinion of wizardkind in general. He would look weak enough when word of his confrontation with Voldemort got out—and he was sure that the Death Eaters would find ways to send that information slyly among the Dark purebloods. He would not add a weakness he could hide to the list.

“It’s true,” Narcissa went on, her words dripping down like water wearing on a stubborn rock. “Yes, Harry, you are right, and many average wizards are forced to wear a glamour when something like this happens to them, or else get a replacement. But with someone of Lord-level power, that has never *mattered*. There was Lord Guile in the seventeenth century, who lost his left leg and simply used his magic to levitate him. He never hid it, and chose his allies from among those who showed no reaction, and his strongest friends and counselors and Inner Circle from those who were wounded in similar ways. The Broken Guard, they were called, and it meant nothing but respect.”

Harry shivered. He had heard of the Broken Guard, but he had not thought to apply that precedent to himself. It didn’t matter, because—“He had the will to demand respect. He was a compeller. I don’t want to *force* people to respect me.”

“Not will,” said Narcissa. “Magic. Haven’t you noticed *yet*, Harry, how honor is done you that would not be done anyone else at your age, because of your magic? And then, once someone gets inside that magic and sees and knows more about you, and sees what you have done for others, they will become your allies because of who you are. Believe me, most of the Dark purebloods would dismiss you as a child if not for your power.” She leaned forward and clasped Harry’s hand. “They have not. They might be shocked at this, but they are far more likely to swear vengeance as I have done.” She smiled a bit. “It is too bad that I am the only one who can swear that particular oath on Bellatrix. The others will have to content themselves with other Death Eaters. Lucius in particular...oh, Harry, he will be *so* angry.” Her smile widened and became dreamy. “You have never seen Lucius when he is really, truly in the grip of one of his overpowering rages. He’s so cold most of the time that one forgets he can torture with passion as well as detachment.” Her eyelashes fell, once, as she closed her eyes in some intense memory. “It was when I saw him fly into one of those rages after Crispus Rosier insulted me that I knew I really wanted to marry him.”

Harry couldn’t speak, couldn’t think. The thought of finding himself embraced and held close by those he had been sure would be among the first to push him away if they found out about the loss of his hand...

But then he did find his breath, and blurted out, “Do you really mean to tell Lucius about this?”

Narcissa sighed, the way she would if Harry had disappointed her. “Of course,” she said. “I mean to tell everyone, Harry.” She reached into the pocket of her robe and drew out a long scroll, which she opened with some ceremony and laid down before him. Harry looked down, and saw name after name in shining silvery ink, like moonlight. At the bottom was a blank space, a deep green line.

“These are the names of Dark pureblood wizards I have won to your cause with my dancing,” said Narcissa simply. “Some of them I approached as myself, some as Starborn, but all of them know the truth now, and all of them agreed. The majority of these particular agreements came after Walpurgis Night. When it comes down to it, Harry, magic is more important to us than blood. And we have seen how highly you value that old, wild Dark magic, and how much you would risk to protect both it and the people who use it.”

Harry stared at the list in a daze. Most of the names were familiar, though not together. The first names were ones that had occurred and reoccurred in pureblood families for generations, the surnames ones that he had studied for days and weeks and months and years, reclining on his back with his books on the lawn of Godric’s Hollow.

Charles Rosier-Henlin. Mortimer Belville. Henrietta Bulstrode. Ignifer Apollonis. Edward Burke. Thomas Rhangnara. Honoria Pemberley...

And on, and on, and on.

Harry swallowed as he looked at the line of dark green ink at the bottom of the page. He knew that was where he would sign, binding himself to these wizards and witches. “And you are absolutely sure that they would remain with me in spite of my missing a hand?” he whispered.

“There is nothing that you could do that would deter them,” said Narcissa, “short of betraying your ideals, and turning out to be someone who would, say, Declare himself a Light Lord.”

“No,” said Harry. “But I have no intention of Declaring myself a Dark Lord, either.”

“I told them that.” Narcissa’s eyes were large and calm and just the slightest bit triumphant. “They did not care. In fact, some of them have had enough of Dark Lords to last them a while. The Dark Lord has intimidated them and punished them when they dare to do anything but send their children to be Marked. They’ve had their homes raided and valuable books taken.” She paused, and her lips pursed. “Arabella Zabini, in fact, gave me this message for you. She said that she is your firm ally now, because Death Eaters took her Parseltongue books.”

Harry experienced a brief stab of regret, but he was feeling too much else for it to make an impact. He stared at the scroll again, and shook his head. He had always intended to move forward, of course, and make more allies, and take more people under his protection, but he had resigned himself to the thought of wearing a glamour while he did it.

The thought that he might not have to, and it would make no difference—

He could not assimilate it right now, he thought, and he rolled up the scroll and handed it back to Narcissa. Then he had a sudden thought, and sat up in alarm, looking around. *Is Dumbledore listening to this conversation?*

Fawkes appeared above him, and gave a run of notes that sounded like a chuckle. A vision formed in Harry’s mind of Dumbledore bent over his paperwork again, vaguely wondering why he took more satisfaction in it than ever. Fawkes had kept an eye on him while Harry rested and recovered. Harry really should learn to trust him, in fact, since he would have let him know at once if Dumbledore had suspected anything about Narcissa’s intrusion.

Harry relaxed. Then he looked at Narcissa as Regulus nudged him and whispered, *You know that you can’t go to Wayhouse in this condition. Besides, I’d knock you out if you tried. So ask her to go.*

Harry sighed. “Narcissa, Regulus is with me, and he knows the location of his body now. He thinks that he was Transfigured into a toy and left at Wayhouse. Could you—“

Apart from the slight widening of Narcissa’s eyes, there was no sign that she had been startled by the news, and she nodded, interrupting him. “I would be most happy to, Harry.”

“He thinks he’s in the nursery,” said Harry. “Other than that, he’s not sure what kind of toy he might be.”

“I will simply fetch them all, then.” Narcissa stood with a graceful motion. “Rest for right now, Harry.” She leaned over him and kissed his forehead. “I have seen you,” she said, “and I will carry a report back to the others.” She turned and strode towards the doors.

Fawkes let out a warning chirp, to show that the Headmaster was paying attention again. Harry opened his mouth to warn Narcissa, but without even looking, she touched something in her pocket—a Portkey, it must be—and was gone, smoothly vanishing in a whirl of color.

Harry let himself fall back on the pillows, and sigh, and wait until Madam Pomfrey, still looking haggard from the magic she’d performed that morning, came out of her office and smiled at him. “Would you like some dinner, Mr. Potter?”

“Yes,” said Harry, and let himself whine. He wanted to, and besides, it would help convince the Headmaster that he was still weak and acting like a child. “Can I have something other than beef broth, this time?”

Regulus snapped at him at the same time as Madam Pomfrey did. *Beef broth makes you strong.*

“Beef broth makes you strong, Mr. Potter,” said Madam Pomfrey, and then paused as if wondering why Harry was trying not to giggle. “It’s what I will bring,” she ended firmly, and went towards the fireplace to call a house elf.

Harry squirmed, unsure if he could take food from house elves right now, but just then the doors opened and Draco came in, and he stilled, because Draco would get upset if he raised those scruples now, and it really wasn’t worth it.

Why will you listen to him but not me? Regulus said in injured pride.

Harry thought that was ridiculous enough to deserve the jab he gave back. *Because he’s a much better kisser.*

That did, indeed, shut Regulus up.

Albus frowned thoughtfully as he studied Harry through the wards. He’d had the impression of someone vanishing just before he looked in on him again, but if so, it hadn’t been someone whose visit had managed to influence the boy unduly. His eyes looked swollen, but Albus welcomed that. Keep him emotionally off-balance, and then he would not question his sudden inclination to visit Lily again.

Albus watched a longer time, and was pleased to see that every time young Mr. Malfoy brought up the issue of where Harry was going to spend the summer, or made some supposedly casual remark about Harry staying at Malfoy Manor, Harry slid smoothly away from it. He didn’t address them if he could help it, and other times he was so neutral as to soon send the easily bored Malfoy onto other topics of conversation.

Good. That is the way to do it. Let anyone suspect the truth beforehand, and we would not be able to move him in time. I will summon Lily to come back three days from now, when Madam Pomfrey has said he may leave the hospital wing. We will whisk him away before either the Malfoys or Severus get ideas.

It might be that he didn’t have to worry about Severus, though, Albus would admit. The man had been looking into a Pensieve and writing most of the time lately. Albus could see that much, though he could not tell what Severus was writing; the errant professor had exiled Hogwarts’s wards from his rooms almost entirely and woven his own.

And, as more good news to be added to a surfeit of it, it seemed that Fawkes was trying to reconnect with him, creeping back bit by bit. Albus didn’t try to rush it, didn’t hurry him. He just let images of the phoenix flash across his mind whenever they could be persuaded to enter, and the rest of the time worked in happy silence, content with his visions of the Light becoming strong.

Narcissa stepped carefully into Wayhouse and looked around once. The changeable house had a knothole in the wood above the main staircase. Narcissa paused, looking at it, and then walked up the stairs and further into the house. Cousin Arcturus’s distinctly odd sense of humor for once failed to materialize, and she did not go sliding down the stairs to land in an ungraceful heap at the bottom of them, or begin dancing a jig that she could not calm.

When she reached the reading room at the top of the stairs, she found one of the boxes from which she had taken certain small treasures on her last visit to Wayhouse shifted a few inches to the left. Narcissa paused again, and let her fingers brush across the top of the box, wiped free of dust. It might only have been the house’s whim, of course, which had lowered the wards in the first place and would insure that some parts of it were clean and others dirty at a moment’s notice.

Narcissa didn’t think it was.

She let a smile play across her lips, and ducked out of the reading room and into a low-ceilinged sitting room. She had come to the house only for the Transfigured Regulus. She must remember that. She knew where the nursery was, and it would be the work of a moment to levitate the toys and float them after herself. She was sure that no one would have disturbed *those*. Ingenious of the Dark Lord, really, to make Regulus a common object that might be lost among a thousand others and not a magical one, one that might be touched or disturbed. It might have amused him to keep a traitorous, Transfigured Death Eater in the hands of someone else and see him used constantly, but obviously in this case, a different sense of the fitness of things had ruled.

She had come to the house for that reason, and that reason only.

No, not really. That was the only reason *Harry* had asked her to come. In truth, Narcissa had another, and she moved lightly through room after room, following a faint trail in the dust, gratified to see that her suspicions were correct.

Of course, she did not take her unawares. A certain kind of silence ceased ahead of her as she passed through Cousin Arcturus's bedroom—his portrait blew her a kiss—and a different kind of silence took its place. Narcissa quickened her pace. The plan hadn't been to take her by surprise.

The plan had been to take her.

She swept into a circular room, oriented around the delicate mosaic on the ceiling, one of planets moving around the sun in an endless waltz. Cousin Arcturus had been ever so proud that he'd known Pluto was there before the Muggle astronomers did, and the three planets he'd discovered and they still hadn't danced merrily in the outer rings.

Of course, the spell came at her from behind, a curse that they'd used again and again in their childhood, one that would cause small sharp pinches all over the skin of whoever it struck. Should the curse continue, the pinches would move inward and start squeezing the heart and lungs—something that was never allowed to happen when they were children and their parents were always just a breathless, frightened scream away.

She chose it because of where we are, Narcissa thought, as she performed the countercurse and turned around. *This is a place for family.*

"Hello, Bella," she said.

Her oldest sister edged into view from behind the bookcase where she'd hidden, her teeth bared. Narcissa regarded her with a pleasure she had not thought she would feel. When they were children, and her mother had told her in confidence that Bellatrix appeared to have inherited all the madness of both the Black and the Rosier lines, Narcissa had been divided between fear that Bella would hurt her someday, and horror that she would disgrace the family in public. Now, she saw the madness as the beginning of a payment for the debt that Bella owed Harry.

"Cissy," said Bella, her voice a broken echo of its old sweetness. "You're here. You came. You're here."

"I did," said Narcissa, and touched the thing riding in her pocket, next to the Portkey. Exaltation surged and rode her. She had thought she would use it for a different purpose before she cast the *Finite Incantatem* and watched the glamour of Harry's left hand vanish, but now she had changed her mind. There was no doubt of the appropriate punishment for Bella. "Did you know that I would be here, sweet, sweet Bella? I wondered."

"No," said Bella. "You were already here. Took the weapons, I know." She smiled, revealing a mouthful of cracked teeth, and held up her wand. Her dark eyes gleamed with dazzling excitement. They'd always been her most beautiful feature, Narcissa thought, at least when her long black hair was a rat's nest, like it was now. "Tell me where they are, Cissy. Or, better, come join *him*. He is the one you should have been serving, if you held to the true ideals. Not like our cousins." Her eyes clouded over with anger. "Not like our sister."

Andromeda had always been Bellatrix's nemesis when they were children, biting her lip and keeping stubbornly silent when Bella tried to hurt her, and then she had delivered the most stinging insult possible: she'd slipped out of Bella's guard when their parents were trusting her to keep Andromeda from eloping with Ted Tonks. Narcissa remembered walking into the room where they'd kept Andromeda prisoner and finding Bellatrix on the floor in a variation of the Full Body-Bind that took eight hours to undo. The next word they'd had was that of their sister's marriage, and then her name had been burned off the family tapestry. Narcissa smiled more widely now, thinking of that, thinking of what their quiet, proud, far too bitchy middle sister would have given to be standing here with her now.

"I hold to the true ideals," she said, and began moving left, so that Bella would think Narcissa was trying to draw her into a dueling circle. "The ideals the Black family had before the Dark Lord arose. This is only one Lord, Bella, you know that, and in the end he'll die like they all die. It's not worth betraying what we are to serve him."

Bella's eyes flew wide, and she shrieked, sending a mouthful of spittle flying. "He is *invincible*," she said. "He has conquered death. He is my lord, and he is my master."

Narcissa laughed at her. "One invincible lord, defeated by a baby and then by a fourteen-year-old," she said, shaking her head. "Bella, really, I would have thought better of you. At least choose a master that a twenty-year-old wizard alone could have destroyed."

Bella shrieked, and charged her.

Narcissa pulled the weapon out of her pocket. It was nothing, really, if you just looked at it, a small silver coin with an imprint of a wizard's head on one side and the Black family crest on the other—an odd Sickle, perhaps. But Cousin Arcturus had made it, and Cousin Arcturus had had a peculiar sense of humor, and an obsession, in his later years, with the difference between chance and fate. He'd made a weapon that carried both with it.

Narcissa flipped the coin into the air, calling, "Heads!"

Even if Bella recognized the coin for what it was, she was too far gone into madness to stop her charge—or speak coherent spells, for that matter, since she was shrieking threats, instead.

Narcissa whirled aside from her, and ducked behind the bookcase. She watched the coin complete its twinkling tumble, and land on its side, and roll in three circles before falling over with the wizard's head up. Then it gave a brief black sparkle, letting Narcissa know it was ready.

Narcissa waited until her sister turned around and looked at her again. She stared her directly in the eye, and smiled, and said, "What you did to Harry in the graveyard, I wish revisited upon you, threefold."

Black lines of power lashed from the coin, leading directly to Bellatrix's left hand. She began to scream as a line of blood spouted across her wrist, and then an invisible knife began to cut, straight down.

Narcissa leaned against the bookcase and watched, calmly, as muscle tore and parted, as bone appeared, as the magic revived Bellatrix when she would have fainted from the pain, as the incantations Bella had performed must have kept Harry awake to feel the trauma in the graveyard. Draco's letters had hinted only, never being explicit. But they, combined with the fact that Harry's hand was gone and he had certain exceptionally difficult Dark spells wound about the stump, satisfied Narcissa that what she was seeing now approximated the reality of what had happened there.

Only threefold, of course.

The hand sagged free at last, and a flash of fire cauterized the wound. Bella slumped with a low wail of pain as the black magic consumed her hand and soared away into the coin again, lying in a pool of her own blood.

She looked up at Narcissa, and, amusingly, among all the other emotions in her face was a spark of betrayal.

She vanished, Apparating.

Narcissa gave a smile she knew would be faint and distant, and stood away from the bookcase. She could not try to pick up the coin.

Dear Cousin Arcturus and his obsession with the unusual. The coin could be flung by any person of the Black bloodline once, though they had to call out the name of the side they wanted, heads or crest, in mid-flight. If it landed with their side upwards by chance, then their wish was as fate—for that one wish only. Afterwards, if that same person tried to touch the coin again, he or she would simply die. Likewise, someone who tried to touch the coin and didn't share the Black blood would perish.

Narcissa had intended to try and use the coin to persuade one of her reluctant, wavering potential allies to come to Harry's side. She'd toyed with the idea of using it on the Dark Lord, but then remembered that Regulus had been in his service. The Dark Lord had been in the habit of asking questions of any pureblood follower whose family might possess weapons that could hurt him. He would have protected himself against the coin long ago, or else he would have confiscated it without touching it and hidden it away. The fact that it had been in Wayhouse proved he was protected against it.

Narcissa gently levitated the coin behind her. She could no longer use it, but Draco could, or Andromeda, or her niece Nymphadora. And she was certainly not going to leave it here for Bella to find, though Bella had used it already, in her childhood.

She gathered a few more weapons as she made her way through the house, noting the absence of those she had expected to find. Bella would have them, then. Narcissa would mention that to Harry.

She reached the nursery, shook her head at the jumble of toys, and swept them all up in one whirlwind. Then, with them hovering obediently behind her, she reached for the Portkey that would take her back to the Manor.

She landed gracefully in the small library. Lucius laid down his book and looked at her, carefully raising an eyebrow at the jumble of objects floating behind her, but not saying anything.

Narcissa went to him and kissed him hard, without speaking. Lucius laughed soundlessly at her beneath the kiss, and, when she pulled away, took her hips in his hands and looked up at her with an expression combining eagerness and affection.

“Whom did you hurt?” he asked.

“Bellatrix,” said Narcissa, and sat down to tell him all the details. He would enjoy hearing them as much as she had enjoyed seeing them, she thought.

Besides, by telling him about this first, then she would have two enjoyments unalloyed. She would tell him about Harry’s hand next, and the other signs of suffering she had observed, and get the pleasure of watching him go into a rage.

She wondered whom he would swear vengeance against.

She hoped she would get to watch him exact it.

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Chapter Sixty-Nine: Trying Again

Snape’s world had become a blur of Pensieve memories, of writing so that his fingers were splashed with ink as they usually were with crushed Potions ingredients, of hastily snatched meals and sleep and hasty trips on the sly to look at Harry in the hospital wing. Not even the burning Mark on Midsummer evening had made him as urgent as this. He had the feeling that he was running out of time. He had to finish transcribing Dumbledore’s memories of Harry’s training from the Pensieve Potion soon. He did not know why, but he *must*.

“Now, Harry. Sit down on the grass, and we’ll tell you a story.”

Harry sat down on the grass of the lawn at Godric’s Hollow. He was about five or six in this memory, his green eyes permanently wide and taking in information about the world. You wouldn’t know that unless you’d known him for a while, though, Snape thought. Already he had learned to hide almost all emotion behind a mask that only truly softened and glowed when his brother was near.

Lily sat down in front of Harry on his right, Dumbledore on the left. Snape moved up to stand between them, and wished impatiently, once more, that this was not a memory. He could take Harry away from this if it were reality. Then Harry might still be this age, and a good deal of the damage that Snape had seen might be reversed.

But it was not to be. Instead, he stood there and watched Lily tell the boy a story, supposedly, her voice soft and hypnotic.

“There was a Slytherin girl who used to torment me, Harry. Charlotte Snoddard was her name, though I used to call her Charlotte Snot-Nose.” A fleeting smile played across Lily’s face, and then went away, back into the depths of stillness. “She knew that she could get me to cry with just a few words about Mudbloods in the right vicinity.

“But I learned to ignore her. Do you know what I did?”

Harry shook his head, his hair flopping into his eyes. Dumbledore was leaning forward now, as if he wanted to hear Lily’s story better—or simply wanted to study Harry’s face, and watch him listening to it.

“I learned to turn the conversation back on her,” said Lily triumphantly. “I learned to find out about *her*, where *she* went and what she did during the day, and then I would ask her about problems I knew she was having, the boys she fancied, the lessons that she missed because she was lazy and often didn’t get out of the dungeons until class had already begun. She was suspicious at first, of course, but I never laughed at her, and finally I got her to seek me out and just babble at me about the course of her day. She might open with a taunt, but when I asked her about the things that were important to her, she was more willing to talk about that. Finally, she never used another taunt. I’d moved into another capacity as far as she was concerned, the listening ears. And I was bored, most of the time, but I never cried because of her again.”

Lily leaned forward and lightly tilted Harry’s chin up. “And that is something that you can do, Harry, if someone asks about

you and won't be quiet. You can learn to ask about the things that are important to them, the problems they have and the people they care about. Most people are far more interested in talking than in listening, far more interested in themselves than in you." She paused and smiled. "Especially because you are—"

"Connor's guardian, and guide, and protector," said Harry, with the air of something long rehearsed. "There's no reason for them to be interested in me."

"Very good, Harry." Lily patted his cheek. "So Albus is going to test you and see how well you've learned this particular lesson. When he starts talking about you, turn the conversation back towards him."

Snape had to watch as Dumbledore led Harry through a simple conversation, trying to talk to him about his training, his day, what his favorite colors were, what he liked about the sunlight. Harry was clumsy in return at first, and gave answers that his mother gently scolded him for, but he learned as the afternoon wore on, and managed several smooth transitions that led Dumbledore to talk about his own experiences instead.

Here was the source of much of Harry's evasion, then, Snape thought, trying to keep calm and rational, much of his ability to dodge undetectably around concerns about his health or state of mind. Most people *were* more interested in themselves than in him, and they were gratified, as well, by the sense that Harry was a sincere and patient listener—something that Charlotte Snoddard could not have been satisfied of with Lily, for all the times Snape had heard her brag about her "pet Muggleborn." They would listen, and talk to him, and reveal more and more of themselves, at the same time that they never noticed Harry was receding from them.

Snape slowly finished writing out the last lines of that memory, and then stared at the parchment, followed by a stare at the bottle of silvery Pensieve Potion.

That was done. That was it. He had transcribed all the memories of Harry's training that he had stolen from Dumbledore.

Snape let out a deep breath, and then began muttering copy spells at the reams and reams of parchment, just in case. He was about a quarter of the way through when someone rapped on the door of his quarters. Snape jerked his head up, glaring. Not many students knew where his private rooms, as opposed to his offices, were, and he knew that Harry and Draco would still be in the hospital wing. This was far more likely to be a professor.

"Come in," he called, after a tense moment, and dismissed the wards on the door.

To his surprise, the first person who entered the room was Connor Potter, the Gryffindor brat, with McGonagall right behind him. The brat planted his fists on his hips and gave Snape a harsh stare that reminded him, strongly and unpleasantly, of the original Potter. He felt his lip curl back.

"Potter—"

"Severus," said McGonagall, with a quick nod at him. "A moment, please." She raised her hand, and writhing gold and red lines draped his room in Gryffindor colors, encircling them. Snape stared. He had not thought that she had gained *that* amount of control over the wards.

A moment later, as he watched the wards work their way into the stone of the walls, he was furious. "How dare you!" he hissed at her, standing and reaching for his wand. "I have only just removed the wards so that Albus could not spy on me, and now—"

"He has been spying on Harry, too," said McGonagall, folding her arms and regarding him sternly. "This is the only way to be sure that we'll get a bit of privacy from him. I'll take these down when I leave, Severus, but for now, you *are* going to leave them where they are."

Snape blinked, then nodded. "And what did you want to say to me?" He gave the boy a harsh glance. "And why did you bring this brat along?"

The brat's face flushed, but he seemed to realize it would be a good idea not to reveal how irritated he was. He took a deep breath instead, and said, "It's about Harry. I got a letter from James. He told me that Harry was coming home to stay with him for the summer. Him and Lily."

Snape felt the explosion of rage in his chest as though it were happening to someone else. He dimly saw one of the Transfigured chairs go flying across the room and smash into his bookshelves as his wandless magic reacted, but it wasn't until McGonagall said sharply, "*Severus!*" that he was recalled to himself.

Breathing hard, he sat back in his chair and stared at Potter. "You are not lying?"

Potter shook his head. "I'm not. But when we confronted Harry—Professor McGonagall and Malfoy and I—under this kind of ward so that Dumbledore couldn't hear, he told us the truth. Dumbledore put another compulsion on him when he came back from the graveyard, and he was in such physical and emotional shock that it took hold. Harry had an interview with Lily, and he did think that he wanted to go back to either Godric's Hollow or Lux Aeterna with her. But then he broke free."

"He spoke with his mother." Snape could feel his words slur, mostly because his tongue and lips felt numb.

McGonagall nodded. "He did. And, Severus... I have let Mr. Potter tell this story because he knows more than I do, but I would know more. Why do you fear so much to let Harry go home with his parents?" Her eyes were steady, and her arms had assumed a folded posture that meant she wasn't leaving until she got an answer.

Snape nodded towards the paper he'd been copying. "Read those. They're transcriptions of scenes that I got from a Pensieve full of Albus's memories." He turned back to Potter as she started reading. "Go on."

"He told us that he had no intention of going to back to them for the summer, not now," said Potter, with a slight shake of his head. "But he had to pretend to have it, because that would mean that Dumbledore was fooled into thinking him still under the compulsion. And—well. He made Malfoy promise not to tell you about this, because he seemed to think that you might do something to Lily and James." He looked searchingly into Snape's eyes.

"Not myself," said Snape. He had already decided that. His vengeance hung suspended by such a slender thread now, but he knew that the way to break Harry's trust forever and have no hope of regaining it would be to torture Harry's parents himself. "I am going to hand the information about his childhood over to someone else who will be able to use it as it should be used."

"Harry doesn't want anyone to know," said Potter, so softly that Snape could barely hear him.

"I don't care," said Snape. And he didn't, not anymore. The boy could hate him, but he hated him already. And the knowledge that Harry had been in enough trauma to slip backwards that far, to look for comfort in his parents and even accept and believe another of Albus's compulsions for a time...

No. Wait. There is one thing that does not make sense. If he broke the compulsion, why would Albus still be alive? Harry hates compulsion enough to attack anyone who uses it violently. Snape lifted a hand to touch the fading bruises around his throat. I should know that.

"Why is the Headmaster still alive and sane?" he demanded of Potter.

Potter's face assumed an expression of disgust, and that, of all the possible looks he could wear, made him most like his brother. "Because Harry has this mad plan to *redeem* them," he said flatly. "Dumbledore and Lily, at least, and probably James, too, though he didn't say that. He's confining Dumbledore's compulsion. He wants to talk to them, apparently, and forgive them."

"They can't be forgiven," said Snape, not caring that he was speaking about Potter's mother in that deep tone. "They have hurt him one too many times, and they represent too great a source of temptation and danger for Harry. I will destroy them."

"I quite agree," said Potter.

Snape shot him a sharp glance. The hazel eyes that met his shone with reckless anger and courage. Gryffindor qualities, both of them, but at this moment, Snape supposed, they would serve.

"Where has Harry decided to stay for the summer?" he made himself ask. "And you?"

"I'll be with the Weasleys," said Connor. "Arthur Weasley has friends in the Ministry who helped him strengthen the wards on the Burrow, so that I can stay there and not have to ask for help or permission from Dumbledore." He grimaced. "I think my father assumed I would be staying with him and Harry, but he didn't really ask me, and now I can just say that I made prior plans.

“I almost asked Harry if he would come with me, but I knew he’d refuse. He doesn’t want to be around that many people. He doesn’t want to stay with you, either,” he added, “or with the Seers in their Sanctuary, even though I know they invited him. He doesn’t want to be around people who would make him go backwards, he said. He thinks you focus too much on the past.”

A strangled gasp behind Snape interrupted him before he could reply. He turned sharply, and saw McGonagall lifting her head from reading the records of the memories, a shocked look on her face that could not have been deeper if she had looked into the actual Pensieve Potion.

“They trained him like this?” she whispered. “He suffered like this?”

“Yes,” said Snape.

McGonagall went on staring at the papers for a moment, as though she expected them to rear up and pull her back in. Then she nodded once, and turned to Snape.

“I trust you to take care of this, Severus,” she said. “Harry must never be allowed to return to his parents, and you must make sure that Lily and Albus are punished for their actions.” She closed her eyes. “To think that I once thought them the perfect Gryffindors, the epitome of our House,” she murmured.

The urge came to Snape to say something ridiculous and sentimental then, something like McGonagall being the epitome of Gryffindor now, but he squashed it. *Not with Potter in the room.* “I plan to show the evidence to those who can take care of it,” he said, and then looked at Potter. “You do realize that word of this will get out and make your life difficult, as well?”

“I would have cared a few days ago,” Potter whispered. “But I survived the Tournament whole and healthy, and Harry... didn’t.” He closed his eyes, and stood there for a long moment, as if debating. Then he sighed, and said, “Harry’s already going to be as mad as hell at me for coming here and talking to you. So I might as well reveal this, too. He’s lost his left hand.”

Snape staggered, and caught himself on the back of his chair. “What?”

“Malfoy told me,” said Connor. “Bellatrix cut it off at the wrist, and made it so that he couldn’t get a replacement. Harry’s wearing a glamour all the time now.” He lifted his head and looked at Snape imploringly. “He wants to hide it. He’s barely told anyone about it. Even Malfoy only found out on accident.”

“I must see him,” said Snape, in a voice that he knew didn’t sound like his own. He was out the door and striding for the hospital wing before either McGonagall or Potter could react.

Snape paused when he reached the hospital wing, because he had no choice. Madam Pomfrey opened the doors to him with a forbidding expression and a slight shake of her head. And more, Harry was tucked into his bed, thoroughly asleep. He was breathing soundly, too, as though the nightmares and visions had finally ceased to plague him.

“Is it normal for him to sleep so much?” Snape had to ask the matron, without taking his eyes off Harry. He wasn’t that short any more, but at the moment, with Snape’s knowledge of his past and his missing hand, he looked small. He tended to make himself smaller, too, curling into corners and ducking to escape people’s gazes and taking any excuse to diminish his own accomplishments.

“Severus,” said Madam Pomfrey, drawing his gaze back to her. “Sleeping curses are difficult to cast or reverse, but they are relatively easy to *detect*. I’ve found none on Mr. Potter. He simply needs to rest.” Her face softened for a moment. “That’s why he’s spent most of his time in the hospital wing so far. I’ve healed him of the bite on his shoulder that You-Know-Who gave him, but that exhausted him further. And he needs so much more rest than that,” she mused, shifting her hands on the tray of potions that she held. “He hasn’t slept well all year, I know that, and he needs time to recover from what happened to him in the graveyard—time that I know he’s not going to allow himself.”

Snape nodded curtly and moved forward, sitting down next to Harry’s bed. His eyes lingered on Harry’s left hand, and he nodded again. He noticed, now, that there was a callus missing on the boy’s thumb from gripping his broom that should have been there if his hand was exactly the same as it had been.

He should remove the glamour. He should let Madam Pomfrey make sure the wound isn’t infected.

It was difficult for Snape to even think about Bellatrix cutting off Harry's hand. He knew how brutal she was with Muggle and Muggleborn victims, even purebloods who defied their Lord. The thought of what she would do to Harry if she got the chance, and in revenge for removing her right hand as Harry had earlier in the year...

Snape felt a surge of helplessness that was becoming familiar to him. He wanted to snatch Harry up and hold him close against all the wrongs of the world. He wanted to make sure that no one else could ever hurt Harry again. He wanted to force Harry into a set of calm, quiet rooms where he couldn't find anyone else to help or any war to worry himself about, and force him to face his past. He knew that he couldn't do any of those things, and that was coming closer to driving him into madness than anything since his Death Eater days had.

This is what it is like to be a parent, he thought. It's no wonder that I never wanted to be one. But then his eyes went back to Harry's face again, and he shook his head. No, I want to be one now. If Harry will let me.

Harry stirred, just then, and woke. Snape was familiar with that little yawn and the subtle stretching Harry did from this past summer. After seeing the memories in the Pensieve Potion, he knew more about where it came from. Lily had taught Harry to wake slowly and not to let anyone know he had returned from slumber until he was ready, just in case there were enemies lurking nearby. Only after Harry could see no foes in the hospital wing did he relax and roll over.

Of course, he tensed again once he saw Snape.

"Harry," said Snape softly, because there was no way around this. "I know everything." He let his eyes dart to Harry's left hand, and looked up to surprise an expression of sick horror on the boy's face. He tried to tell himself that it came from anyone, not just him, knowing about that particular weakness, but he couldn't help the hammer blow of rejection that slammed into his gut. "You need not pretend. I want to know why you won't forgive me. I want to know why you can see your mother again, and yet you cannot bear to see me."

There. That would not reveal to the Headmaster's listening ears that Snape knew any of the truth about his compulsion, but it would tell Harry what he needed to know. And, of course, Harry was quick enough to figure out who must have told Snape all of this, from the widening and narrowing of his eyes.

He spoke in a low, furious voice that Snape didn't think owed anything to pretense. "Why should I want to see you again? I don't care that you hurt me. That would have been all right, if you'd just lied to *me* about something that hurt *me*. But you *put a compulsion on Draco*." A brief wind ruffled the curtains of the hospital wing before Harry struggled and got his magic back under control. Snape felt relief, and then shame because of the relief. "You hurt other people," Harry went on, his voice deepening even further. Snape thought he could hear what Harry would sound like as an adult in that voice, and shivered. He would not want to be on the wrong end of this man's wand. "I can't forgive that."

"And your mother hurt your brother," Snape said.

"He's made his own decision on that," said Harry. "He's breaking off relations with her and my father. I think he's crazy—" that would be for Dumbledore, Snape knew "—and he thinks I'm crazy. We're even. But I asked you directly about Draco, and you *lied to me*." He turned his head away, and Snape was startled to realize, from his harsh breathing, that he was near tears.

He needs rest even more than Madam Pomfrey thinks he does.

"Harry?" Snape asked quietly. "I know that I have done worse things than lie to you. Your mother has done worse things than lie to you." *Gone without touching you for two months, trained you to despise soft and pleasant things, told you that not passing one of her tests meant that you should feel shame for the rest of your life...* "Why is this so unforgivable?"

Harry remained still for a moment. Then he turned back, and his eyes were too bright, and Snape knew he was getting the unvarnished truth.

"Because you mean more to me than she does, goddamn you," Harry whispered. "Of *course* it hurts more."

Snape stared at him, and hardly cared that Fawkes had just exploded into being over Harry's head, chirping worriedly, or that Harry closed his eyes and went rigid as if his mind were reaching out to some distant target. He was too busy dealing with the knowledge that he had not sacrificed Harry's love and respect.

Not yet.

Harry sat like that, barely breathing, for a few moments, until he opened his eyes, and sighed, and came back to himself. "It's all right," he said. "We turned his suspicions away, changed his memory a bit. He won't be paying attention to this conversation for the next few minutes, so we can talk freely." He leaned forward, and looped his arms around his knees, and stared at Snape. "I've seen, now, what you can do," he said bluntly. "What you *would* do. And I know what my summer would be like if I stayed with you. You'd try to force me to focus on the past, wouldn't you?"

"I would help you heal, yes." Snape forced his reeling emotions back under control, as well as the idea that he could not possibly do anything else that would push Harry away from him. He might have to. Parents had to do many things that their children didn't like, and so did guardians. "You can alter the future, Harry, but not the past, and that is why it will chain you until you face it and change your feelings about it."

"You sound like one of the Healers at St. Mungo's." Harry shook his head, his hair bouncing. "No. I'm not staying with you."

"But you are not as angry at me as you pretended to be," said Snape.

"Not once my emotions settled down, no." Harry tilted his head to the side. "The sleep helps. But you did endanger Draco's life, and you did lie to me, and I know that you might do the same things again if you really thought it was necessary to protect me."

"There is nothing I would not do to protect you," said Snape, and, with regret, he saw the path they would follow for the rest of their conversation, stretching away before them. He saw where it led, and it was a hard and bitter thing, to know that he would have to walk it after all, to make the sacrifice of Harry's good will that he thought he had already made.

It is a bitter thing, he thought, for a man not to know himself and his own reactions to intense pressure. I believed I would bear this far better than I have borne it.

Harry nodded. "I *understand* that." He let his breath hiss between his teeth. "But some of those things would interfere with the war, and others would break down this resolve that I've been building. I might find that I hate my mother far more than I do right now, if I dwelt on all that she'd done to me."

"And yet you're determined to ignore it," Snape summed up. *No, this is not the Harry I thought I would be dealing with.* "You're determined to use this anger of yours at my actions to force yourself away from me and go about the business of the war."

"Yes." Harry tilted his head. "I won't pretend that it doesn't hurt. Of course it does. But I know you now, sir, better than I did. And I can't let someone like you be my guardian. You would... *guard* me too closely. You would prevent me from forgiving Dumbledore and Lily, which I have to do. You might still let your grudge at James make you react in inappropriate ways."

"Not that last," said Snape. "Never again." *I hate this road far more than any I have walked, and yet I will proceed to the end.*

Harry examined his face, then shrugged a little. "Maybe not," he agreed. "But we have different priorities. You know me too much and too well. My other allies will follow me because they don't know everything you do. And I'm not going to tell them, either," he added, as Snape opened his mouth. "And you aren't, either, because you know I would never forgive you if something happened to Lily because you, oh, let the wrong bit of information out of your mouth in front of Hawthorn."

Harry. You think your forgiveness matters more to me than seeing you safe, and content, and happy. It does not. On this, you have very, very badly underestimated me.

Or perhaps he was simply relying on what he knew of the past Severus Snape, Snape thought, watching Harry's eyes shine as he steadily laid down the truth he understood. That was perfectly plausible. Snape had only recently acknowledged his own change.

"So this is the way it will be," Harry was saying. "I go where I have to go for the summer—"

"And that is?" Snape cut in.

"I don't know yet," said Harry impatiently. "Someplace where I can still fight the war, and still forgive Dumbledore and Lily."

With people who won't press me too much. Someplace where I *know* that I can do what I have to do." He stared directly into Snape's eyes for a long moment.

"Maybe, someday," he whispered, "we can reconcile. I told you the truth. Because I understand what you did and why you did it, I'm already partly reconciled to you. But I'm not going to forgive you, not now, because then you would feel that you had license to do whatever you wanted. And I can't let you do that." He paused. Then he said, "I think you understand me now. Necessity, not choice, is forcing me into this. So I'll tell you something that would otherwise have come as a surprise. I'm going to write Scrimgeour and ask him to strip you of legal guardianship of me in a few days."

Snape closed his eyes.

"And who will be your legal guardian instead?" he forced himself to ask.

"I don't know yet," Harry repeated. "I'll find someone."

"Why?" Snape heard his own voice say, when he had meant to say something distinctly different. "Why are you doing this?"

He looked at Harry. Harry had his head tilted slightly to the side, his eyes steady and bright and full of regret.

"Because even after everything, even knowing you lied to me, and how much that hurt, and even knowing that you endangered Draco's life, I still don't trust myself," said Harry evenly. "I could *still* forgive you, and that would mean that I'd give you back power over me. I'd do things like maybe hate Dumbledore and Lily again, because you could persuade me into it. So I'm going to make sure I don't have an excuse for that."

Snape felt a snarling revulsion curl up inside him, and closed his eyes. *No one should be that in control of his own emotions, so willing to abandon those he loves. Of course, I know why he is like that.*

"I am going to have Draco at my side," said Harry calmly, "from knowing myself, and him. I can't go through this without him—I love him too much—and he wouldn't leave anyway. But he's going to have to be enough, along with my allies. You—" Harry's voice broke for the first time. Snape did not look at him. "You are *too* much. There's no way I can accept parenting from you. I can't accept the kind of healing that you want to give me, either. It would take too much time. I'm sorry, but I've made my decision, and that's the way it has to be."

They sat in silence for a moment more, and then Snape asked the question that had been haunting him. "Would you really ever go back to Lily?"

"Only to forgive her, and help her heal," said Harry softly. "That is the only reason."

"But as long as she lives, she is a danger to you," said Snape. "At the very least, she might try to gain custody of you again if you have no legal guardian."

"She is not a danger to me anymore," said Harry. "She's small and broken. She only has the power over me that I permit her to have."

You are wrong, very wrong, about that, or you would never have folded under the compulsion for as long as you did, Snape wanted to say, but he did not say it. "And Dumbledore? He is neither small nor broken."

"But I'll forgive him," said Harry, the impatience creeping back into his voice. "I'm handling him. I'll do it—"

Fawkes chirped, and Snape knew Dumbledore was again listening.

"Go away, Professor," said Harry, sounding brisk, but unable to keep out a tone of gentleness. "You know what I'm doing, and why. Go away." From the sound of it, he had rolled back over and burrowed into his blankets.

Snape stood and walked away from the hospital wing, slowly opening his eyes, his mind a torrent of emotions.

He had thought Harry hated him. It seemed he did not. He had thought Harry incapable of forgiving him. It seemed he was not.

And now he would have to damn that love and that forgiveness, because when Harry saw what Snape meant to do with the memories of his past, they would *undoubtedly* crisp and blacken and burn.

But as long as his mother lives free, she is a danger to him. So long as most of the wizarding world still respects Dumbledore, or thinks him guilty of no worse crime than senility, he still has too much power.

So long as Harry refuses healing, he will be crippled, and in his mind far more so than in his body.

It had been easier to contemplate this when he thought that he already possessed Harry's hatred.

Snape lifted his head. He had thought that it was better for Harry to laugh and hate him than it was for him to love him and be silent, hadn't he? He thought it was better for Harry to live healed, even if that meant that Snape gave up all claims to any thought of reconciliation or forgiveness in the future.

With eyes open, knowing what would happen the moment his plan came to fruition and Harry heard of it, he stepped onto his road.

Neither of us were born for the easy way.

~*~*~*~*

Interlude: The Invitation

*To: Peter Pettigrew
June 25th, 1995*

Dear sir:

While we have not often corresponded, and you may indeed be surprised to receive a letter from me, I think I am right when I say that we have a common interest in Harry Potter, and in seeing that Albus Dumbledore receives justice. Not vengeance, not mercy, but justice.

I have seen the Pensieve record of your trial; I requested it from the Ministry two years past, and saw the events that transpired in it. I have never been in doubt, even before Harry informed me of the true state of affairs, about your trial being mishandled. Now that I know you were wronged, I would like to extend an invitation to you.

Albus Dumbledore shall soon find himself called to justice for his monstrous mistakes in handling Harry Potter. It is only right that he should also be called to justice for what happened to you. Will you return from your exile and testify against him?

I am not asking you to do this for my sake, or even for Harry's. But it is because of him that I dare to write to you at all, and to ask for a final cutting out of suffering as an end to all suffering. We have other common bonds I might call upon—we have both worn a brand on our left arms that identified us, for the rest of time, in the eyes of the world—but I would like you to make the decision on your own cognizance alone. I have learned some things from Harry, though he does not think I have.

I remain, sir,
Severus Snape.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Seventy: The Clear Sea For Miles On Glimmering Miles

Harry woke with a gasp. He wondered, for a moment, as he lay panting on the hospital bed, whether Voldemort had returned to his full strength and possession of memory, and if he had had a nightmare.

But no, he usually remembered the visions distinctly, and now, he did not feel any blood pouring from his scar. In fact, he lay still, for a long moment unable to remember either the dream or what had awakened him.

Then the sensation came down on him again—the calling voices in his head, relentless as the surf.

Come to us.

Harry shook. It felt as though a cord had lashed to the center of his chest and were tugging him helplessly in one direction.

He was half out of bed before he knew it. He did manage to pause once he thought about it, and stood shivering on the cold floor. He still wore pyjamas, and it was not yet dawn.

“Harry?”

Draco’s head poked up, hair mussed with sleep, from the hospital bed that had become his over the last few days. He blinked at Harry, and then shook his head. “Do you need to go to the loo?”

“No,” Harry whispered. The call echoed in his head, stealing his next words, and a longing sweetness surged up in him in answer to it. He made his decision then. He had promised to tell Draco when he might be going into danger, after all. “Something’s calling me.”

“What do you mean, *something*?” Draco demanded, alert in a moment. “And where were you going?”

“I just got out of bed when you sat up,” said Harry. “That’s why I’m telling you now. I think that it’s going to pull me along whether or not I really want to go.” And now, now he *did* want to go. There was a taste in his mouth like water and sunlight mingled, and the imperceptible promise, roaring through the voices, that he would have more of it once he reached the place the voices wanted him to come. “But I want you to come with me.”

“Of course you do,” said Draco, decisively, and made his way over to him, putting an arm around his waist. “You shouldn’t even be out of bed yet.” He gave Harry a concerned glance. “Are you sure that you can stand?”

Harry smiled slightly, and used his magic to force strength into his limbs. After several days of lying there with nothing to do but renew the glamour on his hand after Narcissa had taken it off, and blow around the hospital wing when he was angry at Snape, it responded eagerly. “Now I can,” he said.

Draco nodded, and, to Harry’s relief, didn’t raise any other silly objections, like rousing Madam Pomfrey from sleep to tell her something that she could neither prevent nor should have to worry her head about. “How are we going to get there? Apparating?” He blinked and swallowed when he said the last word.

Harry shook his head. “These people still haven’t given me a clear image of a place yet. I don’t think I *can* Apparate. It’s really just a bunch of voices in my head calling to me, and—“

Come to us!

The summons fell over him, bathing him in a crash, and Harry grabbed tight hold of Draco as he felt it sweep him up. The cord in his chest tightened like a sling, and then he was flung forward, tumbling through space. All the while, Draco followed him, determinedly; Harry almost thought he might have found a way to even if he hadn’t had his arms around Harry’s waist when the pull came.

Sand crunched under Harry’s feet, and suddenly gulls’ cries were in his ears, piercingly loud if not piercingly sweet. He stumbled, but the disorientation wasn’t even as bad as that from Flooing. He opened his eyes, and the moment he recognized where he was, he managed to stand.

Not far from him, the sea roared and crashed, ran in endless ascending and descending patterns, over the sand of the Northumberland beach where he had come to practice his Midsummer ritual with his father and brother.

“Where are we?” Draco whispered.

“Some place I didn’t expect to come,” said Harry, and reached for his wand, which he always kept in his left pocket now, to be able to draw it more quickly with his right hand. He remembered the letter that Evan Rosier had sent him, about meeting on this beach someday, and was already more than half-sorry that he had obeyed the summons—though he hadn’t had much choice about that—or let Draco come—though he had promised not to leave him behind.

Now that he was here, the voices were silent. The beach faced east, of course, and Harry could just make out the first glimmer of sunrise on the waves. Harry cleared his throat when no one approached or offered any explanation.

“All right, Evan, you’ve had your fun,” he said, making sure to keep his tone light and chiding. “I didn’t bring any blueberries, and I didn’t want to duel you, either, so why don’t we call it even, and I’ll go back to the hospital wing at Hogwarts now?” He closed his eyes and remembered the outskirts of Hogsmeade, prepared to Apparate both himself and Draco back.

“Harry.”

Draco’s voice stopped him. It was soft, a bare whisper, but not frightened. Harry would have Apparated in an instant if it were.

He opened his eyes, and followed Draco’s pointing finger—not to one of the slight hills behind them that might have hidden a Death Eater, but out to sea. Harry turned, following it, not sure what he was supposed to see.

In fact, for long moments he saw nothing. The foam just barely reflected back the golden light, glimmering and casting sparks as it dashed itself to its death on the sand. The waves themselves were picking up strength and speed, seemingly as Harry watched; he thought the tide was coming in.

Then he saw two speaks of foam that formed a glittering silver mirror, not a golden one. Harry squinted, trying to make it out, but it ducked behind the crest of another wave. He took a step nearer, though he had to drag Draco along; he seemed warily fascinated, but not enough to let go of Harry’s waist and let him stand on his own.

Harry heard the hum of sweet voices in his head then, not words, but wordless music that reminded him of—something, something he could not quite grasp or comprehend. He blinked. He listened, but the symphony did not rise much higher, and then he had something else to distract him.

The silver glint returned, and reformed, and this time Harry could see a long spread of light taking form and shape. A head of hair was riding in the foam, keeping shape even as it was jostled by the incoming tide.

Then shots of white in the gray water gathered together, and shone like legs, and coalesced into them. The silver hair rose, and shook. Light lashed down from the rising sun that seemed to spin a head into existence.

And a unicorn came out of the sea.

The song exploded inside Harry’s head. He found himself falling to his knees as the unicorn’s hooves hit the sand with the sound of small bells. A powerful stallion, he stood there a moment, shaking the foam from his horn, and then made his way towards Harry in a high, floating trot.

Harry blinked back tears. He didn’t know if it came from the music in his head, a chorus of flutes backed by song such as he knew, now, that the sun and the moon sang, or the sight of the unicorn, or the warmth of Draco’s arm around his waist as he sank down beside Harry, overwhelmed.

Or the sudden knowledge in his head, which took the form of a quotation he had once read in an old book on magical creatures.

The unicorn is the oldest enemy of the serpent.

The stallion had come to a halt in front of him by now, and stood watching him with eyes like stained glass.

When the serpent comes to drink from the pool and release venom from his sly mouth into the water, all the animals await the coming of the unicorn. He always appears, the next night, and with him always comes the moon, even if that night the moon has turned her face from earth. He plunges his horn into the pool, and the healing light spreads from it—for the unicorn’s horn is proof against all poison—and the water is pure and clean again.

The stallion bowed his head, and the same gently irresistible force that had compelled Harry to come in the first place lifted his arm high now.

His left arm, with the glamour at the end of it, which vanished as the unicorn’s horn approached it, unable to stand against the honesty of a creature of such pure Light.

Harry watched the tip of that horn brush the stump of his severed wrist. A star of radiance at once sprang up, rippling across his wrist like the flow of moonlight across a still pool. It wrapped tight, and Harry could see strands of poison-green and black floating in it, gathered by the silver coils of the unicorn’s magic.

The power, pure and tainted alike, flowed back to the unicorn. The stallion gathered them on his horn and held his head high for a moment, whipping his mane behind him. Harry could see how the sun illuminated and thus diminished the spells that

Bellatrix had put on his arm, making them seem small and not so much troublesome as pitiful.

He did not think the unicorn had taken them all, but he had taken a good number, and as Harry watched, he whirled, slinging the Dark incantations from his horn into the sand. Then he raised his left hind hoof and stamped on them, crushing them to death. Harry watched the axe-like hoof cleave the curses apart, and saw them try to attack the unicorn, and saw how they dissolved and ran away, melting into the sand and harming nothing and no one any more.

The song in his head soared to a fever pitch of triumph.

The sun was rising.

The stallion came near again, and bowed his head near to Harry's chest, reminding Harry of that moment in the forest in autumn when he had thought he would die of a horn in the heart. This time, though, the horn simply brushed the wound from Voldemort's bite, and it shone and closed a little more.

Then the unicorn dropped to one knee in the sand, more graceful than any horse alive, and turned his head to fix Harry with a shining eye.

Harry would have refused what he thought the stallion wanted, but one didn't refuse a look like that. Carefully, he worked his way away from Draco—who, staring in silent awe, didn't protest—and climbed, his hand fisted in the unicorn's mane, onto his back. If his pulling gave any pain, the stallion showed no sign of it.

Then he rose and began to canter along the edge of the sea.

Harry had, somehow, not thought that riding a unicorn would be very different from riding a horse. He had never realized that he would have the opportunity, but if someone had asked him, then he would have shrugged and said that it must be much like a horse, mustn't it?

But it was not. The strength of the rolling muscles under him was more like a dragon's, as though every movement could as easily be a preparation for flight, for a dance, for the rising into light that Harry had seen the unicorns do when he freed them, as another step. The skin beneath his gripping legs was incredibly soft, a softness that silk could only aspire to, and as warm as the coming sun. The sounds of his hooves, quiet though the bells rang on the sand, mingled with the music in Harry's head until he had to close his eyes against it, and against the light shining off the stallion's horn.

The unicorn changed to a gallop. Now they were truly running, and Harry could feel the speed piercing through the shadows in his mind, shoving aside the justifications and explanations that he had given himself and everyone else, striking down and severing the cobwebs he had hung up to guard the truths he wanted to hide *from* the truth.

He suspected, then, why the unicorns had brought him there, but it was far too late to withdraw or shout that he wanted down.

Gleams of light to the side caught his attention, and when Harry turned his head, he saw other unicorns running there: pretty young mares, another stallion with long, shining silver scars down his flank that he wore with pride, foals with horns barely sprouted and eyes still large and trusting. They all carried with them that blaze that transfigured other people, lifting them to the same glorious height as the unicorns ran on, if only for a little while.

On and on they ran. And the lies and deceptions in Harry's mind collapsed and burned and tore themselves apart.

The stallion wheeled abruptly, and then Harry heard his hooves stop ringing. They had risen in flight, he realized, and were burning out over the sea like a low, silvery comet.

Harry wrapped his arms around the unicorn's neck and bowed his head. Tears were burning on his cheeks. He'd tried to resist them for so long, but they were coming out now, and he didn't think that he could stop them until he had wept them all.

It helped that he wasn't crying simply from sorrow or self-pity, but from the exaltation of the beauty all around him.

The stallion dipped down, and then they landed on a sunlit wave and dropped gently into it. Harry could feel the seawater soaking his pyjama legs, though with the unicorn's warmth beneath him, it wasn't cold. The other unicorns accompanied them, playing in and out of the waves, piping music through their horns and singing back and forth in joy that Harry didn't think any human could ever quite understand, because no human would ever be that innocent.

I'm not, he thought, but he didn't try to stop the tears, because he understood it would do no good.

The stallion swam with him directly towards the sun, and Harry tilted his head back, feeling the warmth sear into and strike and bedazzle him. And the tears continued coming to the surface, and along with them came shame and regret, grief and guilt over the deaths of Dragonsbane and the little boy, self-loathing and self-denial, drawn out of him like the poison they were and absorbed harmlessly into the vast wash of beauty and purity and water around him.

The words he could not have faced at any other time echoed in his head now, given gentleness by their surroundings.

If sacrifice is not the way anymore, Harry, then why do you still insist on sacrifices? Why do you demand things from yourself that you would never demand from anyone else, that you would think them mad and sick to demand from others?

Harry took a deep, hiccupping breath, and answered from the center of that knot of tightness in the middle of his chest that he always felt when he cried.

I don't know.

The uncertainty swept him up and dissolved the knot. Harry fell forward, and the unicorn's mane crept like tendrils of sweet mist around his face, filling his nostrils with more than the scent of flowers, making him faint with the glory of it.

You are part of the reason that this beauty is back in the world again, said that voice that might have been his and might have been the voice of the magical creatures swimming, utterly free, around him.

I know.

A pause, and then the voice said, gentle even as it pushed, *You might act more like it, sometimes.*

Harry covered his face with his hand, but it didn't really help. He knew the light was still there, and the unicorns, and the sea, vast miles of it, more beautiful and more relentless than any magic, immortal and terrible.

And the unicorns, who judged him, who could judge him if anyone could, and did not find him wanting.

The knot broke apart, the hatred at the center of it—for his failures in the graveyard, for what had been done to him, for what he had do in consequence of it—gone at last, and Harry *breathed*.

He lifted his head, and removed his fogged glasses. The sun still blinded him, but the softer glow from the white coats of the unicorns—not at all like the gleam of polished snow he had once thought it was—and the shine from his own soul, steady and green-gold through his skin, calmed him.

He could do this. He could go on.

And some things were *not his fault*.

Harry closed his eyes. He knew that the unicorns would turn around, eventually, and carry him back to Draco. He knew he would have to answer questions, and resist some more badgering to go to Malfoy Manor, and that Draco would want him to Apparate them back to Hogwarts at once. He would have to endure fussing from Madam Pomfrey, too, for breaking his promise not to leave the hospital wing.

And beyond that was the harder road, peppered with uncertainties: about where he would stay with the summer, about who would become his new guardian, about how he could fight the war against Voldemort without losing himself to hatred and rage, about how he was going to deal with things like Lucius knowing about the loss of his hand.

But he thought he could walk that road. He need not know everything, not right away. There was this abeyance, this pause of sweetness, before he fell back into the madness of it.

Around him, the sun blazed, and shone, and flared, and the sea rose in the morning, and the unicorns swam, beauty that had come dancing up to him, fearless, because it knew that he would never try to chain or hold it or prevent it from dancing away again.

For a moment, in which he rested, both freedom and peace coalesced for him.

For a moment, there was only beauty, and *light*, and the clear sea for miles on glimmering miles, and his heart was still with

wonder.

The sun was rising.

End of Book 4